

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Critics have been curiously reluctant to explore the possibility that Shakespeare might have developed a theory of drama. We find discussions of stage technique, audience manipulation, the reflexivity of the plays, their dramatic structuring, Hamlet's advice on acting. We are given analyses of Shakespeare's poetry and uses of language, and considerations of his allusions to art, poetry and fiction. But the question of what might lie *behind* all this evident concern in the plays and poems with drama and aesthetics has prompted surprisingly little examination.

Traditional criticism has tended to view Shakespearean drama as a primarily literary poetic endeavour, and while recent studies have shifted the emphasis towards a pronounced concern with the playwright's theatrical practice, little enquiry has been made into whether he concerned himself with a coherent dramatic theory, or, indeed, had a theoretical position at all.¹ This swing from 'literary' to 'theatrical' approaches to Shakespeare has a puzzlingly seamless aspect to it, in that the question which might have been asked in that transition failed to emerge, and the assumptions of the old approaches were carried into the new: the question of a specifically *dramatic* theory was left out. Hence, studies which focus on Shakespeare's attitude to drama talk of his 'poetics', and 'his Renaissance conception of poetry as a superior kind of truth', on which assumption it is possible to claim that Shakespeare, working as an idealising Renaissance poet in the commercial, transitory world of theatre, reveals a 'scepticism about the value of his art as a model of human experience'. Influential studies have put forward the view that Shakespeare worked against the 'limitations' of his art in its capacity both to represent reality and to deliver a higher

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63358-1 - Shakespeare's Theory of Drama

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Excerpt

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kind of truth, or that he used the play as a metaphor for life, to turn 'the world itself into a theatre, blurring the distinctions between art and life'.² Much recent 'metadramatic' criticism has sought to elucidate and explore this idea of Shakespeare's plays as metaphors for 'life-as-drama', focusing on dramatic reflexivity, the play-within-the-play, and characters seen as actors, stage-managers and playwright-directors.³

Studies which have included discussions of Shakespeare's concerns with dramatic art (usually focusing on *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) have tended to make a straightforward equation, or contrast, between the art of the dramatist and the art of his characters. Traditional interpretations, for example, have equated Prospero's 'so potent art' with that of Shakespeare; Quince's 'Pyramus and Thisbe', as its antithesis.⁴ The underlying assumption shared by all these approaches is that Shakespearean drama is an essentially mimetic art, whether it is seen as imitating life, or as imitating the theatricality of life, or/and, that it is based on a Renaissance conception of poetry, aspiring to deliver a higher kind of truth.

This book pursues a line of enquiry which began by asking 'Why did Shakespeare write *drama*?' to consider whether he might have specific and significant reasons for his choice of this particular art form, with clearly defined aesthetic aims in what he wanted that drama to do, and why. A central aim is to show why we need to replace the term 'Shakespeare's poetics' with 'Shakespeare's theory of drama' to challenge traditional criticism's fundamental assumption that Shakespeare equates the theoretical and moral purposes of literary poetry with those of his own art. It argues that this theory of drama involves a denunciation of literary poetics and the mimetic concept of art, a challenging of history's claim to truth and its capacity to accommodate temporality, and an insistence on the fictitiousness of Shakespearean drama. It is what leads Shakespeare to a repudiation of literary (and historiographical) representations of truth that provides the main focus of my enquiry into his theoretical concerns as a dramatist.

Chapter 2 examines the interrelated issues which make up what I take to be Shakespeare's theory of drama, and the ways in which it can be seen in the poems and plays to be functioning as 'A

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978-0-521-63358-1 - Shakespeare's Theory of Drama

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Defence of Drama', challenging the views expressed in Sidney's *A Defence of Poetry* to form, in effect, a refutation of Renaissance aesthetics.

Chapter 3 explores Shakespeare's prevalent concern with the 'de-humanising' processes of mimetic art, by examining *Venus and Adonis* and the Sonnets as highly self-conscious enquiries into the sterilising effects of poetry's rhetorical 'dyes' in relation to his own role as a dramatist, and demonstrates how these literary works provide significant insights into his dramatic theory. It also offers a redefinition of the term 'Ovidian' in Shakespeare by showing how the dramatist's creative responses to the Latin poet's artistic concerns with myth, fiction, poetic originality, and the complex relations between false illusion and substantial reality act as a significant and pervasive Ovidian presence in the canon. The underlying importance for Shakespeare's theory of drama of these strands of Ovidian influence is reflected throughout the book.

Chapter 4 examines *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* in the light of Renaissance aesthetic theory as examples of Shakespeare's repudiation of neoclassical verisimilitude and conceptions of art as the perfecter of nature; and chapter 5 considers the related question of mimesis, offering a reassessment of what 'fiction' and 'illusion' mean in Shakespearean drama. It distinguishes *mimetic* illusion, which is treated within the plays as an activity which falsifies human life, from *dramatic* illusion, the self-proclaimed fiction which paradoxically explores realities and compels belief. The broad argument of the chapter, which is that the playwright's frequent emphasis on the fictitiousness of his art is of precise and fundamental significance to his dramatic theory, is supported by readings of *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet* and, more briefly, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Measure for Measure*.

Chapter 6 argues that Shakespeare replaces historical accounts of past events with a self-proclaimed fiction in order to challenge history's claim to truth. It examines *Richard III*, *Henry VIII*, *Henry V*, and *Richard II* in the context of Shakespeare's responses to the humanist concept of anachronism and his sense of drama's capacity for accommodating temporality and change.

Chapter 7 examines *Antony and Cleopatra* as Shakespeare's most

explicit challenge to the claims to truth of both poetry and history, and his most confident proclamation of his drama's powers of self-renewal; its three sections examine the languages of Octavius, Enobarbus and Cleopatra as they reflect the thematic and structural pattern of rivalry set up within the play between the belated narratives of history and poetry on the one hand, and the physical immediacy, performative action and fictitiousness of drama on the other.

This is a necessarily exploratory study on a large and complex topic. The initial plan was to try to be as comprehensive as possible, but to have attempted to cover a more wide-ranging selection of texts and pursue more fully the lines of enquiry it proposes would have resulted in too unwieldy a book. My aim, throughout, has been to suggest a way into a subject and show why it is worth critical debate. But the book makes a large claim, and some explanation of my procedures is necessary. The approach has been deliberately eclectic, and uneven: I devote, for example, one chapter to a long and detailed analysis of a narrative poem because it seemed important to try to substantiate as fully as possible the proposition that a Renaissance writer was attacking some of the most fundamental aesthetic concepts of his time, and *Venus and Adonis* provides some of the strongest evidence for this. The texts I have chosen to examine in detail are probably the more unexpected ones, and those I have ignored or treated less fully, or cursorily, have tended to be the plays which are more usually discussed in relation to Shakespeare's attitude towards his drama. Discussions on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, traditionally considered to be the two central statements about his own art, for example, may seem to some blasphemously brief. I have found that the less obvious texts yielded so many interesting, often complex, insights into Shakespeare's theory of drama that they ended up almost demanding to be analysed at the expense of the more critically familiar works. The extensive coverage of the non-dramatic works might strike the reader as surprising in a study of Shakespeare's dramatic theory, but it is in these works that we find so many of the important ideas being explored, and even tested out. As I hope the study demonstrates, the dramatic theory which I am suggesting can be discerned in Shakespearean drama is con-

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978-0-521-63358-1 - Shakespeare's Theory of Drama

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cerned with the development of an art form which can overcome what it sees as the inadequacies of literary poetry, and the non-dramatic works are as much about poetry in relation to Shakespeare's own role as a dramatist, as they are about their ostensible subject matter.

It is, then, very much an exploratory and partial study, but I hope it will suggest further lines of enquiry into Shakespeare's theoretical concerns as a dramatist; that it will lend precision to such critical terms as 'fiction' and 'illusion' when applied to his plays; and that it will help us more confidently to place this writer and thinker in the forefront of English Renaissance aesthetic thought.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63358-1 - Shakespeare's Theory of Drama

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CHAPTER 2

Shakespeare and Sidney. Two worlds: the brazen and the golden

When we look for criticism on Shakespeare's aesthetic views we find the many references to poetic and artistic theory found in the plays and poems examined, and usually summarily consigned to 'the common thought of his age'; or, where a given statement does not seem to correspond with a contemporary view, or results in interpretative difficulties, commentators are more often than not content to leave the matter unexplored, giving no suggestion that the reason for their confusion might be worth investigating.¹ One example of such critical neglect concerns one of the most significant statements on art to be found in the canon: 'Artificial strife / Lives in these touches, livelier than life', spoken by the Poet in *Timon of Athens* (I.i.37–8). One editor of the play glosses the line, or rather, admits he is incapable of doing so, by taking issue with the gloss of a previous editor: 'This notion of *art at strife with nature* is common enough but "artificial strife" can hardly mean "the strife of art to emulate nature" . . . nor is it clear how that strife could be "livelier than life"'.²

The question we would expect to find being asked here is not raised. If the line does not make any sense, which is what we are left to infer from this editor's refusal to make any attempt to interpret it, why is it there? Are we to suppose that a dramatist who has had no apparent difficulty in the structuring of coherent sentences for nine comedies, nine history plays, two Roman plays, three 'problem' comedies, four major tragedies and a sonnet sequence of unprecedentedly complex, intricately structured reasoning, is here suffering a momentary lapse in clarity of expression? Or is it merely taken for granted that we share the critic's assumption that if Shakespeare is not adhering to the prevailing views of

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Renaissance theorists, it is beyond the bounds of possibility that he might have an intellectually motivated reason for placing within a play a deliberate and uncommon challenge to a common notion about art? Whatever the reason for not enquiring further into the meaning of the line, the gloss provides us with an example of the ways in which criticism traditionally has been wary of attributing to Shakespearean drama any coherent theoretical position on aesthetics.

Why, with this writer, is there a resistance to the idea that there might be specific theoretical issues being raised in such statements, and that these may have far-reaching implications for our understanding of Shakespeare's concerns as a dramatist? It is not the purpose of this study to speculate on the reasons for this resistance, but it might help to bear in mind two critical attitudes. Is it possible that even now the centuries-long tradition which has seen him as the 'natural' genius who came from a provincial country town with his grammar-school education, stumbled into a career in the theatre and, by some inexplicable process of the brain, provided drama of unsurpassed mastery and formidable powers of original thought, continues to act as a subliminal influence on Shakespeare scholars, whatever their critical predilections? Combine this with an equally consciousness-embedded idea of the dramatist's powers of 'negative capability' which makes it 'impossible' for us to determine what he really thought about the matters that are treated in his plays, and it becomes less surprising to find comparatively little evidence of detailed enquiry into the dramatist's views on his art. To argue for greater attention to the theoretical concerns of Shakespearean drama, is not to suggest a return to traditional criticism's quest for immanent meaning, but to insist that these concerns deserve to be explored at the level of enquiry on which modern theorists conduct criticism of, say, Spenser, Milton and the Romantic Poets, and before that can be attained, we need to dispense with the paradoxical attitude that licenses the disclosure of immanent meaning while disavowing access to central aesthetic aims.

If we start out with a different set of assumptions, then, and allow that references to theory in Shakespeare's work might tell us something about his attitude towards imitation in relation to his

own role as a dramatist, we might look again at the Poet's line in *Timon* and start by entertaining the possibility that a statement might mean what it says. We find that, though made to seem difficult, which is part of its meaning, the statement is both precise and lucid. It is actually very simple. The 'difficulty' arises if you try to place it within the rigid framework of Renaissance aesthetic theory which leads one to think, like Oliver, that 'it can hardly mean' what it says. It is saying that 'the struggle of art against nature (with the suggestion that the struggle is unnatural) lives in these brushstrokes, and is livelier than life'. If we do not think it makes any sense it is because it is not saying what we would expect it to say. In the mimesis concept of art, the ideal is a skilled imitation of nature that is so life-like we are deceived into thinking the imitated subject is the real thing. In the painting described in *Timon*, it is the *artificial strife* which is livelier than the subject. What lives in this painting is the unnatural struggle against nature, which we can see in the brushstrokes. The dramatist has made a Poet unwittingly expose the absurdity of all art forms which imitate life so skilfully, that it is the skill of the artist which we notice, not the life that he has imitated.

Why is the mimesis concept of art ridiculed? What might be the significances of this statement for Shakespeare's attitude towards imitation? Where else in the canon do we find this concern with the processes by which life is transformed into an imitation of itself, where the copy supersedes the original? What are the implications of this for a writer who spent most of his career choosing to write plays, to write them for performance and not, apparently, for publication? Did he have a particular reason for writing drama, as distinct from poetry or prose, that is related to this concern with imitation?

Where, exceptionally, a critic points out that Shakespeare reverses many of the attitudes of Renaissance aesthetics, it is not in order to explore the possibility that this might indicate a conscious attempt by the playwright to establish a theory of his own. Ekbert Faas writes, 'Shakespeare can be blithely oblivious of some of the hotly debated issues of Renaissance criticism', and 'rarely commits himself to an established theoretical attitude', to conclude that, 'more often than not, [he] reveals an eclectic versatility in subscrib-

ing to whatever ideas best serve his immediate demands'.³ We are given the familiar image of the 'natural' poet with no central aesthetic purpose imposing constraints on what he will or will not accommodate in his art, and who is therefore free to adopt whatever theoretical viewpoint seems most useful for his present requirements.

Is this really all we are able to offer in the way of critical attention to the artistic aims of a dramatist who, throughout his work, is preoccupied with the relations between insubstantial image and corporeal substance, the real and the unreal; a dramatist who explores the physical consequences of deeds prompted by acts of the imagination: the blood that will not be washed away from Lady Macbeth's hands; the coupling of nothing with nothing inside Leontes' head that produces the monstrous command to have a new-born baby murdered; or that comparable union of imaginings in Othello's mind which results in his transforming the white flesh of his beloved into a senseless statue? Is Jonson's poet of nature who 'wanted Arte' still the most we can say about a playwright who persistently shows us why the disembodied language of rhetoric is dangerous, and all forms of de-materialising representation are to be distrusted; who repeatedly demonstrates what happens when we ask symbol to be congruent with meaning, whether it is rhetoric's treachery of value which turns Helen of Troy into a pearl and perpetuates the killing and bloodshed of war in the name of an abstraction named honour, where words and their meanings have become so dislocated, discourse is madness; or whether it is rhetorical poetry's de-corporealising process which turns Adonis into disembodied fragments of dead metaphors so that when he tries to escape suffocation by rhetorical trope he ends his life with his flesh gored by the tusk of a boar?⁴

When we ask symbol to be congruent with meaning, we lose the body, which is what many of Shakespeare's protagonists come to learn, whether it is the metonymic confusion of Richard II which will turn him into no-thing when he is deprived of his name; whether it is the total and absolute identification of individual identity with a code of honour which allows a Roman soldier to put on a new name as unthinkingly as if it were another suit of armour in *Coriolanus*; whether it is Shylock's transmutation of the barren

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-63358-1 - Shakespeare's Theory of Drama

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metal which represents abstract fiscal value into a pound of human flesh, and the price that must be paid for turning flesh and blood into a cash nexus is to be robbed of your daughter, your own flesh and blood, and of your spiritual creed; or whether it is the concrete-into-abstraction process which makes Lear think he can cut into three a cartographical representation of his kingdom with impunity and leaves him, finally, cradling the corpse of his daughter, and asking his heart to break.⁵

This concern with the processes by which life is turned into a representation informs both the subject of the dramatist's art and the form with which he creates it. The two are interdependent, not simply related.

Examples are found throughout the canon of the ways in which flesh and blood are turned into a symbol or an abstraction; fecundity is transformed into sterility; some-thing turned into no-thing, and no-thing turned into some-thing: the problematic relations of the insubstantial and the substantial are embedded in the theoretical foundation on which Shakespearean drama is based.

A 'DEFENCE OF DRAMA'

When we start to enquire into Shakespeare's concerns as a dramatist, several interrelated issues emerge which suggest a theory of drama which involves:

- * complex responses to contemporary artistic and poetic theories, in which the repudiation of the mimesis concept of art is central;
- * the primacy of the human body in his art;
- * an insistence on the fictitious status of his drama;
- * a highly developed sense of the humanist concept of anachronism, expressed in the plays in an acute awareness that his present will become our past;
- * an inviolable demand that his drama accommodate temporality and change.

Within Shakespeare's plays and poems there can be traced a 'Defence of Drama' which redefines the parameters of contemporary debate on the rival claims to truth of poetry and history by