

CHAPTER I

Introduction

There is a sense of great abundance in Shakespeare's plays – so much so, indeed, that in every generation there are interpreters who cut and simplify, unable to cope with the wealth of ideas and experiences in the plays, or supposing their audiences incapable of doing so. I believe, on the contrary, that abundance is a great strength of Shakespeare's plays, that they are designed deliberately to expand the mind – to generate a sense of concentrated vigorous life in emotions and ideas, to promote as multiple an awareness as possible of differing facets of a story; and that this aim, already discernible in Shakespeare's earliest work, is at the core of his development, and of his power and distinctiveness as an artist.

My aim in this book is to take some examples which focus on Shakespeare's art of translating – or better, transfiguring – material into the three-dimensional language of theatre. Each new Shakespeare play is to a certain extent a 'reading' of material from other books and plays – and, it should be stressed, this usually includes plays he had himself already written. The plays he used as sources offered a visual dimension, presenting their narratives not only in words but in practicable stage action and stage images, and these Shakespeare noted with care; yet even when he read the most unpromising kinds of prose chronicle his dramatist's instinct for selection is evident: he had an eye for the telling action no less than the telling phrase: he made a narrative visual as well as verbal, and his plays, when acted, present stage metaphors which can equal those in the spoken text.

Following his method of composition as I do here means

seeing Shakespeare's plays in terms of multiple codes woven together in complex designs, often involving eclectic mixing of generic elements (here Shakespeare was in accord with sixteenth-century Italian theory and practice¹), so that each play is a unique answer to the particular challenge he set himself on that occasion. It is necessary to take account of the stories themselves, as well as the way his dramatic designs shape them to concentrate on central issues: the exceptional individual and extreme experience, and – no less profound concerns – communal life, cultural structures and imperatives, and the relation of story to history, and to myth.

In each chapter I take a different bearing on Shakespeare's art of theatre, and aim to follow the implications of his designs in a variety of different genres, whether or not the consequences seem disconcerting or otherwise unfamiliar. I deliberately use a variety of approaches and ideas – an eclecticism of method prompted by Shakespeare's own eclecticism, for this is the key feature of his constructional method, of his attitude to subject-matter, to dramatic structure, genre, style.

Shakespeare had an excellent memory, yet when he recalled previous work – whether his own or other people's – he always did so with fresh ideas in mind, and he persistently set himself challenges, reshaping available theatre styles and ceaselessly inventing new ones. He was always ready to look with fresh eyes at familiar material or techniques – he recreated Falstaff in *The Merry Wives*, he shaped the same novella material into extraordinarily different forms in *Much Ado* and *Othello*; and he varied it again in *Cymbeline*.

In *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare subverts the academically solemn doctrine of the three unities, and in doing so reveals his alertness to the debate about the future of the drama in Elizabethan England, to which Sir Philip Sidney had lent his eloquent weight on the side of conservative orthodoxy. In Polonius' list Shakespeare parodies academic pedantry: 'tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral' (*Hamlet*, 2.2.364–5). This reduces the matter of genre to just four fixed terms, absurdly supposing that any variant may

be accommodated by a simple mechanical permutation. Polonius' clumsy effort here may result in nonsense, but Shakespeare himself took the subject of genre most seriously: he was highly conscious of artistic decorum in dramatic form, style and genre, except that, from the outset, his creative imagination displays great power in creating new dramatic shapes, choosing eclectically among a diverse and wide range of traditions.

My choice of plays for sustained discussion is intended to be exemplary rather than exhaustive. It includes examples of the major genres in which Shakespeare worked. I have chosen some plays which, though less famous, seem to me especially interesting in themselves, and to throw fresh light on Shakespeare's artistic evolution. Allusions in the later plays to the earlier works can suggest what their imaginative and technical significance was for Shakespeare himself as he reflected on his artistic development. For this reason Shakespeare's early, middle, and later phases are represented.

While the chronological order of Shakespeare's earliest plays is still a matter for contention, it is accepted that by 1596 he had produced *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Titus Andronicus*, *King Henry VI* (Parts 1, 2, and 3), *King John*, *King Richard III*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the question of which came first is disputed – *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *1 King Henry VI* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* have each their recent supporters.² The problem of establishing a chronology is partly due to the lack of conclusive external evidence, but there is also the difficulty of making comparisons between works as unlike as these. Indeed, though the twelve plays are early works, each shows confident independence in its handling of Elizabethan dramatic conventions, while the sheer range of different genres and styles which Shakespeare explores in them is unequalled.

This body of work, which Shakespeare had achieved by 1596, provided him with source material so rich that he was able to return to it again and again for inspiration, and at the same time it served as a handbook of solutions to technical problems of play-making. As an assertion of versatility it challenged rival

playwrights; at the same time it was a demonstration to acting companies and audiences of his ability to reshape the kinds of play already established on the Elizabethan stage, and it held out the promise of new kinds of play altogether.

Questions of style and genre are important because they can influence, indeed partly predetermine, a good deal of the affective as well as the intellectual scope of a play. The plays I choose for discussion are of diverse kinds, which tradition has been content to label tragedy, comedy, history; but inspection of that tradition – of stage interpretation as well as critical reception of the plays – shows that very often, over-rigid assumptions about genre and style have reduced and distorted the dramatic and intellectual experience the plays can offer. I invoke the idea of multiplicity as a way of accounting for the generic mingling which is so pronounced a characteristic of Shakespeare and which has proved such a barrier to neo-classical critics.

My method is comparison, I study Shakespeare's re-use of his own earlier work – its importance as a source seems to me profound – and I study his use of plays, poetry and prose by others. However, while I attend closely to Shakespeare's art of transfiguring in relation to his active development as an artist, I also use another quite different approach, one that is non-chronological: I ask what is revealed – on both sides – when one particular work is placed beside another. I ask: what does one see in Shakespeare when he is placed beside Spenser, or Sidney; but also: what do we learn of Spenser, or Sidney, when we turn to them after Shakespeare.

Dr Johnson made an important distinction when he declared that Shakespeare's first concern was theatrical, not literary, in writing his plays – 'He sold them not to be printed but to be played'³ – although there is no better witness than Johnson to the effect on the solitary reader of a Shakespeare play. In the following pages I am much concerned with Shakespeare's verbal text, but I also endeavour to relate the verbal text to the other elements of theatre-language, the codes that together constitute the sign-systems of live performance – especially those

Introduction

5

involving the body. It is from the interplay of the verbal and non-verbal codes that a play, as distinct from a non-dramatic narrative, is composed. Because they are not only verbal, these interconnections have tended to be overlooked.

I have concentrated on instances where Shakespeare worked very closely with specific texts – including his own previous work – when making a new play, because in these cases his artistic decision-making can be identified with particular clarity – he becomes visible as an artist. In many respects, even so, ‘Shakespeare’ remains invisible: his medium, drama, is a performance art in which the writer’s self-expression is displaced on to invented figures, the ‘persons of the play’, and these figures take on further independence when impersonated variously by actors. It is a fact of live theatre that there will be differences between one performance and another even with the same cast of actors.⁴ Shakespeare’s response is to make a virtue of necessity, devising robust dramatic designs woven from matter so substantial that they generate repeatedly diverse interpretations; and this multiple-faceted quality is a great source of their narrative interest and energy.

The special quality of live performance which Shakespeare stresses is suspense. If he compares great men making history to actors performing a play, it is because they both confront the risk of live performance. They must perform well, but the occasion always has an element of unpredictability: so in *Julius Caesar*, immediately Caesar falls to the knives of Cassius and his friends, Cassius imagines how the theatre will perpetuate the live performance of their much-rehearsed scene:

How many ages hence
 Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
 In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

(3.1.111–13)⁵

Shakespeare’s audiences, ages hence, do indeed still see the lofty scene, as Cassius correctly prophesies; but what history and theatre commemorate is not his success, as he anticipates, but his tragedy.

I value the live performance, and I devote some space to

discussion of live performances. Since 1969 I have been exploring Shakespeare with students through theatre-workshop classes, sometimes with full performances as spin-offs, and my approach partly derives from this experience, as well as from going to the theatre.

Acting versions, however, are normally abbreviated, sometimes drastically so, and often contain further changes: to the words, or to the number and order of scenes, to the staging, to the narrative, depending on the playing place, the occasion, audience, company size. This common theatrical practice is apparent from the unauthorised early Quarto editions of several Shakespeare plays, but it is significant that Shakespeare or his company took the trouble to publish fuller, more literary Quarto editions for these plays. It should be emphasised that no play of Shakespeare's survives in its original manuscript. There are only printed editions. There is no direct access to what Shakespeare wrote. It is uncertain what changes would have been made (and with what degree of consistency) to the authorial fair-copy when it was prepared for the use of the 'bookholder' (or prompter) in the Shakespearean playhouse. The practice with regard to prompt-books in later historical periods is that detailed practical performance notes are recorded, but, as William B. Long argues,⁶ evidence is lacking of such detailed marking-up in Elizabethan playhouse 'books'. Thus although certain printed texts of Shakespeare plays show signs of playhouse adaptation, they leave many questions of performance unanswered. Nor is one able to recover 'the original performance', since any performance involves features unique to that occasion – the voicing of the speeches, physical action, and audience collaboration – which are not recorded. Much, therefore, remains uncertain or unknown, and so it is fortunate that all of Shakespeare's play-texts do contain many implicit as well as explicit directions for staging and performance, and these provide some guidance for critical as well as stage interpretation.

For many plays there is relatively little textual instability because there is only the Folio text; for several of the best-known plays, however, there are both Quarto and Folio versions,

Introduction

7

between which there are variations involving not only words and lines but whole speeches and scenes. This is the case, famously, in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.⁷ In my discussion of *King Lear* I confine myself to the earlier complete version, the Quarto, as I wish to concentrate on Shakespeare's direct reworking of earlier plays. Throughout this book I base my discussion on the earliest edited Shakespeare play-texts – up to and including the First Folio – and responsible modern editions based on them.

I take it for granted that Shakespeare anticipated diverse emphases in stage interpretation of his plays, and I imagine he welcomed the fact; but at the same time his play-texts have proved to be both ample and sturdy enough in conception, practical design, and written substance, to accommodate very various emphases without losing an overall dynamic shape. Indeed it is the common experience that to work on Shakespeare under rehearsal conditions is to become aware of ordering principles deeper than those explicit in the verbal text. As Emrys Jones shows in his classic study *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1971), Shakespeare's constructional unit is the scene, and within the scene the sequence of speakers creates strong formative patterns. Experience of rehearsal and performance shows that minor changes may be made within scenes without altering the design as a whole, while the fixed order of the scenes guarantees a basic sequence, ensuring that predetermined patterns of repetition and variation of different kinds must be woven, so that it takes heavy cutting or the transposition of whole scenes to disrupt these patterns. Such robust methods of composition secure the narrative and give firm guidance about performance; yet far from inhibiting the performers, they also positively enable a certain space for improvisation in the moment of playing.

The plays I have chosen for discussion mostly involve representation of the past, and from the perspective, whether unobtrusive or evident, of Shakespeare's own time. Shakespeare's Romans reflect certain immediate concerns of his culture, and indirectly reflect Elizabethan ideas of the past (contrast the Romans in Dryden's *All For Love* or Shaw's *Caesar*

and *Cleopatra* or Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*). In 1610–11, very near the date of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, Sir Walter Raleigh, imprisoned in the Tower of London, wrote in the Preface to his *History of the World*:

I know it will bee said by many, That I might have beene more pleasing to the Reader, if I had written the Story of mine owne times; having been permitted to draw water as neare the Well-head as another. To this I answer, that who-so-ever in writing a moderne Historie, shall follow truth too neare the heeles, it may happily strike out his teeth ... It is enough for me (being in that state I am) to write of the eldest times; wherein also why may not it be said, that in speaking of the past, I point at the present, and taxe the vices of those that are yet lyving, in their persons that are long since dead; and have it laid to my charge? But this I cannot helpe, though innocent.

To Raleigh it is evidently an accepted commonplace that one might write a history, even of remote times and places, to provide an oblique critical commentary on current events. He declares that it is certainly too dangerous and too difficult to write the history of the present.⁸

The majority of Shakespeare's plays have settings remote in time and place, but they are scattered with deliberate anachronisms which, like his allusions to acting and theatre, are locally enlivening – as when in the ancient Greece of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, King Theseus watches an entertainment by his subjects, every one of whom is manifestly an Elizabethan tradesman, or in the remote Vienna of *Measure for Measure*, where the suburbs are populated with Jacobean London low-life. Yet behind such incidental features is a much larger scheme in which Shakespeare pays only intermittent respect to having set the action in some remote time and place, otherwise representing the narrative in terms of his own culture. This gives him the freedom to shift the point of view, now viewing the past from an Elizabethan perspective, now adopting the historical context to throw a defamiliarising light on the Elizabethans – inviting recognition of their present time of live performance itself in relative, historical terms.

In Shakespeare, theatre is not only a mode of representation, it is a language for perception and thought; a language made up

Introduction

9

of many voices, perspectives, many codes, brought to bear on major issues. Each of Shakespeare's plays burgeons with ideas. His presentation of the past involves reflecting the present, and this is also true in a special sense, to which he draws attention: since theatre is a performance art, a play can only be staged in the present, and spontaneous audience response, unique to that occasion, is a part of any performance. Again, neither actors nor spectators are immune to the broad influence of their own social and political context, so that the same play-script will be perceived in different ways in different historical periods or cultural situations. In the USA, *Julius Caesar* in the nineteenth century⁹ was seen especially in terms relevant to that society, of republicanism and the phenomenon of political assassination, and *Hamlet* in the Paris of Sartre reflected current existentialist ideas – indeed photographs of the actor Jean-Louis Barrault as Hamlet seem now more a visual epitome of the period than a representation of a Shakespearean character.¹⁰ In such apparently anachronistic applications of Shakespeare, later generations are in a sense being true to Elizabethan practice, for while the large majority of Shakespeare's plays have settings remote in time and place, the Elizabethan actors usually performed in modern dress. In the earlier part of the sixteenth century it was the fact that religious morality drama was customarily performed in contemporary terms that had made it so susceptible to politicisation,¹¹ and this led, menacingly, to its complete suppression. The stage history of Shakespeare's plays in later centuries shows how variably the plays have been and continue to be interpreted, according to prevailing cultural conditions: thus an audience today at a performance of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* contemplate a multi-layered narrative, one depicting the ancient world, but doing so partly in Elizabethan terms, and one which must in turn be represented by today's actors and to some degree in today's accents, thereby invoking a present-day perspective¹² on the Elizabethans as well as on the ancient culture of 'windy Troy'. The reflection offers an audience an oblique, defamiliarised view of their own time and place.

Georg Lukacs in his study *The Historical Novel* defined the genre of historical novel in terms equally applicable to historical drama. Invoking the light of Hegel – ‘the historical reality represented must be made clear and accessible to us ... so that we ... may find ourselves at home therein’¹³ – Lukacs commended Scott’s historical fiction as a form of critical realism, for its ability to represent the minute particulars, the detail of ordinary life and of ordinary men’s lives, as the ‘real social and economic basis’ from which historical necessity arises (p. 65), while he saw Scott’s leading figures concentrating in themselves the salient positive and negative sides of the historical movement concerned. The protagonist, according to Lukacs’s model of the historical novel, should be a type, a synthesis of general and particular, in whom is embodied ‘the complex interaction of concrete historical circumstances ... with the concrete human beings ... who have been very variously influenced by them, and who act in an individual way’ (p. 64). Detail in the narrative will not be ‘local colour’ but positively serve as ‘a means of achieving historical faithfulness’, making clear ‘the historical necessity of a concrete situation’ (p. 65).

Recently emphasis in literary theory and practice has shifted to the multiplicity of perspectives from which events can be interpreted, to the problematic nature of the ideal of ‘historical faithfulness’ – of objective recording of fact. Thus Hayden White asserts that ‘every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications’.¹⁴ History may refer to reality in a different way from fiction, but both are narratives, and the act of reference may be problematised by stressing its rhetorical status.

The issues and approaches outlined here will be familiar from their reflection in contemporary post-modernist historical fiction: for example John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot*, Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*; and also in poetry: Geoffrey Hill, *Mercian Hymns*; and drama: Tom Stoppard, *Travesties*, or Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls*. In such works different historical moments are juxtaposed by unexplained time-shifts, often involving abrupt changes of style –