CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Hamlet *versus* King Lear

Let me begin with two lists, so as to provide an orientation for the first part of this book. One is a short anthology of comments praising either *Hamlet* or *King Lear* as the best, the greatest, or the chief masterpiece of Shakespeare. The claims for *Hamlet* pretty much died out by the 1950s, while those for *King Lear* become commonplace only from the 1950s onwards, though notably anticipated by Hazlitt and A. C. Bradley. The second list records some of the major international events in the period 1956–65, which is when the great shift in the status of *King Lear* took place. I do not claim that there is a direct connection, or that what was happening politically in the world at that time explains the way Shakespeare's plays were assessed, but only that critics consciously or unconsciously reflect the mood of their time; and the mood of that period was dominated by the expansion of nuclear arsenals and the fear of a war that might destroy the world. This mood was indicated in two of the films that made a huge impact, Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959), a film about the end of civilization in a world devasted by atomic waste, based on a 1957 novel by Nevil Shute; and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove: or, How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1963), a satirical reflection of the nightmares of the age. Here, then are the lists:

1 The anthology: (a) *Hamlet*

'*Hamlet* – the noblest and greatest of all [Shakespeare's] tragedies' (John Keble, 1830).
'Other works of the human mind equal *Hamlet*; none surpasses it' (Victor Hugo, 1864).
'*Hamlet* is the greatest creation in literature that I know of' (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, as reported by Hallam Tennyson, 1883).

'*Hamlet* is the greatest of popular dramas' (J. Dover Wilson, 1935).
'The play [*Hamlet*] is almost universally considered to be the chief masterpiece of one of the greatest minds the world has known' (Ernest Jones, 1949).
'[*Hamlet* is] one of the few great masterpieces of the European spirit' (Salvador de Madariaga, 1948).

(b) *King Lear*

'[*King Lear*] is the best of all Shakespeare's plays' (William Hazlitt, 1817).
'*King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's great achievement, but it seems to me *not* his best play' (A. C. Bradley, 1904).
'This greatest of plays [*King Lear*]' (D. G. James, 1951).
'In the twentieth century *Hamlet* has yielded to *King Lear* the distinction of being the play in which the age most finds itself' (L. C. Knights, 1960).
'For a number of critics it [*King Lear*] is self-evidently the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies' (Emrys Jones, 1971).
'The play that has come to be regarded as the definitive achievement of Shakespearean tragedy' (Howard Felperin, 1977).
'The tragedy of Lear, deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare, is commonly regarded as his greatest achievement' (Stephen Booth, 1983).

2 Some major events 1954–65

1954, March Americans explode hydrogen bomb on Bikini atoll; fallout affected Japanese fishing boats, and also islanders more than a hundred miles away.
1956, October Uprisings in Hungary and Poland crushed by the Soviet Union.
1956, November Outbreak of Suez war; Britain, France and Israel invade Egypt, are defeated and humiliated.
1957, October Sputnik, first Soviet space rocket, placed in orbit.
1958, February Launching of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.
1959, January Fidel Castro takes over in Cuba. First two Americans killed in Vietnam.
1960 France explodes its first atomic device.
1960, March Sharpeville massacre in South Africa.

1960, May U2 spy plane shot down over Russia; after repeated denials that they were spying, the United States was forced to admit it when Gary Powers was produced alive.
1961, January Inauguration of President John F. Kennedy.
1961–3 Build-up of American arms; Kennedy announced in 1963, 'In less than three years we have increased by 50 per cent the number of Polaris submarines – increased by 70 per cent the proportion of our strategic bombers on fifteen minute alert – increased by 100 per cent the total number of nuclear weapons in our strategic alert forces . . . increased by 60 per cent the tactical nuclear forces displayed in Western Europe.'[1]
1961, April Bay of Pigs; invasion of Cuba backed by the CIA fails disastrously.
1961, August East Berlin closed off from the West by completion of the Berlin Wall.
1962, October Cuban missile crisis.
1963, November Assassination of President Kennedy.
1964, August Tonkin Bay incident; two American destroyers said to be attacked by North Vietnamese gunboats.
1964, October Krushchev ousted by Leonid Brezhnev.
1965, October China explodes its first atomic bomb.
1965, February First sustained bombing of North Vietnam by Americans; first marine battalions land in Vietnam; 200,000 combat troops there by December.
1965, August Watts riots in Los Angeles

Hamlet and *King Lear*, archetypal tragedies of youth and age, have always challenged for regard as Shakespeare's greatest work. Although Hazlitt and Keats gave supremacy to *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, as the quotations above show, remained the central, and for many the greatest, work of Shakespeare until the 1950s. About 1960, however, an intriguing double shift took place. On the one hand, *King Lear* regained its ascendancy in critical esteem, and since that time most critics seem to have taken it for granted (see the quotations above from Emrys Jones, Howard Felperin and Stephen Booth) that they can refer to it as Shakespeare's greatest play. On the other hand, *King Lear* changed its nature almost overnight: the main tradition of criticism up to the 1950s had interpreted the play as concerned with Lear's pilgrimage to redemption, as he finds himself and is 'saved' at the end, but in the 1960s the play became Shakespeare's bleakest

and most despairing vision of suffering, all hints of consolation undermined or denied. I was intrigued by such sudden changes in critical estimation and interpretation of the two plays, and set out to investigate how and why they occurred.[2] This investigation in turn raised other issues, and led to the present book.

There is no simple explanation for this shift in the 1960s, but it strikingly coincided with a period of political change, as indicated in the chronology above, that affected the mood of people in Britain and in the United States. The 1950s saw the development of the hydrogen bomb in 1952, an explosion of one being shown on television in 1954;[3] by the end of the decade, 'anxiety over fallout had become a powerful force around the world'[4], and had led to the founding of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain (1958), and the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy in the United States. The orbiting of Sputnik, launched into space in 1957, seemed to bring home to millions the possibility of the destruction of life on the world, or its contamination by fallout, a possibility realized fictionally in the best-selling novel *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute. France exploded its first atomic device in 1960, and 'Everyone understood that more nations with bombs meant more chances for disaster from a faulty transistor, an insane authority, or (more realistically) an escalating local conflict.'[5] Polaris submarines using foreign bases, as in Scotland, further alarmed inhabitants of such countries. The Alain Resnais film, *Hiroshima mon Amour*, recalling the effect of the first atomic bomb on Japan, began to circulate in 1959. Fidel Castro took over in Cuba in 1959, and in the next few years a war between superpowers seemed imminent. The wretched Bay of Pigs affair, an attempted invasion of Cuba backed by the CIA, failed in 1961, the year in which the Berlin Wall closed off East Berlin from the West. When Soviet missiles were placed in Cuba, provoking the Secretary General of the United Nations to announce in October 1962, 'The very existence of mankind is in the balance', fear of nuclear destruction perhaps reached its peak.[6] If nuclear fear gradually diminished into a more cynical acceptance that the world was going to be permanently near the brink, at two minutes to the midnight of obliteration, there was no going back to a pre-nuclear world.

These are some of the events of the period around 1960 that deeply affected people in Britain and America, and which have a bearing on the way *Hamlet* and *King Lear* were interpreted. Criticism,

as most now realize, is never an innocent activity; it always has a hidden agenda, even if the critic remains largely unconscious of it. For criticism always reflects the ideology of the critic and the conditions of the age in which he writes, however much it may claim to be independent and concerned only with the text. No critic can escape from the problems of his own time, or avoid reading literature in the context of these concerns. Without going so far as to assert that 'writing and reading are always socially determinate events', as if the author has no free play of mind, I would in general agree with the new historicist observation that 'the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, like ourselves, historical subjects'.[7] My own reconstructions have, I am aware, the same limitation, and yet we can only begin to understand what critics are saying, and why they take the positions they assert, what ideological presuppositions are embedded in their writings, by attempting to gain a historical perspective and discover how and why critical response to *Hamlet* and *King Lear* has changed over the years. I realize that the shifts that happened about 1960 in the standing and interpretation of these two plays could only be assessed in relation to a much larger historical sense of the critical treatment of the plays. Hence in the first two chapters I offer an analysis of the main trends and ideological tendencies in the criticism of the two plays since about 1800. I use the term 'criticism' in the widest sense to include not only academic criticism, but references or reworkings in fiction, plays and poetry by other writers, productions and film versions, and what Ruby Cohn has called 'offshoots', like Edward Bond's play *Lear*.[8]

These chapters are not designed as a history or survey of criticism, for their aim is to historicize or provide a genealogy for the central preoccupations revealed in a range of critical responses. They present a selective account, and one that may often be partial in ignoring fine tuning, for I am not concerned with details so much as with the overall implications of a range of readings. Others might include critical readings I have ignored, and omit some I have emphasized, especially in the period since the 1950s, when the growing numbers of assistant professors needing to publish a book in order to gain tenure in America, and the inevitable professionalization of the academy in Britain and America as concerned more with research and publication than with teaching, have led to a massive proliferation of critical writings on Shakespeare; but I suspect that

the characteristics I describe in Chapters 2, on *Hamlet* and 3, on *King Lear*, would emerge as prominent in any overview, even if they might be nuanced in different ways. Each play generates a complex and interesting story of critical response, two features of which especially affect the development of the argument of this book in the later chapters.

The first of these features relates to politics. Although Hamlet was, as a character, abstracted from the play and privatized as a representative of everyman by Romantic and later critics, he also became in the nineteenth century an important symbolic political figure, usually typifying the liberal intellectual paralysed in will and incapable of action. By contrast, *King Lear* was depoliticized, even by the radical Hazlitt, perhaps at that time because of a possible association with the mad old monarch, George III; and until the 1950s the play was, in the main, seen as a tragedy of personal relations between father and daughter, or as a grand metaphysical play about Lear's pilgrimage to discover his soul. All this changed after 1960, since when *King Lear* has come to seem richly significant in political terms, in a world in which old men have held on to and abused power, often in corrupt or arbitrary ways; in the same period *Hamlet* has lost much of its political relevance, as liberal intellectuals have steadily been marginalized in Britain and in the United States. In such a summary account I state the case forcefully to gain attention, and much too simply; and the first two chapters fill out the picture with much more detail and shading. The criticism of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* returns again and again to political issues, overtly or covertly, disconcerting as this may be to those who cling to an Arnoldian or new critical notion of criticism as the disinterested study of texts.

The second feature is to some extent indicated in the anthology of quotations from critics with which this introduction begins, and concerns aesthetic assessments of the plays. Each play has had its champions to assert vigorously that either *Hamlet* or *King Lear* is the 'greatest' of Shakespeare's plays, and, as the quotations show, *Hamlet* was in the ascendancy before the 1950s, while *King Lear* has achieved a pre-eminence since that period, to the extent that its status is now hardly questioned. Yet in all the vast mass of critical writing on these plays, there is hardly any consideration of the grounds for such judgements. Aesthetic questions are generally ignored, or the artistic value of the plays taken for granted. Indeed, criticism has increas-

ingly been equated with interpretation, so that the post-structuralist claim that criticism is a discursive practice no different from other discursive practices such as those we call literature, and the further claim that 'only the critic *executes* the work'[9] and constructs its meanings, appears from one point of view as the culmination of a long tradition in which interpretation has become the central activity of criticism, especially in the academy. The meanings critics find relate to their own values and their own world as well as to the play, and, broadly speaking, tend to reflect or overtly embody their own political or social ideology, whether conservative, quietist, liberal or revolutionary. In universities, criticism has displaced literature as the source of power in English studies, for the critical processing of literature can be taught more easily than literature itself, and through the creation of journals and schools of critisim provides professional enhancement and prestige.

In this professional sense, critical discourse generally has a political concern, but whereas deconstructive accounts of Renaissance literature tended to ignore history, the new historicists in the United States and cultural materialists in Britain have reinterpreted Shakespeare's plays in relation to the power structures of the age of Elizabeth and James I, or in relation to the politics of Conservative Britain in recent years. One effect of these critical moves has been to open up to scrutiny the motives and ideologies often concealed, or at any rate not consciously realized, under claims by earlier critics that they were engaged in an objective pursuit of truth. If most older criticism offered an interpretation of the meaning of *Hamlet* or *King Lear*, usually qualifying some earlier reading, and was not much concerned with the matter of Shakespeare's artistry, post-structuralist criticism has gone further, by abolishing the canon, tearing down the boundaries of literature, recognizing all texts as variants of the same kind of discursive practice, and so elevating critical interpretation to an importance equivalent to, if not greater than, that of the literary text the critic 'constructs' for us. Such criticism effectively also does away with aesthetic values. It is produced mainly in universities and colleges, where it forms the basis for a pedagogical technique, and is more useful than literature itself (in its traditional meaning), for literature demands not merely to be understood, but to be appreciated as an experience, and as art. In some ways these developments have been illuminating, for they have made us recognize that all readings of plays are relative, and that plays

change according to the interpreter, being scripts for performance as well as reading texts or dramatic poems. But this very emphasis on relativity has led to attacks on the concept of organic unity in Shakespeare's plays proposed by Romantic critics like Coleridge, and to the dismissal of any idea of permanent or transhistorical artistic values. At the same time, it seems to me that something of central importance is lost in the processing of Shakespeare, and that we need to be concerned with appreciation as well as understanding, and with the effect the plays have on us, not merely with what they mean. In other words, we need a way of talking about Shakespeare's artistry, and the later chapters of this book basically relate to this theme. In particular, I am concerned in the last three chapters to propose a concept of artistic value that is itself relative, not fixed, but capable of changing with new generations of readers and viewers of Shakespeare's plays, and with changes in the world around us. In Chapter 5 especially I also consider the matter of the relation of artistic value to meaning and to the problem of knowledge, while the last two chapters present one method for the present time of bringing these issues to bear on each of the plays.

Shakespeare studies have been jolted in recent years by the rediscovery that in all likelihood the dramatist revised some, perhaps many, of his plays. I say 'rediscovery' because the issue of revision in Shakespeare's plays has a long history, after surfacing in the eighteenth century.[10] In effectively silencing J. M. Robertson and other 'disintegrators' of the plays early in the twentieth century, bibliographers and textual critics established the conventional belief that changes, omissions and substitutions in the texts of the plays could be attributed to errors by printers and compositors, or to interference in the playhouse. It was generally accepted that the task of an editor was to present a composite text that would be as close as possible to a putative lost original manuscript in Shakespeare's hand, his 'foul papers'. Behind this conception in turn lay the cultural authority of an idealized Shakespeare who, as a supreme genius, never blotted or corrected a line. Conflated texts of plays like *Hamlet* and *King Lear* including all lines from the Quartos and First Folio that seemed to the editor authentically Shakespearian, were accepted as the norm. When in 1931 Madeleine Doran issued a book suggesting the possibility of revision in *King Lear*, little attention was paid to it. An essay by Michael Warren published in 1977 arguing that 'we have two plays of *King Lear*, sufficiently different to require

that all further work on the play be based on either Q or F, but not on the conflation of both',[11] seemed to some older critics shocking and unacceptable; but though debate continues,[12] the idea that Shakespeare reworked some texts has steadily gained more acceptance.

The one-volume Oxford Shakespeare (1986) indeed prints two texts of *King Lear*, from the Quarto and Folio as if these constitute separate plays, and relegates parts of *Hamlet* to an appendix as passages cut by Shakespeare in reworking the play. This edition undermines Shakespeare's authority further by reasserting some claims for disintegration, assigning parts of *Macbeth* and *Timon of Athens*, for instance, to Thomas Middleton. This destabilization of Shakespeare's plays can be seen as another manifestation of post-structuralist criticism, and would seem to problematize further the matter of Shakespeare's artistry, especially in relation to *King Lear*, if there really are two different plays with this title. I have no difficulty in accepting that Shakespeare revised plays, as many modern dramatists do; texts for performance may well be polished and modified in the theatre, where the process of staging can lead to cutting or alteration. However, the possible effect of such changes in the case of Shakespeare's plays has, I think, been exaggerated in the new enthusiasm for cutting Shakespeare down to size. So Jonathan Goldberg argues:[13]

> That in the two Lears different characters may speak the same lines, that the same characters (characters with the same proper names) speak different lines, suggests the radical instability of character as a locus of meaning in the Shakespearean text. Nor can we assume that the text of a Shakespearean play will have a determinate structure; how could it when so much of the text was expendable? The Shakespearean text is a historical phenomenon, produced by ongoing restructurations, revisions, and collaboration; by interventions that are editorial, scribal, theatrical; by conditions that are material, occasional, accidental.

The play Shakespeare wrote vanishes into a morass of revision, collaboration and interventions by editors and actors, and cannot be thought of as a work of art if it has no shape, if it is conceived as a 'contemporary communal construct',[14] or if, in Stephen Orgel's words, the 'real play is the performance, not the text',[15] and the play should be thought of as an anthology of performances, each one different from the others.

Such attacks on the integrity of a play like *King Lear* relate to a wider post-structuralist onslaught on the cultural authority of Shakespeare, who has been toppled from his pedestal by those who now see in him 'the badge of cultural elitism and the instrument of pedagogical oppression'.[16] In the iconoclastic smashing of the idol there is both a sense of release from the dead weight of critical history, and a measure of solemn nonsense that has much to do with the concomitant elevation of the critic and of literary criticism as the new cultural authorities. Gary Taylor ends his long dismantling of Shakespeare's status by saying, 'Within our culture, Shakespeare is enormously powerful. Power corrupts and disfigures';[17] now I suspect that we should replace Shakespeare by 'critic' in this sentence, for the effect such attacks on Shakespeare seek to achieve is to substitute the critic for the author at the centre of power in the academy, and power corrupts the critic too.

A kind of corruption is seen in the excessive claims made in the effort to deconstruct and destabilize Shakespeare's plays. The evidence for revision has been used to question in an especially aggressive way the possibility of artistic coherence in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and I therefore devote Chapter 4 to a reconsideration of the significance of that evidence as it affects the shaping of the plays. Chapter 5, as indicated above, takes up in general terms the matter of artistic value in Shakespeare's plays, in relation to some recent considerations of artistry and of mimesis. The final chapters attempt to reconsider the plays in the light of an analysis of textual revisions, and seek to combine an awareness of the political implications of my own reading of the texts with a recovery of a sense of their artistry. Post-structuralist criticism – I use the term loosely to include deconstructionist, new historicist, cultural materialist, feminist, performance and revisionary textual criticism – has freed us from subservience to the text, and opened up a range of fresh perspectives on Shakespeare's plays. All these approaches have in common a rejection of the idea of a Shakespearean text as possessing a finite meaning or structure. We live in heady days for the critic, who asserts that he or she constructs the literary work, which has no ontological status, and which, like criticism itself, can be experienced only as a form of production. If post-structuralist criticism has usefully problematized Shakespeare's plays, and revealed new perspectives on them, the access of critical power and authority has produced various forms of critical arrogance and