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0521607051 - Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art

R. A. Foakes

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This book focusses on the two plays of Shakespeare that have generally contended for the title of 'greatest' among his works. *Hamlet* remained a focal point of reference until about 1960, when it was displaced by *King Lear*, a play which at the same time ceased to be perceived as a play of redemption and became a play of despair. Foakes attempts to explain these shifts by analysing the reception of the plays since about 1800, an analysis which necessarily engages with the politics of the plays and the politics of criticism. Recent critical theorizing has destabilized the texts, has sought to abolish the frontiers of literature, and hence has undermined the notion of 'greatness' or any consideration of the plays as works of art. Foakes takes issue with such theories and reconsiders textual revisions, in order to argue for the integrity of the plays as reading texts, and to recover a flexible sense of their artistry in relation to meaning.

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HAMLET VERSUS LEAR  
CULTURAL POLITICS AND  
SHAKESPEARE'S ART

R. A. FOAKES

*Professor of English, University of California, Los Angeles*



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## Preface

It was only after this book was completed that Hugh Grady's *The Modernist Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 1991) became available to me. This general account of the shift from the new criticism to post-modernism in Shakespeare studies considers the impact of deconstruction, of the new historicism and cultural materialism, and of feminism in considerable detail. It includes a section on 'Post-modernist Aesthetics', pp. 204–11, which describes what he sees as the two major characteristics of 'contemporary Postmodernist aesthetics' as 'the abandonment of organic unity as an aesthetic value and the overthrow of a series of formerly privileged hierarchical oppositions through a Postmodernist anti-hierarchical impulse' (p. 207). His emphasis is thus on the relinquishment of outmoded aesthetic principles rather than on any replacement for them. He says that the 'end of the assumption of the art-work's organic unity' has been decisive in 'bringing about a basic change in how we read Shakespeare' (p. 210), sliding back from aesthetic questions to ways of reading or interpreting the plays. His book thus tends to confirm my sense that the effect of post-modernism (or more specifically, post-structuralist criticism, my main concern) on literary studies has been to turn away from aesthetic issues in what he calls with some reason 'an anti-aesthetic Postmodernist age' (p. 218).

I am indebted to many who have helped me in one way or another in the completion of a project that was begun some years ago, and had to be postponed during the long illness and subsequent death of my beloved wife Barbara. To each and every one

I can no other answer make but thanks,  
And thanks.

Among those who have answered queries, listened with interest and prompted me to further thought, or brought to my notice points I

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*Preface*

had missed, I am especially grateful to Alan Brissenden, John Russell Brown, Maurice Charney, Howard Felperin, Eloise Hay, E. A. J. Honigmann, Grace Ioppolo, David Jopling, Patrick McCarthy, Derick Marsh, Barbara Packer, Richard Proudfoot, and Alan Roper. I have benefited greatly from the close reading of draft chapters by Victoria Hayne and Robert Watson. I owe many courtesies to the staff of the Huntington Library, San Marino, the library at the Shakespeare Birthplace Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon, and the British Library.

In the course of working on this book I have been assisted by grants from the research fund of the University of California, Los Angeles. The writing of it has been expedited by a Fellowship at the Humanities Research Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, which provided a peaceful working retreat from the hurly-burly of Los Angeles, livened by the presence of an interesting group of colleagues. I have also been aided by a President's Fellowship of the University of California, and a Fellowship awarded by the American Council of Learned Societies.

A number of essays I have already published contain trial runs for some of the sections or ideas in the book; material from them is included here by kind permission of the editors or publishers. I list these essays in chronological order: "'Forms to his Conceit': Shakespeare and the Uses of Stage-Illusion', Annual Shakespeare Lecture at the British Academy, London, 1980, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 66 (1982), 103–19; 'Textual Revision and the Fool in *King Lear*', Essays in Honour of Peter Davison, *Trivium*, 20 (1985), 33–47; '*King Lear* and the Displacement of *Hamlet*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 50 (1987), 263–78; 'Making and Breaking Dramatic Illusion', in *Aesthetic Illusion: Theoretical and Historical Approaches*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1990), pp. 217–28. Part of Chapter 2 is related to 'Hamlet and Hamletism', forthcoming in *Shakespeare Survey*, 45 (1993).

## NOTE

Quotations from Shakespeare's works are modernized except where original spelling or punctuation affects the meaning of a citation from an early Quarto or the First Folio. Line references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).