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SHAKESPEARE AND VIOLENCE

Shakespeare and Violence connects to current anxieties about the problem of violence, and shows how similar concerns are central in Shakespeare's plays. In the early histories and tragedies he took delight in outdoing Christopher Marlowe and other dramatists in spectacular stage violence for its entertainment value. His later plays on English history led him to consider violence in relation to rule, and in the context of the much debated question as to whether war can be just. The almost continual wars of the 1580s and 1590s no doubt affected him and led to scepticism about their value, a theme picked up in the classical plays. In these plays and in his major tragedies he also explored the construction of masculinity in relation to power over others, to the value of heroism, and to self-control. Shakespeare's last plays present a world in which human violence appears analogous to violence in the natural world, and both kinds of violence are shown as aspects of a world subject to chance and accident. This book is the first to examine the development of Shakespeare's representations of violence and to explain their importance in shaping his career as a dramatist.

R. A. FOAKES is Professor Emeritus at the Department of English, University of California, Los Angeles. His publications include *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Cambridge, 1984), *Illustrations of the English Stage 1580–1642* (1985), *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare* (1989), *Hamlet versus Lear* (Cambridge, 1993), *King Lear* for the third Arden series (1997), and, with Mary Foakes, *The Columbia Dictionary of Shakespeare Quotations* (1998). In 2002 he published the second edition of *Henslowe's Diary* (first edition Cambridge, 1961).

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I could hardly be persuaded, before I had seen it, that the world could have afforded so marble-hearted and savage-minded men, that for the only pleasure of murder would commit it; then cut, mangle, and hack other members in pieces: to rouse and sharpen their wits, to invent unused tortures and unheard-of torments; to devise new and unknown deaths and that in cold blood, without any former enmity or quarrel, or without any gain or profit; and only to this end, that they may enjoy the pleasing spectacle of the languishing gestures, pitiful motions, horror-moving yellings, deep fetched groans, and lamentable voices of a dying and drooping man.

Michel de Montaigne, 'Of Cruelty', *Essays* (1580), Second Book, Chapter XI, as translated by John Florio in 1603.

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Preface

This is a book about a problem that troubled Shakespeare and his age as much as it does our own world, namely, how to relate to and cope with human violence. Much recent criticism has been devoted to repudiating any idea that Shakespeare's works can speak directly to our time or have any transhistorical meaning. Deconstructive critics insist on the instability of meaning, and argue that the plays are 'not intelligible by commonsensical notions of coherence, since they are constituted by historical contingencies of the stage, conventions, location, and audience',¹ so that they would say there are no authorially validated meanings. Materialist critics also tend to treat the literary text 'as an enactment or production' of a historical context or 'cultural system'.² The author disappears, to be reinvented 'not indeed as the origin and owner of meaning beloved by nineteenth-century literary biography, but as a cultural construct determined by the representational practices of a particular historical era'.³ Authority is transferred to the reader or critic, who is conceived as creating the meaning of a work. No doubt we can interpret Shakespeare's plays only in the light of our own experience; but as we are reading a text or watching a play performed, common sense may well find something peculiar in the notion of incoherent and unstable works written by a cultural construct.

It is true that 'interpretation responds to the moment of their representation, the moment of reading or of onstage enactment',⁴ so that we negotiate Shakespeare's plays in relation to our own age and perceptions. Violence as manifested in our society in murder, rape, and casual street attacks, in the activities of serial killers, and in acts of terrorism is deeply troubling at the present time, and it is in an awareness of this problem that I consider Shakespeare's treatment of violence in this book. At the same time the plays remain vitally alive, coherent, and rich in embodied meanings for millions of playgoers and readers. Theoretical debates

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about the status of the author and the text have their own fascination, but on the whole theorists speak to other theorists.⁵ Editors, indeed, impose their own choice and arrangement of the text, and printers and publishers design the format of an edition, but the texts of the plays have for long been basically established, and variations and revisions have been pretty thoroughly analysed. Stage directors and actors impose their own style and shaping in productions, and performance is never a mere repetition of the work. But the plays survive our scrutiny, and I think will survive current efforts to destabilize them. In this book I shall treat Shakespeare as the author of his plays, and as the originator in them of perceptions that resonate across the centuries and take on new life and meaning in the context of our own time.

I am grateful to many friends, colleagues, and members of my family who have helped me in discussion to clarify my thinking about violence. The University of California has aided me with research funding, and I have relied heavily on the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, the libraries of the Shakespeare Institute and Shakespeare Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon, the Huntington Library in San Marino, and the Young Research Library at UCLA. I owe thanks to Peter Wright, Kate Falzareno, and especially to Curt Whitaker, whose aid as a research assistant proved invaluable. The advice of the readers for the Press has also been very helpful. Chapter 6, on *Hamlet*, is reworked and expanded from my essay ‘Hamlet’s Neglect of Revenge’, published in Arthur Kinney, ed., *Hamlet: New Critical Essays* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 85–99; I have also used some material from another essay, ‘Coleridge, Violence and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”’, *Romanticism*, 7 (2001), 41–57. Line references for quotations from Shakespeare are to *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson, and David Scott Kastan (London: Thomas Nelson, 1998).

NOTES

1. Susan Zimmerman, ed., *Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (New Casebooks. Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin’s Press, 1998), 2.
2. Ivo Kamps, ed., *Materialist Shakespeare: a History* (London and New York: Verso, 1995), citing the Introduction by Kamps, 5.
3. Richard Wilson, *Will Power: Essays on Shakespearean Authority* (London and Detroit: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 18.
4. Citing W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60. Worthen goes on to say that the plays ‘can only

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speak in the idiom of the present', which I think untrue. Shakespeare's language is for the most part accessible to modern audiences, if only because so much of it has passed into common usage or is known by quotation – and performance often clarifies meaning through action.

5. See R. A. Foakes, 'Shakespeare Editing and Textual Theory: a Rough Guide', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 60 (1999), 425–42.