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SHAKESPEARE'S HUMANISM

Renaissance humanists believed that if you want to build a just society you must begin with the facts of human nature. This book argues that the idea of a universal human nature was as important to Shakespeare as it was to every other Renaissance writer. In doing so it questions the central principle of postmodern Shakespeare criticism. Postmodernists insist that the notion of a defining human essence was alien to Shakespeare and his contemporaries; as radical anti-essentialists, the Elizabethans were, in effect, postmodernists before their time. In challenging this claim, *Shakespeare's Humanism* shows that for Shakespeare, as for every other humanist writer in this period, the key to all wise action was 'the knowledge of our selves and our human condition'.

ROBIN HEADLAM WELLS is Professor of English Literature and Director of the Centre for Research in Renaissance Studies at Roehampton University. His books include *Elizabethan Mythologies* (Cambridge, 1994) and *Shakespeare on Masculinity* (Cambridge, 2000).

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to Aurora
Lo! ever thus thou growest beautiful
Tennyson, Tithonus

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Preface

Renaissance humanists believed that if you want to build a just society you must begin with the facts of human nature. This book argues that the idea of a universal human nature was as important to Shakespeare as it was to every other Renaissance writer. In doing so it questions the central, defining principle of postmodern Shakespeare criticism. By 'postmodern' I mean criticism that's informed by what is generally termed 'Theory' (either spelt with a capital letter, or enclosed by inverted commas, or both, to distinguish it from the literary theory that existed before Barthes, Derrida and other French thinkers began to dominate Anglo-American criticism in the late 1960s). There are of course significant differences between Cultural Materialism and New Historicism, and between different kinds of feminism; where necessary I'll try to make these differences clear. But since anti-essentialism – the belief that there is no such thing as a universal essence of human nature – is a core principle shared by most versions of 'Theoretically'-informed criticism (but not by liberal feminism), I thought it best to avoid repetition of awkward lists of titles of critical schools by using the general term 'postmodern' when writing about critics who claim that Shakespeare was an anti-essentialist. However, with the exception of chapter 9, where I consider Althusser and Foucault and the strange history of anti-essentialism, I've tried to keep discussion of 'Theory' to a minimum. Readers who are interested to know where the notion of a Renaissance anti-essentialism comes from may want to go to chapters 1 and 9 first.

One other point of usage: some scholars use the word 'contemporary' in the sense of 'modern'. I've used it to mean 'living or occurring at the same time'; so for example, when I say that *King Lear* may possibly have set some contemporary playgoers thinking about social injustice, I'm talking about Shakespeare's original audiences. When I mean 'contemporary or nearly contemporary with ourselves' I use the word 'modern'.

All quotations from Shakespeare are from the modern-spelling *Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Because I wanted to avoid making other Renaissance writers look old fashioned by comparison with Shakespeare, I've modernised all quotations from early modern printed books and modern original-spelling editions. However, I've left quotations from Chaucer and 'ancient' Gower in their original spelling. As Spenser wanted his poetry to look archaic I've also left him in the original spelling.

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Board for the award of a Research Leave Fellowship, and to the School of English and Modern Languages at Roehampton University for granting me a semester's study leave. I'm also grateful to Andrew Gurr, Emrys Jones and the late Inga-Stina Ewbank for their kind support.

A number of people have corrected errors and made helpful suggestions – advice which I'm afraid I didn't always take. But you can put that down to the folly of 'those that are in the vaward of our youth' (as Falstaff tells the Chief Justice). I owe thanks to Graham Bradshaw, Joseph Carroll, Trevor Dean, Michael Dobson, Peter Edwards, Ros King, Owen Knowles, John Lee, Fritz Levy, Kevin McCarron, Mike Pincombe, John Roe, Jerry Sokol, Stanley Stewart, Neil Taylor and Rowland Wymer. I owe a particular debt to Tom McAlindon, who first set me thinking about anti-essentialism. And I'm especially grateful to Cambridge's anonymous readers for invaluable advice.

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