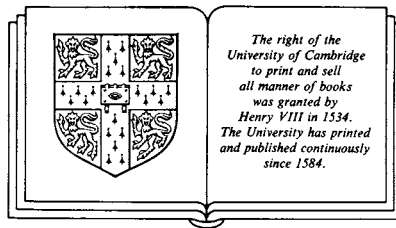


SHAKESPEARE SURVEY
AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF
SHAKESPEARE STUDIES AND PRODUCTION

44

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SHAKESPEARE AND POLITICS

BLAIR WORDEN

I

There has not been an age so sympathetic as the present to the study of the political content and the political context of Shakespeare's plays. Politics are now everywhere in literary criticism. In Shakespeare's time men followed Aristotle and applied the language of what we regard as private ethics to the conduct of public life: today's critics, when they give currency to a term such as 'sexual politics', extend the language of public life to private ethics. Even if we restrict ourselves, as I shall, to a more traditional definition of politics, we notice the transformation of critical approaches that the past half century has brought. Who would now doubt that the behaviour of men in public life was a theme to engage Shakespeare's interest, and to stretch his powers, to the full? Who would assume, as John Palmer did in his *Political Characters of Shakespeare* in 1945, that Shakespeare was 'forced' by the public demand for history plays to 'take the political field' (p. vi)?

On the face of it, the new political awareness ought to add to our understanding of Shakespeare. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the relationship between literature and politics had an intimacy which the modern world has lost. Writers and politicians were so often the same people. The interaction of political and literary aspirations in the career of a Sir Thomas More or a Sir Thomas Wyatt or a Sir Philip Sidney, or of a John Milton or an

Andrew Marvell, is so insistent that we cannot hope to understand the one without the other. Our appreciation of major writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – of *Utopia*, of *Arcadia*, of *The Faerie Queene*, of *Samson Agonistes* – can be profoundly enhanced by a knowledge of the political circumstances in which they were written. Why, then, is the same not true of Shakespeare's plays? A knowledge of Renaissance politics can, as I hope to intimate, illustrate themes of those plays. But it will not take us to their heart.

Of course, we would not expect to be able to relate Shakespeare's writings, as we can the writings of More or Sidney or Milton, to their author's life, for the obvious reason that so little about Shakespeare's life is known – or, at any rate, so little that illuminates his character. Sometimes evidence of his biography is detected in his writings, a method which can sometimes be fruitfully applied to other writers, but to which Shakespeare's resistance is quickly evident. I have heard it said by eminent scholars that only a man who had fought in a war could have written *Henry V*; that only a huntsman could have written Theseus' description of his hounds; that only someone with personal experience of the court could have composed the precepts delivered by Polonius to Laertes that so resemble the recorded maxims of Lord Burghley. The former cabinet minister Mr Enoch Powell, speaking in a television programme on the authorship of the plays, was certain that they are the creation of a man who, like him-

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self, has been at the centre of power. Even Shakespeare's childhood can be re-created on the same principle. Caroline Spurgeon, in one of a series of such discoveries, assures us that Shakespeare 'was clearly, in boyhood at any rate, a keen and strong swimmer, and had probably, with schoolfellows, often plunged and buffeted in the angry waters of the Avon, as did Cassius once with Caesar in the Tiber'.¹ If we were to credit Shakespeare's life with every experience into which his imagination finds an entry we would soon establish for him a career far too active and varied to have left time for the composition of plays – unless perhaps he wrote them at night, during those protracted periods of insomnia that are doubtless re-created in the nocturnal musings of his troubled kings. The relationship between an artist's biography and his writing is always a difficult subject, but there can be no other important writer since the invention of printing for whom we are unable to demonstrate any relationship at all.

Alone of the major artists of the Renaissance, Shakespeare has no tangible personality outside his art. How striking is the contrast between the vividness and sharpness of his stage characterizations and the pale elusiveness of the author of the Sonnets! None of his contemporaries left behind a strong impression of him. Unable to verify a personality for Shakespeare, we can each envisage our own. Mine is that of an actor, whose infirm identity, at any moment of writing as of performing, merges with that of the character he is creating. His heroes – Antipholus of Syracuse, wandering the world in search of his other half; Prince Hal, ceasing (but does he?) 'to be himself' in the tavern; Hamlet, putting (but does he?) an antic disposition on – can have as much problem with their identities as their creator has with his own. Politics, like all the world, is a stage: the stage on which Richard II and Richard III and Marcus Brutus and Coriolanus test the political possibilities of playacting, and on which they lose or forget their parts. If Shakespeare ever settles upon a view of the world, if he ever achieves the sense

of wisdom that his audiences carry away from the plays, it is only within the successive confines of his creations.

Whether or not that speculative characterization of him is correct, our ignorance of the man is one of the many considerations to invite caution in the assessment of the political perspectives of his writing. His beliefs and opinions, no less than his *curriculum vitae*, have been located in the plays. E. M. W. Tillyard tracked down 'Shakespeare's political opinions',² and Tillyard's successors – sometimes even his critics – have located Shakespeare's 'political position' or 'views'.³ Yet all we have on the page are speeches which conform to the characterizations of their speakers. It is hard enough to know how far Ulysses speaking on 'degree', or Henry V's Archbishop of Canterbury on the commonwealth of bees, believes in the vision he articulates, let alone to identify the playwright's own 'position'. The essence of drama being conflict, it is not surprising that his characters' opinions often contradict each other. Hamlet, and Kent and Gloucester in *King Lear*, propose that men's destinies are ruled by the heavens: Edmund, Cassius and Helena declare that belief to be self-deceptive.⁴ Or what are Shakespeare's 'views' on suicide? Brutus and Cassius kill themselves to defy tyranny, but Macbeth declines 'to play the Roman fool', while Hamlet and Imogen think 'self-slaughter' to be forbidden.⁵

¹ *Shakespeare's Imagery* (Cambridge, 1939), p. 99.

² *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London, 1944, repr. 1962), p. 227.

³ John Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London, 1949), pp. 77, 79; Irving Ribner, 'The Political Problem in Shakespeare's Lancastrian Tetralogy', *Studies in Philology*, 49 (1952), 171, 179; David Bevington, *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 245, 248; H. A. Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 214; C. C. Huffman, *Coriolanus in Context* (Cranbury, New Jersey, 1971), p. 65; R. H. Wells, *Shakespeare, Politics and the State* (London, 1986), p. 100.

⁴ *Hamlet* 5.2.10–11; *Lear* Q 2.113–16, 15.35, 16.34–5; *Caesar* 1.2.141–2; *All's Well* 1.1.212–13.

⁵ *Macbeth* 5.10.1–2; *Hamlet* 1.2.132; *Cymbeline* 3.4.76.

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Tillyard regarded Shakespeare, sympathetically, as a representative of the political orthodoxy of his age. Although that judgement still occasionally resurfaces, in a form less sympathetic to the orthodoxy and in a less lucid vocabulary, a number of scholars have rejected or refined it. Yet Tillyard's answers have been challenged more often than his questions. There are two principal elements in his thesis and in its legacy. First there is the supposition that Shakespeare wrote against rebellion and in favour of unhesitating obedience to God's anointed rulers. It is true that Shakespeare's kings invoke that principle – the usurpers King John and Richard III among them.⁶ But then they would, wouldn't they? The pronouncements of Shakespeare's kings on the subject of rebellion are not to be depended on. Claudius, who has murdered royalty, and Richard II, who knows the sad stories of the death of kings, none the less announce – what may comfort them, and what may be useful for monarchs to have their subjects believe⁷ – that kings are untouchable. They learn better – Richard after discovering that kings must do 'what force will have us do', and after dust has been thrown on his 'anointed head'.⁸ Like kings, their loyal subjects need not be taken at their word. In *Richard II*, first John of Gaunt and then the Duke of York stand on the principles of submission and resignation and obedience.⁹ If their view is sympathetically presented, so is its opposite. What Gaunt calls 'patience' his sister-in-law labels 'cold cowardice'.¹⁰ History brushes Gaunt and York aside.

Tillyard and others have taught us much about what Tudor Englishmen were told to think of rebellion, but we know less about what they did think. In *Richard II* the Earl of Northumberland hints at a public opinion different from the one Tillyard leads us to expect: if Richard will 'confess' his crimes 'the souls of men / May deem that you are worthily deposed' (4.1.216–17). In *Richard III*, at Bosworth, Richmond vindicates his rebellion, with a boldness worthy of a Huguenot resistance theorist, by appealing to the legitimacy of

tyrannicide, a daringly unorthodox principle that is given more prominence in Shakespeare's version of the speech than in Hall's, from which he takes it.¹¹ In the Henry VI plays there is little about the impiety of rebellion, and much more about the validity of the Yorkist claim. A Tudor spokesman would have explained that, although Henry IV had sinned in usurping the crown, Englishmen were obliged to obey him and his successors. Yet Shakespeare's Henry VI concedes that 'my title's weak' (3 *Henry VI* 1.1.135); the Earl of Exeter's 'conscience' prompts him to agree (1.1.151); the lawyers take the same view (1 *Henry VI* 2.4.39–58); and the Lancastrians depend for their support on thugs like the Duke of Suffolk, who regards the 'law' as subordinate to his 'will' (1 *Henry VI* 2.4.7–9), and Lord Clifford, who, as he tells Henry, will back him 'be thy title right or wrong' (3 *Henry VI* 1.1.160–1).

It is true that 'rebellion' is always a pejorative term in Shakespeare, as it was always in Tudor England. By the 1590s, when noblemen and gentlemen had ceased to offer leadership to popular discontent, the word had become associated, as the Earl of Westmoreland in the Forest of Gaultres associates it, with 'base and abject routs' (2 *Henry IV* 4.1.32–3), an argument which Westmoreland prefers, in his reproof of the rebel leaders, to the charge that rebellion is sinful. But who decided who the rebels were? No Tudor rebels thought of themselves as rebels. 'He calls us "rebels"', complains the Earl of Worcester of Henry IV (1 *Henry IV* 5.2.39). At the battle of Shrewsbury, in Morton's account of it, 'the word "rebellion"' 'froze up' the Percies' soldiers 'As fish are in a

⁶ *King John* 3.1.73–4; *Richard III* 4.4.150–1.

⁷ *The Winter's Tale* 1.2.357–62.

⁸ *Hamlet* 4.5.122–4; *Richard II* 3.2.53 (but cf. 3.3.78–80), 3.4.205, 5.2.30.

⁹ 2.1.164–71, 2.2.78–9, 2.3.108, 5.2.37–8.

¹⁰ 1.2.37–8; cf. 2 *Henry VI* 2.4.27–69.

¹¹ 5.5.193–210. Passages of Hall and Holinshed quoted or cited in this essay can be found in the appendixes to the Arden editions of the plays under discussion.

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pond.' Yet they gain fresh heart from the Archbishop of York, who 'Turns insurrection to religion' and 'Derives from heaven his quarrel and his cause' (2 *Henry IV* 1.2.197-205). The archbishop's case is unimpressive: his vindication of the uprising uses metaphor not to illustrate an argument but as a substitute for one, and – not alone among Shakespeare's conspirators – he tacks an appeal to the common good on to statements of sectional grievance that seem more keenly felt (4.1.53-94). Yet it would be a confident critic who asserted that Shakespeare's sympathies lie with the archbishop's enemies in Gaultres, the Machiavellian Westmoreland and Prince John – or indeed who claimed to discern any consistent relationship in Shakespeare between the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a cause and the virtues or vices of its champions.

The second principal element in Tillyard's thesis, which has likewise lost authority yet retained influence, is the contention that the English history plays witness a pattern of providential retribution for the usurpation of Bolingbroke. (Perhaps we should rather say, retribution for the murder of Richard that follows and secures it. Bolingbroke expresses no unease about deposing Richard. Like Macbeth and like Claudius he becomes a study in the psychological consequences of committing a murder, not of seizing a throne.) At the conclusion of the histories, the Chorus of *Henry V* proposes no unifying providential theme. Instead, looking back to the Henry VI plays, the Chorus observes that 'so many had the managing' of Henry VI's 'state' that 'they lost France and made his England bleed'. There is nothing in the earlier plays to question the sufficiency of that secular diagnosis (even though critics find a larger element of providentialism in the first tetralogy than in the second). Early in *Henry VI Part 1* the English soldiers in France blame their 'want of men and money' on the English nobles, who 'maintain several factions' (1.1.69-71), the failing which explains the 'negligent and heedless discipline' that fatally prevents relief from

reaching Talbot (4.1.187-94, 4.2.44). The other military disasters of the play are attributed by the characters to the cowardice of Falstaff and to the superior cunning of the French.

Sometimes critics invite us to take Joan la Pucelle's estimate of herself in *Henry VI Part 1* as the 'scourge' of England (1.3.108) to be an authoritative allusion to the Christian scheme of retribution; or to see the civil wars of the first tetralogy as divine punishments for the marriages of Henry VI and of Edward IV; or to suppose that the secular causes apparently at work in the Henry VI plays are to be seen, in accordance with the conventional Christian understanding of providence, as secondary to a divine cause. There is no textual foundation for those suggestions. We do not need to invoke providence to understand what happens to England from 1399 to 1485: to see why a usurpation diminishes the awe on which majesty depends, or why the disputed succession which it produces is a recipe for instability. We do not need providence to explain why a monarchy that has been thus undermined should break down under Henry VI, who inherits the throne as a child; who in adulthood abandons the responsibilities of kingship and retreats into his 'ease';¹² who loses foreign conquests in which his rivals have a stake; and who is duped into a politically foolish marriage.

Of course, the Henry VI plays are full of prophecies and auguries and curses. Yet we would be no more entitled to claim that Shakespeare believed in the supernatural apparatus of the early histories than to infer from *Macbeth* that he believed in witchcraft or from *Romeo and Juliet* that he believed the lovers to be star-crossed. Whether or not the history plays are tragedies, they have the elemental dimension of tragedy. First and foremost they are plays, where history is organized, and re-organized, to accommodate the imagination of a writer who reinvents the universe with every

¹² 2 *Henry VI* 1.3.104-5, 3.1.195-6; 3 *Henry VI* 4.7.52.

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play, or at least with every sequence of plays, that he begins. Within a play – whether a history or a tragedy – he will build a self-sufficient cosmology that supplies a scale of time and history, or gives dimensions to order and chaos, or indicates the size or frailty of human aspiration, or summons hidden springs of hope and fear. The one history play that lacks a cosmology, *King John*, perhaps proves a rule, for it is also the play where (whether or not by design) the balances of sympathy are confusing: nowhere more so than in the exposure by the Pope's representative Cardinal Pandolf – of all people – of the English people's proneness to superstitious explanation of natural phenomena (3.4.149–52, 4.2.143–6).

If the doctrine of providence held a political sanction in Tudor England it was as a Christian doctrine (even though its exponents could usually accommodate pagan or semi-pagan ideas of fortune within it). Yet the cosmology of the history plays is not predominantly Christian. In the Henry VI trilogy it is predominantly astrological. The 'planets of mishap' govern the 'heavens' (not heaven).¹³ Christian doctrine has, too, a smaller place in the trilogy than has classical mythology. It is true that in the two plays that conclude the tetralogies, *Richard III* and *Henry V*, we do find a Christian cosmology. *Richard III* takes us into a late medieval world of beads and rosaries and images and sanctuaries and of oaths sworn over sacraments: a world too where broken men and women lament the judgement of a Christian God upon their land or yearn for 'All-seeing heaven' (2.1.83) to exact retribution upon their enemies. It is a world which Richard expertly manipulates and profanes, clothing 'my naked villainy / With odd old ends, stol'n forth of Holy Writ', seeming 'a saint when most I play the devil' (1.3.344–6), declaring that 'God will revenge' the murder of Clarence (2.1.40), and 'meditating with two deep divines' (3.7.75). The Christian *motifs* summon the play's themes of vulnerability and violation, but need be no closer to any religious convictions Shakespeare

may have had than the astrological framework of the Henry VI plays. Henry V, whose Christianity is unmistakable, and who takes the idea of divine retribution so seriously, fears it not only for 'the fault / My father made in compassing the crown' (4.1.290–1) but for the sinfulness of his troops, and stipulates the death penalty for soldiers who 'take that praise from God / Which is his only' (4.8.106–16). Even Oliver Cromwell, who shared Henry's premises, did not go so far. But nowhere else did Shakespeare go so far either.

II

When Shakespeare's characters contradict each other we notice how rarely or how little the feelings with which we respond to his plays depend upon our taking sides. Yet his characters do not always contradict each other. Some political positions are left unchallenged. They are the conventional positions of Shakespeare's time. Whether they correspond to assumptions consciously or unconsciously held by him, or whether he merely enters into them in order to forge a bond with his audiences, is anyone's guess. Yet it is as well to acknowledge them, for they are the material on which the view of Shakespeare as an expounder of orthodoxy or conservatism must draw. In the history plays, which are written in wartime, love of England and love of victory generally seem desirable. Rich and powerful Catholic churchmen are undesirable or even despicable, Puritans – or characters with Puritan characteristics – no less so: the texts invite not an ounce of sympathy for the beliefs or behaviour of Cardinal Beaufort, or for those of Angelo or Malvolio. There is a horror of demos – of the lynch mob in *Julius Caesar* – and there is a tendency to represent the lower orders as figures of fear or fun or else of unmodulated fidelity. Even in *Coriolanus*, where the citizens are for once given

¹³ 1 *Henry VI* 1.1.1–5, 23, 54; 1.2.1; 1.3.123; 1.6.76; 1.7.9; 2.1.48.

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distinctive voices, they are not given names; and after Agincourt, and at the outset of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the good news is brought that none 'of name' are slain.¹⁴

Some modern critics are indignant to discover that Shakespeare's plays do not seem to be the work of a democrat. Alternatively they uncover democratic aspirations hidden by the allegedly repressive conditions of censorship. It would be as surprising to find a Renaissance playwright hoping for democracy as it would be to find a modern playwright arguing against it. It would be no less surprising to find a Renaissance playwright questioning the institution of monarchy. In Shakespeare's England there was admiration for classical (and aristocratic) republican virtue, but no suggestion that England could or should become a republic. The rebels in Shakespeare's English history plays want not to abolish kingship but either to usurp it or to restore it to the health they believe it to have enjoyed under Edward III or Henry V. While the inconveniences of monarchy that had long been recognized are amply represented in Shakespeare – its tendency to degenerate into tyranny or to break down into the alternative evil of anarchy; the risk of succession disputes and of the rule of minors – its virtues are amply represented too. Kingship has, or should have, a unitive force. When it works well, as in *Henry V*, the nobles are patriotic and unselfish, and the people follow them. When it works badly, as under Henry VI, the nobles are selfish and quarrelsome and infect the commons with their bad example. Folly below corresponds to folly above – as in *Henry VI Part 2*, when the fraud of Saunder Simcox and the fraud of the Duchess of Gloucester are juxtaposed (2.1).

Challenges to the rule of a single person produce selfishness and fragmentation. The rebels in *Henry IV Part 1* squabble, each for 'my' land, as they carve up the map of England (3.1); the conspirators of *Julius Caesar* fall apart; so do the triumvirates that succeed to Caesar's rule. In the representations of Richmond in

Henry VI Part 3 and in *Richard III*, and in the prophecy of Cranmer in *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare solemnizes the Tudor achievement of unity and peace. Is it the distance between the political preconceptions of our time and those of Shakespeare's, or is it some difficulty or embarrassment on Shakespeare's part, that can make those passages seem the sore thumbs of the history plays? Nothing in late Renaissance politics is harder for us to enter – though the theme is widespread in the literature of the period and is the starting-point of the masque – than the idealization of kingship and the longing for a monarch to be a fairy-tale prince. Even in the middle of the seventeenth century, when the collapse of monarchy created the conditions for republicanism, republicans – Milton among them – yearned for an Aristotelian king, who would rule by virtue of divinely appointed merit.¹⁵

If Shakespeare's age could be kingstruck, it could also, it is true, be more sceptical. He writes when the political realism associated with Tacitus and Machiavelli is making a novel and profound impact on imaginative literature; and the political realism of his plays – whether or not he has read Tacitus or Machiavelli – could surely not have been achieved in an earlier age. Yet his writing shows none of the self-conscious and risky preoccupation with the new politics and the new history to be found in Jonson or Chapman or Daniel. The language of public liberty, so widespread in the plays of his contemporaries, rarely appears in his English history plays and looks like dangerous self-delusion in his Roman ones.¹⁶ He writes *Richard II*, not *Woodstock*. It seems possible that, like his choruses, he wished not to offend.

Yet how little the conventional framework of the plays tells us, and how little it matters! If

¹⁴ *Henry V* 4.8.105; *Much Ado* 1.1.7.

¹⁵ B. Worden, 'Milton's Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven', in G. Bock, Q. Skinner and M. Viroli, eds., *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 229.

¹⁶ *Caesar* 3.1.77–80, 110–19; cf. 2 *Henry VI* 4.2.182.

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Shakespeare can communicate the majesty of power, there is nothing he does not know about the emptiness or the duplicity of 'man, proud man, / Dressed in a little brief authority'. His kings remind us that 'a dog's obeyed in office', that the crown is hollow, that 'ceremony' is an 'idol'.¹⁷ In Shakespeare, as in life, virtue mingles insensibly with *realpolitik*. Henry V is an ideal king, who conquers France with an ideal nobility: he is also the king who has been advised to 'busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels' (2 *Henry IV* 4.3.342-3); who strikes a murky deal with the Church; and whose triumphs bring plunder and devastation in their wake. Critics wonder which is the true Henry, the hero or the politician. Both are.

Shakespeare's history plays might alternatively be called war plays, for it is in war that man's character is fully extended. He writes no play about the peaceful passages of medieval history. (There is the peacetime play *Henry VIII*, but that, as we shall see, is another exception to prove a rule.) In writing about Rome he would have been cramped by the peaceful tyranny of the period of the emperor Tiberius, to which Jonson, in *Sejanus his Fall*, brought the most *avant-garde* techniques of political analysis. Shakespeare gives little time to the machinery of politics or the workings of constitutions. His interest is in the psychological rather than the institutional basis of politics. Perhaps there is a danger here for modern interpreters, who write in a century which has been preoccupied with psychology and devastated by ideologies. We instinctively think less well of a statement of political principle – as Shakespeare may not have done – when we believe we detect its psychological roots, a habit which may equip us, for example, to comprehend the flaws of Marcus Brutus better than his nobility. Yet whatever our response to Brutus's decision to assassinate Caesar we cannot derive it from a like or dislike of his constitutional programme, for there is no evidence that he has one.

It may be a mistake even to ask whether Brutus is justified in killing Caesar. Shake-

speare's instincts are always descriptive, never prescriptive. He provides maps of political conduct, not tests of political theory. The political views – the conflicting political views – of his characters are instructive in a way parallel to that in which their conflicting interpretations of their dreams are instructive. They illustrate the interaction of belief and conduct, and show us how political doctrine is adhered to or abandoned or manipulated, but they do not tell us who is right. When Richard II has lost his power, but not yet his throne, the Earl of Northumberland forgets the reverence owed to a king and omits 'To say "King Richard"' (3.3.7-8). Yet once Bolingbroke is installed, the Earl wishes all happiness to the usurper's 'sacred state' (5.6.6) – a sentiment he subsequently learns to forget, when Henry has banished him from court. Northumberland's record reveals much about his character, and much about the suppleness of political theory before facts of power, but nothing about the legitimacy or illegitimacy of Richard's overthrow.

Shakespeare dwells not on the justice of men's causes but on their perceptions of it. In the opening scene of *Richard II* he shows us two rivals, Mowbray and Hereford, passionately convinced of the truth of the competing versions of past events they give, and offers no indication which version (if either) is correct. The pinning down of political or historical explanation is, in any case, not one of Shakespeare's habits. He prefers the formula, favoured too by his chronicle sources, that gives his audience's imagination the space to roam among differing explanations of events: 'whether 'twas . . . or whether 'twas . . .' (e.g. 3 *Henry VI* 2.1.122-8). The plays are full of such openness – and, of course, of historical and biographical imprecision. There is no more beautifully drawn a politician in literature than Polonius. Yet to ask the most elementary question about his political past – whether he had

¹⁷ *Measure* 2.2.120-1; *Lear* Q20.152-3; *Henry V* 4.1.237.

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served King Hamlet, or has been brought in by Claudius – is to ask in vain.

If Shakespeare's history is imprecise, it is none the less more penetrating than that of his more up-to-date contemporaries: more penetrating for example than that of Ben Jonson, whose historical plays are much more faithful than Shakespeare's to the historical record. The intimate links between the writing of history and the writing of drama in Shakespeare's time, illustrated in the career of Jonson or Daniel or Greville, remind us how far historical insight rested (as perhaps it ought always to do) on a historian's doing what a dramatist does: ask himself how a given character would have thought and acted in a given situation. In that method Shakespeare had no rivals. Has justice ever been done to the power of his historical imagination, or to the interlinear penetration that he brings to his reading of Holinshed and Hall and North?

Consider his Roman plays. Some bold and stimulating claims have been made, it is true, for Shakespeare as a historian of Rome. There is the proposal that the contrast between the austere imagery of *Coriolanus* and the bucolic world of *Antony and Cleopatra* shows Shakespeare to have been alive to the evolution of Rome from a primitive to a sophisticated or corrupted society.¹⁸ There is the thesis that he realized from Livy that Coriolanus' sentiments had outlived their time.¹⁹ Perhaps those arguments are too bold. It is not clear that Shakespeare, or anyone else in his time, had a sharp sense of historical evolution. It is not clear either that he had the interest in the constitutional arrangements of republican Rome with which he has been credited.²⁰ The scene (3.1) where Coriolanus speaks for his class – for 'we' – against the power of the tribunes draws on a main theme of Shakespeare's sources, but goes against the grain of Shakespeare's characterization, which, by emphasizing the hero's idiosyncrasy and solitariness, reduces the playwright's scope for the sort of political analysis that had engaged Livy, and substitutes psycho-

logical for constitutional perception. Yet if Shakespeare is not a Livian or a Machiavellian commentator on Rome, there is no mistaking his gift for capturing, from the merest hints in his sources, the textures and the sentiments of the societies he re-creates on the stage. What a profundity of insight into the conflict between republican and imperial values is encapsulated, and what a volume of political commentary made redundant, by Julius Caesar's 'Let me have men about me that are fat' (*Caesar* 1.2.193). No doubt, in bringing Rome alive, Shakespeare creates as well as re-creates. Yet his Rome is, at the least, as persuasive a feat of historical recovery as any accomplished by the historians of his time.

The achievement is reflected in the differences between the language of Shakespeare's Romans and that of his Englishmen. His Romans hail 'liberty', which they applaud (as most of Shakespeare's contemporaries did not) as an abstract ideal: his Englishmen instead address questions of resistance and obedience and divine right which exercised Tudor England much more than they had Rome and which are not raised in Shakespeare's Roman plays, even in connection with the assassination of Caesar. There is a more profound perception too. Shakespeare's Romans exclude private from public life: his Englishmen mingle the two. In England, 'love' is both a public and a private word. It belongs both to the masculine loyalties of politics and to private happiness between the sexes. In Rome the word belongs to the public world but is barred from the private one. It has no place in Volumnia's despairing imprecations to Coriolanus at the climax of the play, or in the speech with which he yields to them. In *Julius Caesar* the 'vows of

¹⁸ P. A. Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome* (Ithaca and London, 1976); Vivian Thomas, *Shakespeare's Roman Worlds* (London, 1989), pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ Anne Barton, 'Livy, Machiavelli and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', *Shakespeare Survey* 38 (1985).

²⁰ Huffman, *Coriolanus in Context*.

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love' which Marcus Brutus once gave to Portia sound to have been formal pledges (2.1.271). At all events a man who is so free with the word 'love' in public life does not use it when protesting his present devotion to her. Instead he calls her, with a word taken from public life, his 'honourable' wife (2.1.287); it is, after all, 'the name of honour' that Brutus 'love[s]' (1.2.90-1). Yet when we turn from Portia's despair at Brutus's broken sleep, and at her own exclusion from her husband's thoughts, to the identical problem troubling Hotspur's wife Kate in *Henry IV Part 1*, we find the English couple able to tease each other about their love (2.4). Or we may compare the tribute of Messala who has brought news of Portia's death to the impassive Brutus - 'Even so great men great losses should endure' (4.2.245) - with the response to the slaughter of his family by Macduff, who agrees to 'Dispute it like a man' but who 'must also feel it as a man' (*Macbeth* 4.3.221-3). Equally we would not find in Shakespeare's Rome a scene comparable to the comical family confrontation in *Richard II* where Bolingbroke overrules his uncle and yields to his aunt in extending leniency to their son Aumerle.²¹

Shakespeare's contemporaries combined their intense interest in England's past with a preoccupation no less intense with the similarities and parallels between past and present. His English history plays subtly delineate a world which is recognizably different from the present, but which also harbours many of the features of that present. If Shakespeare's texts tell us nothing certain about the man by whom they were written, they leave little doubt when they were written. A look at the place of contemporary preoccupations in his plays may help us (provided we do not ask too much of the exercise) to bring some of their themes into focus.

III

The tensions of late Tudor and early Stuart politics are the tensions reported, sometimes

more lengthily and loudly, by his fellow dramatists too. They are the tensions between the gains and the losses of the Tudor achievement. On the one side there has been the attainment of order and unity and of the stability that makes the cultural achievement of the late Renaissance possible. On the other there has been the challenge to old values and old ways. The martial concepts of honour and nobility have been undermined. The power of the new monarchy, and the artificiality and effeminacy of its court, have mounted threats to integrity and independence of character and to freedom and frankness of expression. Hotspur confronts the perfumed popinjay. Late Elizabethan England has seen the final taming of the feudal nobility, most dramatically in the north, where the rebellions of 1536 and 1569 have conspicuous resemblances to the Percy uprisings in Shakespeare; the King's charge in *Henry IV Part 1* that the rebels' grievances had been 'proclaimed at market crosses, read in churches' (5.1.73) must have reminded Tudor audiences of those later crises. By the late sixteenth century the medieval nobility had been largely extinguished.²² It had yielded power to a new service nobility, or carpet nobility, which owed its rise to royal favour and to courtly employment. The manly, warlike, chivalric age was past, or was felt to be. Amidst such gains and losses there was an inevitable ambivalence about the court, the centre of power and of stability and of office-holding. On the one hand it was looked to as a civilizing force and as a model of courtesy and manners. On the other it was reviled, with a persistence and a repetitiveness as striking in literature as in life, as a humiliating arena of flattery and servility. There was a darker side

²¹ The primacy of public life in the Roman plays is a theme of Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome* (Cambridge, 1983).

²² Frail as its statistical base has been shown to be, Lawrence Stone's *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1965) remains essential to an understanding of the changing composition and character of the nobility.