Introduction

> A vision of a future social order [must] be based on a concept of human nature. If, in fact, man is an indefinitely malleable, completely plastic being, with no innate structures of mind and no intrinsic needs of a cultural or social character, then he is a fit subject for the 'shaping of behavior' by the State authority, the corporate manager, the technocrat, or the central committee. Those with some confidence in the human species will hope that this is not so and will try to determine the intrinsic human characteristics that provide the framework for intellectual development, the growth of moral consciousness, cultural achievement, and participation in a free community . . . We must break away, sharply and radically, from much of modern social and behavioral science if we are to move towards a deeper understanding of these matters.
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> Noam Chomsky, 'Language and Freedom' (1972)[1]

Postmodernists do not share Noam Chomsky's views on human nature. Cultural Materialists and New Historicists believe that talk of innate structures of mind or intrinsic human needs is no more than ideological mystification; in reality there are as many forms of human nature as there are human societies. 'Constructionism', writes one leading American Shakespeare scholar, 'is one of the basic propositions by which new historicism as a way of reading has distinguished itself from humanism. Where humanism assumes a core essence that unites people otherwise separated in time and social circumstances new historicism insists on cultural differences.'[2]

The belief that our minds are shaped largely by sensory experience is not a new one. John Locke famously declared that at birth the mind was 'a white sheet, void of all characters, without any ideas'.[3] But in denying the existence of innate ideas Locke did not reject the principle of a universal human nature. He argued that, although we may not come into the world with ready-made notions of, let's say, truth or justice, we are nevertheless equipped with faculties that enable us to learn what we need to know

as human beings, and it's those inborn faculties that define our humanity.[4] What concerned Chomsky was not the notion of the mind as a *tabula rasa* passively absorbing experience – though psychologists now dispute that idea – but the claim that we inherit no species-specific mental characteristics of any description. It was in the early decades of the last century that it became fashionable to argue that human nature was inherently unstable. 'On or about December 1910 human character changed', wrote Virginia Woolf in 1924.[5] 'There is nothing that can be changed more completely than human nature when the job is taken in hand early enough', declared Bernard Shaw ten years later.[6] Woolf and Shaw were being deliberately provocative. But the new denial of human nature wasn't just a matter of novelists and playwrights rhetorically asserting a modernist sense of cultural crisis. Anthropologists from Margaret Mead to Clifford Geertz agreed that human nature was infinitely malleable; even the central nervous system was thought to be a cultural artefact.[7] Sometimes referred to as the Standard Social Science Model, this constructionist view of humanity was the orthodox theory of mind in university social science departments for much of the twentieth century.[8]

For Chomsky there was something profoundly disturbing in the prospect of an Orwellian world in which human nature is fabricated by the state and truth merely an effect of power. It was also bad science. But since the 1970s there has been a revolution in the psychological and biological sciences. Where 'humanity' was once seen as a purely cultural construct, a consensus is now emerging among psychologists and neuroscientists that our minds are the product of a complex interaction between genetically determined predispositions and an environment that has itself been shaped by generations of human culture. The zoologist and polymath Edward O. Wilson has a phrase that sums it up well: we are, he says, the products of 'gene-culture coevolution'.[9] I will discuss the modern debate on human nature in more detail in chapter 9.

But literary postmodernists are suspicious of the truth claims of science and remain ideologically committed to the principle that the mind, and even gender, is shaped exclusively by social forces and owes nothing to our biological nature. It's true that some of anti-humanism's most passionate former champions have now modified their constructionist theories. But in doing so they have effectively abandoned the core principle of postmodern literary theory.[10] As the neo-Marxist critic Jean Howard explains, central to the New Historicist project is 'the attack on the notion that man possesses a transhistorical core of being. Rather, everything from

"maternal instinct" to conceptions of the self are now seen to be the products of specific discourses and social processes'.[11] Postmodernists insist that we bring into the world no inherited predispositions that are typical of our species. It's not just a question of the infant mind being a blank sheet devoid of innate mental content; for the postmodernist there are none of the built-in rules that Locke thought were essential for processing experience. If there is nothing in our mental constitution that can be said to be intrinsically human, any Lockean notions of universal human rights[12] evaporate and we are left with a cipher waiting to be given shape and form by society. As Howard puts it, '*nothing exists* before the human subject is created by history'.[13] Stephen Greenblatt spells out this key principle of New Historicist criticism in one of his most influential essays: 'The very idea of a "defining human essence" is precisely what new historicists find vacuous and untenable.'[14]

Anti-essentialism is as fundamental to Cultural Materialism as it is to New Historicism. Alan Sinfield speaks for a whole generation of post-structuralist Marxist critics when he writes: 'as a cultural materialist I don't believe in common humanity'.[15] Reviewing the critical developments of the past twenty years, Jonathan Dollimore has recently reminded us that Cultural Materialism has always been 'resolute' in its rejection of 'universal humanism' and 'essentialist individualism'.[16]

Postmodernists believe that the notion of a transhistorical essence of human nature is an invention of the modern world. Citing Foucault – 'before the end of the eighteenth century, *man* did not exist'[17] – Cultural Materialists and New Historicists argue that to attribute essentialist ideas of human nature to Shakespeare and his contemporaries is an historical anachronism (though as I shall explain in my final chapter, Foucault meant something very different from what his followers took him to mean). In one of the truly seminal critical books of the late twentieth century – *Radical Tragedy* (1984) – Jonathan Dollimore declared that it wasn't until the Enlightenment that 'essentialist humanism' first made its appearance.[18] So influential was *Radical Tragedy*, and so great the continuing demand for it on university English courses, that a third edition has recently been published. In a foreword to the new edition Terry Eagleton tells us that the book is essential reading for the modern student: it's one of the '*necessary*' critical works of our time.[19] By the end of the twentieth century the consensus view in what had by then become mainstream Shakespeare criticism[20] was that to read this period through 'the grid of an essentialist humanism', as Dollimore put it, is to give a false picture of the age.[21] Shakespeare was in effect a postmodernist '*avant la*

lettre'.[22] Students were warned against the folly of supposing that Shakespeare's plays might have anything to do with human nature.[23] They were taught that in this period the human 'subject' was thought to be inherently unstable and fragmented;[24] that it wouldn't have occurred to people that they might have an inner self;[25] that the idea of creative originality was an entirely alien concept;[26] and that 'in the Renaissance our modern concept of the genius simply did not exist'.[27] As for gender, that was so indeterminate and had so little connection with biological nature that Elizabethans thought the mere act of putting on an actor's costume could literally turn a man into a woman.[28] Homosexuality hadn't yet been invented.[29]

The belief that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were radical anti-essentialists is not supported by historical evidence. On the contrary, wherever you look in Elizabethan England you find the same insistence on the importance of understanding human nature. As the political historian Janet Coleman reminds us, 'for all medieval and Renaissance thinkers, man's nature does not change over time . . . In all societies throughout history men can be observed to have demonstrated through their actions the same kind of nature, a nature that is specific to humans'.[30] For Elizabethan humanists – the word 'humanist' comes via Italian from the Latin '*humanitas*', whose primary meaning was 'human nature' – the proper study of mankind was man.[31] Humanist historiographers believed that the study of history was useful because, human nature being much the same in all ages, it could give the politician a valuable key to human action. Literary theorists defended poetry on the grounds that it gives you a much better insight into the way human beings behave than any scholastic treatise could do: one of the main justifications for reading literature was the belief that dramatic poetry could, as Hamlet puts it, hold the mirror up to nature and show us our characteristic human vices and virtues. People naturally argued about what human nature was like, but no one doubted that it existed. That it was important to understand human nature is something that seems to have been accepted by even the most unconventional thinkers. Montaigne's friend Pierre Charron summed up a commonplace of this period when he said that 'The first lesson and instruction unto wisdom . . . is the knowledge of our selves and our human condition.'[32]

Humanist philosophers from Cicero to A. C. Grayling have argued that any attempt to realise the ideal of a just society must begin with the facts of human nature.[33] Renaissance thinkers shared that belief. However, their intellectual world probably had more in common with Chaucer's

than it does with our own. To emphasise the paramount importance that Renaissance thinkers accorded the study of human nature is not to suggest that their educational principles are relevant to the problems of the modern world (Elizabethan humanists showed no interest in the inductive approach to knowledge that was so soon to transform science). Nor is it to endorse Renaissance theories of civilisation (though there was a strong republican element in Elizabethan humanism, much humanist thought was unashamedly elitist). Rather it's an attempt to reconstruct unfamiliar ways of looking at things in the hope that this may correct certain misconceptions about Shakespeare's intellectual world that have become commonplaces in modern criticism. Dr Johnson said that the task of criticism was to improve opinion into knowledge.[34] As playgoers and readers we all have opinions about Shakespeare. But it's not until you have established the mental framework within which intellectual debate was conducted and meanings generated in the past that you can begin to judge a writer's response to 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure' (*Hamlet*, III.ii.23–4), or evaluate critically the worth of that response from a modern perspective.

Shakespeare's Humanism is about the centrality of human nature in Shakespeare's mental universe. Although in reasserting the importance of *humanitas* in the plays, it runs counter to the general tenor of mainstream, establishment Shakespeare criticism, it's not an argument for returning to the critical past. In my final chapter I'll suggest that, by listening to what other disciplines have to say about human nature, criticism can move on from an outdated anti-humanism that has its intellectual roots in the early decades of the last century to a more informed modern understanding of the human universals that literature has, in Ian McEwan's words, 'always, knowingly and helplessly, given voice to'.[35]

CHAPTER 1

Shakespeare and English humanism

'And what are you reading, Miss – ?' 'Oh! it is only a novel!', replies the young lady, trying to hide her embarrassment. The narrator supplies the rejoinder that the imaginary young reader lacks the wit or the experience to come up with herself: 'in short, only some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language'.[1]

Shakespeare would have had no idea what Jane Austen was talking about; her ironic defence of the novelist's art would have completely passed him by. It's not just that novels as we know them didn't exist in Elizabethan England; human nature didn't exist either. At least, that's what postmodernism tells us. In postmodern Shakespeare criticism it's taken for granted that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were anti-essentialists. That is to say, Elizabethans are thought to have had no general theory of humankind as a species: human beings had no existential 'centre'; they lacked any kind of unifying essence; they were 'frail, precarious, dispersed across a range of discourses'.[2] The idea of a humankind with universal characteristics and a more or less coherent inner self is something that didn't appear in Europe for another fifty years or so. This anti-essentialist view of humanity affected the way people wrote, their theories of authorship and originality, the way they thought about selfhood and gender, their view of history, and their attitude to authority. It informed their whole world view.

When these claims were first made in the 1980s they seemed perverse and counter-intuitive. After all, wasn't it Shakespeare who said that people the world over 'feel want, / Taste grief, need friends' (*Richard II*, III.ii.171–2)? Didn't Shakespeare tell us that 'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin' (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.iii.169)? But of course we can't assume that these were Shakespeare's own views. Perhaps we are meant to read statements like these ironically. At any rate, two decades

later postmodernism's anti-essentialist reading of Renaissance intellectual culture no longer seems so shocking. But though these ideas have been thoroughly assimilated into mainstream Shakespeare criticism, it's not easy to find evidence for them in European intellectual history. In Elizabethan England, as in Continental Europe, intellectual and artistic life was permeated through and through by humanist thought, and Renaissance humanists believed that all social and intellectual inquiry must be grounded in an understanding of human nature. What Pope said about philosophy in 1734 was as true of the Renaissance as it was of the Enlightenment: humanists believed that the proper study of mankind was man.

Humanism was a highly self-conscious intellectual movement that devoted much thought to promotion of its own methods and ideals. Though humanists argued about the nature of 'man', they agreed both that there was an irreducible essence of human nature, and that it was important to understand what that essence consisted of. Human beings might have unique powers of rationality, but their nature was flawed: that's why civilisation is such a fragile thing. But knowledge of the generic limitations of human nature could help to guard against the consequences of human folly. If self-knowledge, meaning both awareness of your individual strengths and weaknesses and an understanding of humanity in general, was 'the chief part of wisdom', as Erasmus put it,[3] literature could help you to acquire that wisdom. By holding 'as 'twere the mirror up to nature' (*Hamlet*, III.ii.22),[4] the arts of poetry and drama could help you to understand your 'human-kindness'. In its broadest sense, Renaissance humanism was a literary culture that concerned itself with the question of how to promote civilised values and at the same time guard against the barbarism to which the baser side of human nature always threatened to lead us.[5] Shakespeare's plays are a product of that humanist culture.[6]

THE PROPER STUDY OF MANKIND

The word 'humanist', first used in England in 1589,[7] is a translation of the Italian '*umanista*',[8] which meant someone who taught the *humanae litterae*, or 'liberal arts' as Prospero calls them (*The Tempest*, I.ii.74). The ruling ambition of the humanists was to recover the values of classical civilisation. Because civilisation was thought to have had its origins in oratory,[9] the study of classical eloquence formed the basis of humanist plans for a new system of education. Some humanists, like Petrarch, were

fiercely nationalistic; others, like Erasmus, deplored international rivalries and cherished the ecumenical ideal of a world, or at least a Europe, united by reason and learning.[10] But nationalists and internationalists alike shared the belief that any programme of social reform must be based on a true understanding of human nature. 'The first lesson and instruction unto wisdom . . . is the knowledge of our selves and our human condition', wrote Montaigne's friend Pierre Charron.[11]

'*Umanista*' in turn comes from the Latin '*studia humanitatis*'. In classical Latin *humanitas* had three principal meanings: human nature; civilisation, or culture; and benevolence, and this is how the word was understood by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English humanists. In his Latin dictionary of 1565 the Elizabethan humanist Thomas Cooper gave examples to illustrate these related meanings of *humanitas*, explaining that they could be summed up under three general headings: 'the state of human nature common to us all'; 'liberal knowledge, learning, humanity'; and 'courtesy, gentleness, humanity'.[12] When the seventeenth-century poet Robert Aylett explained the meaning of 'humanity' he gave the same priority to human nature: 'Humanity may have a threefold sense, / man's nature, virtue, and his education / In humane arts'.[13]

Modern scholars describe Renaissance humanism as primarily an educational movement[14] and contrast it with the more generalised nineteenth and twentieth-century use of the word to mean a concern with secular values.[15] It's true that the pioneering figures in Renaissance humanism were, in the main, editors, translators, and teachers who believed that a systematic study of classical eloquence would help to bring about a more civilised society. In Northern Europe in particular, humanists argued that education meant that you had a duty to the state. In More's *Utopia* the character of Peter Giles advises Hythlodaeus to act as counsellor to some illustrious prince; in *The Governour* Sir Thomas Elyot claimed that 'the end of all doctrine and study' was 'good counsel';[16] in *Gorboduc*, England's first Senecan tragedy, Sackville and Norton remind the young Queen Elizabeth of the importance of listening to wise counsellors; Shakespeare's Duke Vincentio remarks: 'if our virtues / Did not go forth of us, 'twere all alike / As if we had them not' (*Measure for Measure*, 1. i.33–5). Ben Jonson summed up the humanists' belief in the importance of civic duty when he justified the study of poetry by saying that 'it offers to mankind a certain rule, and pattern of living well, and happily; disposing us to all civil offices of society'.[17] The ideal that inspired Renaissance humanists was a just society, ruled, like Plato's imaginary republic, by a wise and responsible oligarchy.

These generalisations about the emphasis in Northern Renaissance humanism on the practical application of learning are not in dispute. But at the same time it's important to keep in mind the origins of the term '*umanista*' and the significance that humanists attached to the study of human nature. This is something that hasn't been given much attention in modern Renaissance scholarship. As the word suggests, a humanist was someone who made it his business to understand humankind. Indeed how could you begin to plan the just society until you knew what kind of human problems you were dealing with? As the humanists' favourite Latin author, Cicero, had said, if you want to explain the meaning of justice, you must look for it in the nature of man.[18] So while modern scholars are right to distinguish between sixteenth-century and modern humanism – the one concerned with the recovery of classical culture, the other with the promotion of secular values – we need to be sure that we don't lose sight of the original concern of Renaissance humanists with the study of human nature.[19]

When More had Peter Giles advise Hythlodaeus on his civic responsibilities he was almost certainly thinking of Cicero. For Renaissance humanists Cicero was the supreme example of the philosopher who devoted his life to service of the state. Petrarch said of him, 'of all the writers of all ages and races the one whom I most admire and love is Cicero'.[20] In the *De officiis* Cicero wrote: 'Those whom Nature has endowed with the capacity for administering public affairs should put aside all hesitation, enter the race for public office, and take a hand in directing the government.'[21] His words were echoed in countless Renaissance treatises, plays and poems. The first classical text to be printed in Europe, *De officiis* was the most important of all Cicero's works for Renaissance humanists. It encapsulated, in a way that no other classical work did, the humanist ideal of the civilised life. Cicero's book is a treatise on the moral duties of a statesman. Writing in exile and in fear of his life, Cicero was concerned with the preservation of the republican values that he believed were the very foundation of civilisation and that were now in danger of extinction. But because he believed that ethical systems are derived from our essential characteristics as human beings rather than from some supernatural source, he devoted the first book of his treatise to an anatomy of human nature. Cicero begins by listing those universals that are the defining features of our humanity: the power of speech and reason, the ability to distinguish between cause and effect, sociability, a concern with family ties, a need for security, a desire for truth, hatred of unjust authority, an aesthetic sense, and so forth. Cicero

argues that it's from these basic human characteristics that our moral sense is derived.

Having described the universals that define humanity as a species, Cicero then distinguishes between our generic nature and our particular characteristics as individuals:

> We are invested by Nature with two characters, as it were: one of these is universal, arising from the fact of our being all alike endowed with reason and with that superiority which lifts us above the brute. From this all morality and propriety are derived, and upon it depends the rational method of ascertaining our duty. The other character is the one that is assigned to individuals in particular.[22]

For Cicero the founding principle of all responsible action was an understanding both of humanity in general and of one's own particular strengths and weaknesses as an individual: 'we must so act as not to oppose the universal laws of human nature, but while safeguarding those, to follow the bent of our particular nature'.[23] That's why self-knowledge, in the sense in which Charron defined it – 'the knowledge of our selves and our human condition' – is of such paramount importance for Cicero and his humanist followers: only through an understanding of our human limitations can we hope to control the baser part of our nature and live virtuous lives that contribute to the public good. As Juan Luis Vives, the Spanish humanist and friend of Erasmus and More, put it: 'what greater practical wisdom is there than to know how and what the human passions are: how they are roused, how quelled?'[24]

That the ancient adage *nosce teipsum* – know thyself – is a key principle in humanist thought in general, and in Shakespeare in particular, is so well known that it hardly needs repeating.[25] Social identity may be a fluid and unpredictable phenomenon, oft got without merit, and lost without deserving, and dependent, like reputation, on circumstances; as Jaques says, 'one man in his time plays many parts' (*As You Like It*, II.vii.142). But we shouldn't confuse an individual's social role with his or her essential inner being. Renaissance writers go out of their way to insist on the distinction. In *Radical Tragedy* Dollimore cites Francis Bacon's essay 'Of Custom and Education' as evidence of an explicit anti-essentialism. 'Nature', wrote Bacon, 'nor the engagement of words, are not so forcible as custom.'[26] What Dollimore omitted to mention was that this essay is one of a pair.[27] In the companion piece Bacon characteristically put the other side of the argument, asserting the inviolability of that essential self which exists at a deeper level and is not affected by the