

## CHAPTER I

*Shakespeare and politics: an introduction*

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Current developments in Shakespeare criticism expose us to the appropriation and adaptation of the playwright's work across an ever-reconfiguring array of contextual fields and a variety of media, including film, television and, most recently, the internet. Yet, even among those critics who confine themselves to a more traditional definition of politics, no small part of the politics of reading Shakespeare continues to come from the struggle for meaning that occurs at the level of the text. The playwright's oeuvre sustains a productive interpretative ambiguity which defies each new critical paradigm that attempts to corner or limit it. And it is here of course, amid the contingencies that inform our critical practice, as well as our appreciation and reception of the plays themselves, that the transformational possibilities of 'Shakespeare' could truly be said to reside. In short, the very endurance of the dramatist's work is clearly related to its ability to withstand interpretations that are often politically contestable or diametrically opposed; and in some sense, it is precisely this 'lack of fit' which has continued to ensure Shakespeare's corpus its socio-political significance.

As a result, over the last four hundred years the playwright has been adopted by almost every faith, political hue and persuasion. Yet paradoxically these attempts to bind Shakespeare to an individual cause – neo-Conservative, Protestant, Catholic, Republican, Liberal, Tory, Marxist, high Anglican, and so on – only serve to confirm that the plays and poems remain irreducible to a particular context or a uniform party-political position. This is not to say that the dramatist's work is somehow of 'timeless' significance, nor is it to deny the value of work which has revealed the playwright's involvement in securing regimes which have deployed Shakespeare for their own oppressive ideological ends. Yet it is precisely the historical variability that informs our reception of Shakespeare that offers proof, if proof were needed, that his plays cannot be exhausted by a 'specific ideology or ideology critique', so that, as the literary critic Geoffrey Hartman observes: 'No culture politics can long hold Shakespeare down.'<sup>1</sup> In their

plurality, the essays reassembled here, drawn from the leading work in the field, *Shakespeare Survey*, confirm that potential for change and their diverse range of concerns and preoccupations also attest to the truth that, in its current state, Shakespeare criticism remains far from politically neutral.

SHAKESPEARE'S POLITICAL CONTEXT: THE PRESENT  
MOMENT OF THE PAST

In fact the volume confirms a paradigm shift that, over the end of the twentieth century, has witnessed the emergence of a new 'political awareness' in Renaissance studies generally and in relation to Shakespeare criticism in particular. In grouping the chapters together around a range of interlinked thematic clusters this introduction attempts to reflect the variety of ways in which the interaction of literary criticism, politics and history can provide mutual insight and illumination. There are many divergent approaches on show here, yet the adoption by almost all the contributors of an interdisciplinary approach is a shared characteristic and demonstrates a willingness to grasp the complexity of the play's political contexts. Crucially, there is an engagement with a heterogeneity of *histories* rather than any overarching or static sense of History as a grand providential design. The essays also demonstrate a dynamic sense of the interaction between text and context. This is in tune with the complexity and discontinuities that informed Shakespeare's own narrative practice. The playwright was after all, first and foremost an adaptor, a notorious Jack-of-all trades, an 'Upstart crow' who fleeced his competitors and lifted and reworked his best plots from the templates provided by others. In writing his plays Shakespeare had ready access to a vast archive of politically significant texts and treatises including the homespun political theory of More and Bacon, as well as contemporary histories, older chronicles and newer translations of classical texts. He also possessed an evident familiarity with European contemporaries and political thinkers such as Montaigne and Machiavelli, as well as a working knowledge of Church law and scriptural religion. Yet such is the diversity of Shakespeare's reworkings and borrowings from this extraordinary array of source material that those in search of the articulation of a clear political thesis within the plays themselves, will remain frustrated.

Indeed, no small part of the paradox, as Blair Worden reminds us in his opening overview of 'Shakespeare and Politics', is that in a period when the realms of historical and dramatic writing overlapped, despite their intimacy with political themes, Shakespeare's plays often seem insulated from immediate political concerns, so that even if a knowledge of Renaissance

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politics can illustrate key motifs within the dramatist's work any attempt to tie the plays to a particular historical or political explanation is consistently thwarted. In construing the relation between text and context then, it is not so much a matter of what we read but *how* we read; as understanding Shakespeare's politics is, in part, as Worden hints, an exercise in literary hermeneutics, where any given recycling of the past often doubles for a reconfiguration of the present:

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 . . . (p. 33)

In emphasizing the conjunctural clash of past and present and in breaking with a unified sense of history as divinely preordained or prescribed, the plays provide a sense of illumination that relies on difference as much as on similarity, and as a consequence they reside in a world that is neither properly modern nor medieval, so that as Worden argues:

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 and Machiavelli – could surely not have been achieved in an earlier age. (p. 29)

In fact, as Worden implies, Shakespeare's drama presents us with an almost constant interrogation of historical transition, regime change, usurpation and tyranny. Yet any structural analysis of the relation between the political context for these shifts in power and their various claims to legitimacy remains contradictory, as we move between a variety of competing forms of political administration – neo-feudal, absolutist, proto-republican – sometimes a mix of all three. The resultant clash of ideologies often produces structural dislocation and presents a challenge to 'old values' and 'old ways' and Worden's reading alerts us to the ways in which characters and meanings in the plays necessarily begin to contradict each other – so that terms such as 'nobility' and 'honour' now possess a multivalent quality, as words and concepts now also possess new connotations.

The 'political realism' to which he alludes is particularly pronounced in Shakespeare's histories and tragedies as newly emergent power-seekers and Machiavellian upstarts like Bolingbroke and Edmund ride roughshod over an older order that once stressed fealty and loyalty, and in the process demystify and erode extant notions of sovereignty. In short, in the midst

of regime change, we are confronted with what Peter L. Rudnytsky in his chapter on ‘*Henry VIII* and the deconstruction of history’ aptly terms ‘the simultaneous presence of conflicting perspectives’ (p. 47). In amplifying the structural complexity of Shakespeare’s engagement with often contradictory source materials Rudnytsky provides a theoretical underpinning for the political and interpretative open-endedness of the plays which I have hinted at above, noting that Shakespeare:

constructs a dramatic universe dominated by ‘deceptive appearances’ and the ‘relativity of truth’, in which in Pirandellian fashion, ‘all is true’ means precisely that *any* interpretation of the past may be true if one thinks it so, and no point of view is allowed to contain or control all others. (p. 48)

Although this perhaps overstates the case for uncertainty and epistemological relativism the particular strength of Rudnytsky’s chapter is that, in reading Shakespeare’s history plays as history, he reminds us of the extent to which, in its ability to accommodate multiple interpretations, the playwright’s dramaturgy demonstrates a form self-consciousness that is thoroughly modern. In a reading that revisits Shakespeare’s late history *Henry VIII* as history rather than romance, Rudnytsky argues that in sustaining divergent interpretations concerning the ‘great matter’ of the king’s divorce, the playwright simultaneously ‘upholds and subverts the “Tudor myth”’ by juxtaposing Catholic and Protestant views of what was a pivotal moment in English history. Such is the temporal complexity of this revisioning of the past that it also simultaneously locates a series of uncanny repetitions in the present; this in turn provides the play with an oblique topicality as it enables a number of further speculations concerning its relation to contemporary Jacobean court politics.

This sense of a practice of historiography reconfigured by the present, yet for critic and playwright alike, inevitably filtered and ‘re-visioned’ through ‘the lenses of previous interpretations’, is the shared concern of Anne Barton’s chapter on ‘Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*’. Amid the playwright’s reworking of the political sources for his tragedy in the recently translated Roman histories of Plutarch and Livy, Barton locates a tension between Livy’s proto-republican account of Rome and the merely biographical or ‘individualist’ tone of Plutarch’s ‘history of the life’ shaped for moral and didactic purposes. In a skilful exposition, she proceeds to locate a ‘Machiavellian strain’ in Shakespeare’s assimilation of Roman history that perhaps owes more to his understanding of Livy even as it draws most of its content from Plutarch. As she points out, whether or not Shakespeare had read Machiavelli’s own commentary on Livy in the

*Discourses*, the playwright demonstrates an understanding of the dynamic complexities of an evolving Republic that owes much to the developmental model of history that attracted Machiavelli. Here again then, it is not just the relation between texts that is crucial, but also the acts of interpretative mediation that occur betwixt and between. Not just Shakespeare reading North's translation of Plutarch's 'Life of Coriolanus' and Holland's translation of Livy's *Romane History*, but also Shakespeare (perhaps?) reading Machiavelli reading Livy, or at least reading Livy from a Machiavellian perspective.

In some part then, the chapters by Worden, Rudnytsky and Barton each reflect a willingness to engage with the plays as sophisticated works of historiography in their own right, as well as complex allegories for the political present. At the same time despite their contemporaneity, as Worden reminds us, there are few direct references to topical concerns in the dramatist's work itself,<sup>2</sup> partly because, however indirectly 'contemporary' they may be, Shakespeare's plays emerge at a moment when modern English history is effectively a banned subject and playwrights had to negotiate the matter of political censorship. The apparent controversy caused by Shakespeare's *Richard II*, a play which, perhaps almost inevitably, features in several of the chapters in the volume, presents us with a case in point. The most explicit engagement comes in S. Schoenbaum's chapter on 'Richard II and the Realities of Power', where he focuses on the claims concerning the revival of Shakespeare's play on the eve of the Essex rebellion and ponders the consequence. In the process he resurrects a rich mix of 'possible sources, near misses and analogues' to Shakespeare's play. This is well-trodden ground of course, and amid a heterogeneity of source materials the most notorious textual evidence for the 'Essex connection' includes a dedication to Essex in John Hayward's best-selling but ill fated *Life and Reign of Henry IV*, as well as the implicit analogy between Elizabeth and Richard reported by her antiquary William Lambarde during a conversation where the monarch is reputed to have compared herself to Richard II: 'I am Richard II. know ye not that?' In appearing to blur the boundaries between state and stage, the matter of the Essex affair and its 'connection' to the staging of a play that was supposedly Shakespeare's (as critics have reminded us there were other possible contenders) in advance of the failed rebellion, has retained an almost totemic significance in the course of sustaining numerous 'political' interpretations of the playwright's work. In its fetishization of the Essex incident, contemporary criticism has arguably invested an undue reliance on the accuracy of an empirical approach to history which it has regularly contested elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Yet the preoccupation with the Essex affair and a sense of its significance is understandable, for

if Shakespeare writes at the crossroads of a political culture, then the Essex circle – awash with republican theory and busily re-reading Tacitus, whilst simultaneously adopting a *faux* medievalism and modelling its behaviour around an outdated Chivalric code of martial valour – exemplifies precisely that process of historical doubleness and split perspective we have already outlined above. Whether or not the connection between the Essex rebellion and the staging of Shakespeare's play proves sustainable, *Richard II* constitutes an analogous degree of temporal and historiographical complexity, juxtaposing a range of political systems as well as accommodating an uneven chronology. Faced with its reworking of so many contradictory and ambiguous source materials Schoenbaum (perhaps wisely in the circumstances) implicitly opts for the verdict 'not proven', as he moves away from the link to Essex and in reading against the grain of the play's medievalism, his own adjudication is to opt for a reading of Richard as a skilled but flawed Machiavellian with a sophisticated grasp of 'politic' behaviour and the workings of *Realpolitik*.

#### COUNTER-DISDISCOURSE AND SOCIAL CRISIS

In reading the plays in relation to Shakespeare's own political context and alongside the contemporary political concerns of sovereignty, state and political rebellion, one cannot afford to lose sight of an alternative 'history from below': a counter-discourse of popular protest and dissent that is often written in the margins of the official history, or excluded altogether. It is now something of a commonplace to note that Shakespeare's drama emerged at a moment of acute political turbulence; a period of social upheaval, often shorthanded by cultural historians as the 'crisis of the 1590s' – a decade which encompassed a series of catastrophic events including dearth, plague, rapid population expansion, inflation, unemployment, increased immigration and attendant vagrancy, attacks on 'aliens', apprentice riots and a host of other problems.<sup>4</sup>

Unsurprisingly perhaps, several of the essays in the current collection explore the relationship between social crisis and the potential for political change. In 'Plutarch, insurrection, and dearth in *Coriolanus*' David George recontextualizes *Coriolanus* in relation to Jacobean England and provides a detailed gloss on the play's 'glancings, borrowing and allusions' to the Midlands insurrection and the attendant anti-enclosure riots of 1607–08; while Pierre Sahel offers a brief, but penetrating overview of Shakespearean dramatizations of 'Coup d'état, rebellion and revolution'. Again in some sense, as Sahel notes, 'no complete conclusion' can be advanced on these

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matters on which Shakespeare remains characteristically ambivalent; and in anticipating the conventional definitions of modern political theory the application of some of these terms is, to an extent, anachronistic. Yet, again, as George and Sahel's accounts ably illustrate, it is the radical hybridity of Shakespeare's plays and their attendant ability to occupy more than one position that confirms their political potential. The particular importance of placing the playwright's work in closer relation to popular culture and popular protest is that it highlights the extent to which the plays recycle a range of festive material and rituals drawn from an unofficial or 'oppositional' culture, a fact foregrounded in recent political readings of the playwright's work which, in building on the work of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, have highlighted the plays' links to the tradition of the carnivalesque: a 'utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance' or topsy-turvydom descended from the Roman Saturnalia, in which the dislocated time and space of holy days or holidays, doubles as a place where rule is temporarily suspended, and the social hierarchy is inverted.<sup>5</sup> The carnivalesque also occasionally doubled as a lexicon for articulating the accumulated discontents of an unjust society, as revels turned to revelry. Within the plays themselves this capacity to imagine alternative political systems or to exploit creative forms of dissent within existing structures, is a key index of the extent to which social rituals and traditions were assimilated into the popular dramatic tradition. In sum, the structural logic of these and other forms of protest confirm a type of 'belonging in displacement': evoking a counter-culture for whom crisis is the norm. A condition of 'order in disorder' perhaps best encapsulated by the interchange between Jack Cade and Dick Butcher, on observing the orderly advance of the king's forces in *2 Henry VI*:

DICK They are all in order, and march toward us.  
 CADE But then are we in order when we are most out of order  
 (*2 Henry VI*, 4.2.184)<sup>6</sup>

To some extent of course, as William C. Carroll reminds us, Cade remains Shakespeare's 'Ur-vagabond', yet as his chapter 'Language, politics, and poverty in Shakespearian drama' demonstrates, the relation between authority and a sub-culture of protest which appears to oppose it, is always complex, and by no means translates into a straightforward polar opposition, so that:

Cade's utopianism needs to be recognized as a complex linguistic creation, not simply, as some have argued, a mockery engineered by Shakespeare (himself allegedly on the side of the establishment) to discredit Cade . . . His [Cades's] rise and

fall reveals no simple ideological position of subverting or subverted. Rather, his voice forms part of a complex socio-political discourse marked most of all by heteroglossia. (p. 146)

As Carroll implies Shakespeare yokes the languages of high and low culture together, so that each effectively co-habits alongside the other. As a result, the discourse of poverty and protest is always already multi-accentual or ‘dialogic’, especially in the case of characters like Cade, Edgar / Poor Tom and Autolycus, where Shakespeare engineers a productive encounter between languages across the social divide. The result is a social-political discourse of many tongues or ‘heteroglossia’, which in turn exposes the precarious balance between ‘authority’ and its subversion, as well as revealing the arbitrary construction of social rank and its reliance upon role playing.

Carroll’s sense of an open-ended dialogue between language and identity is further supplemented by Margot Heinemann’s essay “Demystifying the mystery of state”: *King Lear* and the world upside down’ where, amid the breakdown of a political system and territorial dispossession, a structure of inversion – the counterposing of power and powerlessness, riches and poverty – presents us with a different order of things. Once again, the result is a liberating process of demystification and an exposure of the relative status of rank. Though again, as Heinemann notes, this ‘reversal of degree finds no easy resolution in the play’ (p. 161). Importantly though, as she notes, no small part of the play’s utopianism resides in its uncanny facility to *anticipate* the possibilities of other more positive and alternative futures, as amidst echoes of contemporary Familist discourse and early Dissenter rhetoric, Shakespeare’s play unwittingly foreshadows the radical religious sectarianism which resurface in a revolutionary context forty to fifty years later.

#### OTHER PLACES

These concerns with counter-discourse and political opposition, as well as the licence permitted to certain forms of ritual protest and their attendant forms of displacement, might easily lead us to a more explicit engagement with the place of Shakespeare’s stage, which itself of course already occupies an ambivalent socio-symbolic domain – residing as it does within the city liberties yet beyond the control of civic rule. In geo-political terms, as the new historicist Steven Mullaney reminds us, the early modern stage occupies a ‘liminal’ zone, providing playwrights, audiences and players alike with the opportunity to explore the boundaries of an ‘official’ culture. As such it

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constitutes a contradictory cultural topography, a place where ‘the horizon of community was made visible, the limits of definition, containment and control made manifest’.<sup>7</sup>

In fact Shakespeare’s re-writing of place could be said to constitute the terrain of a ‘political practice’ in its own right, so that the playwright’s relentless appropriation of unfamiliar or ‘alien’ cultures stages a productive encounter which oscillates restlessly between the strange and the familiar, and is both active and dynamic insofar as it offers an audience the opportunity to construe other possible worlds even as these turn to be a refashioning of a world closer to home. As a consequence the theatre effectively doubles as a location for forging new identities, rehearsing a process which as Mullaney implies, can simultaneously relocate and transform conventional categories. As Mark Matheson’s chapter ‘Venetian culture and the politics of *Othello*’ demonstrates, many travellers’ tales and political tracts of the period offer an analogous re-reading from the point of view of an ‘other’ culture, initiating a process of ‘cultural exchange’ which is simultaneously capable of ‘destabiliz[ing] and enrich[ing] English political discourse’ (p. 171). In the case of *Othello*, Matheson argues that the playwright’s choice of a Venetian setting produces an opportunity to develop a proto-republican perspective, as Shakespeare effectively recontextualizes women’s experience in a ‘patriarchal but non-monarchical’ culture. In the process of staging Desdemona’s understanding of her own position and her ability to change places within the broader cultural order of republican Venice and its ‘relatively liberal’ institutions, the playwright grants her a degree of relative autonomy in her ability to appropriate a ‘progressive’ republican discourse in order to contest a conservative paternal authority. Again the focus here is on those who, in political terms, either exploit the displacement that opens up within different forms of social organization or those who suffer exclusion because of it. So that, as Matheson observes: ‘The play is a powerful illustration of his [Shakespeare’s] ability to perceive and represent different forms of political organization, and to situate personal relationships and issues of individual subjectivity in a specific institutional context’ (p. 169). While Desdemona is able to co-exist simultaneously inside and outside Venetian society by exploiting the difference between ‘public and private’ worlds, outsiders like Othello often fail to make a distinction between different political orders – domestic and state, conservative and progressive – and are placed in a vulnerable position as a consequence.

Shakespeare’s own appropriation of context is one thing, his appropriation by others another and much of the most recent post-colonial work on Shakespeare has focused on the cross-cultural adaptations of the

playwright's work in a range of different contexts.<sup>8</sup> Yet of all Shakespeare's 'other places', that which is closest to home – Ireland – engenders a sense of multinational complexity which is, ironically enough, often elided or obscured, even by recent 'political' approaches to the playwright's work. The oversight is somewhat perplexing, not least, insofar as Willy Maley reminds us:

Shakespeare, for half of his literary career, lived in a polity that consisted of England, Wales and – contested – Ireland. The royal house was of Welsh provenance, and the Irish wars were the most pressing contemporary political conflict. For the remainder, he wrote in the context of an enlarged state presided over by a Scottish king, a state whose most significant events, provoking crises of representation, were union and plantation. Neither cultural materialism nor new historicism has shown itself to be sensitive to the conflictual British context of Shakespeare's texts. Ireland is a late entry to English Renaissance criticism, and its position within a simple oppositional model of Irish versus English, or British versus Irish, owes more to contemporary politics than to the vicissitudes of the early modern British state.<sup>9</sup>

In further exacerbating the Irish question, the vicissitudes of state to which Maley alludes are also further complicated by the fraught relation of religion and politics; indeed in Shakespeare's own time the two are never easily disentangled, a fact amply illustrated by the current critical vogue for positioning Shakespeare as a crypto-Catholic residing in a Protestant culture. As Paul Franssen demonstrates in his chapter: 'The Bard and Ireland: Shakespeare's Protestantism as politics in disguise', however it is reappropriated, this type of ambivalence constitutes productive fare for critics and biographers alike. A variety of novels and plays have fantasized about the politics of the playwright's religion, so that, in the context of the Anglo-Irish conflict alone, Shakespeare's putative Protestantism has been appropriated 'on both sides of the divide'. In imagining Shakespeare 'otherwise' his essay provides a useful reminder that, as Maley suggests, the legacy of Shakespeare's symbolic yield for English/Irish/British history remains a site of contestation and that here, as elsewhere, cross-cultural adaptation often contains the seeds of its own dissolution

#### SHAKESPEARE, POLITICS AND THEORY

The refashioning of cultural identities and the complexity of their restaging necessarily leads us to a more explicit sense of engagement with literary theory, particularly in relation to its claim to 're-politicize' our understanding of the playwright's work. In recent years, the unmasking of literature's relation to ideology and historical and political context and the role of