Introduction

This was the fatal period of that virtuous fabric.[1]

More are men's ends marked than their lives before.[2]

In his mischievous essay, *'Tempest* in a Teapot', Tony Dawson draws attention to the stories that are told about the end of Shakespeare's career and to the reductive effect these stories invariably have.[3] He announces without preamble that he thinks *The Tempest* 'Shakespeare's most consistently overrated play' (*'Tempest* in a Teapot', 61) and points out that this is a direct result of the play's privileged position as the last Shakespeare wrote, that in view of 'the importance of chronology in the assessment of Shakespeare's plays' the fact that *The Tempest* 'comes at the end of Shakespeare's career means that it will be read retrospectively, as climactic' (ibid., 61). Resisting this tendency, he points both to the actual absence of evidence for determining which of the three plays *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, all apparently written in 1610 or 1611, was truly the last of Shakespeare's solo-written plays and to the tactics critics deploy in order to ensure that, of the three, it is *The Tempest* which retains that status by default, thereby sustaining the standard assumption that the play is intrinsically autobiographical. He notes that *Cymbeline*, for one, is often treated – on a purely impressionistic basis – 'as an apprentice work in comparison with *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*' and is therefore 'seen usually as written earlier than they', an entirely imaginary priority constructed simply because, as Dawson puts it, 'we do not like to imagine *Cymbeline* as Shakespeare's last complete play' (ibid., 62). And he offers an alternative vision of the end of Shakespeare's career, helpfully providing a page or two of anxious dialogue between Hemmings and Condell by way of support and asking

what is wrong with imagining Shakespeare's career trailing off, going from bad to worse, from *The Tempest* to *Cymbeline* and parts of *Henry VIII*, before being judiciously terminated by his worried partners in The King's Men, who perhaps

asked young Fletcher to do what he could to make the old master's new texts acceptable to their increasingly perplexed audiences? (ibid., 62–3)[4]

Having posed the question, he provides the obvious answer: 'Well, we all *know* what is wrong with thinking this way – we have too great an investment (personal, academic, and ideological) to make it desirable' (ibid., 63).

That investment, I wish to argue, is made not only in *The Tempest* or in the plays known collectively as 'late Shakespeare' but in the overarching idea underpinning claims that certain creative artists have a distinguishable 'late phase' or 'late period' at the end of their careers, and in the privileged place that the idea of late writing occupies in the critical imagination. It is important to be aware that when we refer to Shakespeare's last romances or tragicomedies as his 'late plays' and to his final playwriting years as his 'late phase', we are neither simply affirming chronology nor rehearsing an understanding of the creative process that would have been familiar to Shakespeare himself. Nor, again, are we working on a premise applicable only to the study of Shakespeare. We are, rather, invoking a general history of critical analysis, a history that starts with the establishment of style as the organic product not of an epoch but of the life and will of a given artist. This organic understanding of style, which emerged from the biological thought of certain German Romantic philosophers and which transformed critical attitudes in the early nineteenth century, continues to provide the basic foundation of everyday thinking about creativity even now, despite the best efforts of poststructuralism and postmodernism to dislodge it. The field that received the initial impact of this new understanding of the work of art was not, as it happens, literary criticism but musicology, and it was almost immediately (if stutteringly and locally to begin with) that the idea of the 'late work' began to emerge as a way to make sense of the last compositions of certain composers – principally, to begin with, Beethoven and Mozart. The fundamental change wrought by Romantic philosophy was the assertion of a direct connection between the progress of the artist's life and of that artist's style from youth to maturity. The invention of late style was, and remains, supplementary to this vision of the creative life – supplementary, that is, both in the straightforward sense of 'additional' and in the slightly more elusive deconstructive sense in which, by claiming finally to complete something previously considered complete, the supplement demonstrates the impossibility of completion. But it is at the same time central to that vision, because the artist's late period is held to fulfil the cycle or to endorse the trajectory (depending on the metaphor deployed) of the extraordinary creative life. As such, rather than being of merely

peripheral interest, the idea of late style is in fact synecdochic of the biographical urge in general, and any critique of late style must therefore also involve a critique of the central place biography still occupies in the critical process.

Wilfully, I will indulge in a little life-writing of my own. I first began to address the idea of late style when I was asked, a little over a decade ago, if I would be interested in editing *Henry VIII* for the Arden Shakespeare series. *Henry VIII* (or *All is True*, as it was known when first performed) offers, as I was already aware, a classic instance of the anxiety of the supplement. Postdating *The Tempest*, it was in all likelihood the penultimate play in which Shakespeare had a hand, first performed in June 1613 and responsible – through the misfiring of a cannon that was to mark the King's entrance to a banquet – for burning down the first Globe theatre, the original 'Shakespeare's Globe', in an event described in humorously eschatological terms by the courtly gossip Sir Henry Wotton. 'This was the fatal period of that virtuous fabric', he noted, tongue a fair way into cheek, 'wherein yet nothing did perish but wood and straw, and a few forsaken cloaks; only one man had his breeches set on fire, that would perhaps have broiled him, if he had not by the benefit of a provident wit put it out with bottle ale' (Wotton, *Letters*, 2: 33). *Henry VIII* is thus in several disconnected ways a 'late play'. It is a play which verges on the end of things, marking a moment of dissolution that is both personal and institutional and thus, finally, eschatological. It is also, curiously, a play which, despite the various reports of the burning down of the Globe and its central place in that event, leaves surprisingly little trace of its existence, in Shakespearean criticism at least. Tracking its critical history in order to construct an introduction for my edition, I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated by the play's absence from books both on Shakespeare's history plays and on his late plays. The former omission I felt I could understand (although that didn't stop it irritating me): postdating the previous Shakespearean history play, *Henry V*, by fourteen years and entirely out of rhythm with it and with the other plays dramatising an historical sovereign's reign, *Henry VIII* has generally appealed even less to critics than has *King John*, the other Shakespearean history play generally considered three companion-pieces short of a tetralogy. Nineteenth-century critics tended to assume that both plays were written at the same time in the wake of the major historical cycles as a kind of double afterthought, and they still tend to be treated, at least tacitly, as displaced and somewhat dysfunctional twins. The Signet Shakespeare edition, for instance (like the Garland collection of critical

essays on the plays), bundles these two belated histories together as no-hopers between a single set of artistically underwhelming covers.

The omission of *Henry VIII* from books on the history plays was, then, relatively understandable. Its concomitant omission from books on the late plays, on the other hand, seemed to me to be thoroughly baffling. Why, I wondered, when they address Shakespeare's final years, do critics (with a few honourable exceptions, but only a few) focus solely on the four plays dating from 1608 to 1611 – that is, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* (and often, in fact, on only three of these, casting *Pericles* adrift) – and not the two (or three) plays that postdate them – *Henry VIII*, *Cardenio* (lost but perhaps not wholly irrecoverable) and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*? It seemed clear that this selectivity was not arbitrary, that there were in fact several explanations, each of which had a distinct bearing on the overarching idea of 'late work'. First, there was, as Dawson has reminded us, the matter of the privileged status of *The Tempest* in the minds of critics as Shakespeare's self-consciously 'last' play. Second, there was the difficulty critics still have in coming to terms with the notion of Shakespearean collaboration, since each of the post-*Tempest* plays is demonstrably co-written. And third, there were the problems these plays present, being in various ways noticeably different from their immediate predecessors, for any attempt to offer a clearcut, overarching definition of 'late Shakespeare'. Even critics apparently uncomfortable with the premises of subjectivism – by which I mean readings that assume a direct relationship between the state of mind of the author at a given moment and the nature of his output at that moment – persisted in an unspoken sentimental belief that *The Tempest* represents Shakespeare's valedictory gesture, his 'farewell to the stage', reading Prospero as the playwright's *alter ego*. Any play that postdated *The Tempest*, therefore, was considered *de trop*, in frankly poor taste, as unappealing as an ageing pop star's comeback tour. Moreover, the collaborative authorship of these plays – *Pericles* written with George Wilkins, *Cardenio, Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* with John Fletcher – created severe and specific problems for subjectivism. After all, if you don't know which line was written by which playwright, how can you reach useful biographical conclusions? And, in any case, how can a play actually be a *late* play if it is also, for one of its two authors, an *early* play (as is the case with the Fletcher collaborations)? These are not comfortable questions for anyone keen to sustain the idea of late Shakespeare and they are therefore customarily ducked.

As I worked on *Henry VIII*, then, I became increasingly aware that it is impossible to separate 'late Shakespeare' from a certain supra-individual

conception of lateness, universal in supposed scope but vaguely defined and contradictory – a conception which seemed to me to a certain extent both to produce and to be produced by the idea of a specifically *Shakespearean* lateness. The idea of late writing or late style was created neither by nor for Shakespeare: it emerged in the first instance, I suggest, within musicology and was only later applied to literary texts and to fine art (though this statement should be qualified with reference to Vasari's account of the style of Titian's last paintings, to which I will return). But it undoubtedly developed, at least in anglophone culture, quite specifically by way both of critical accounts of Shakespeare's later career and of the tendency of subsequent writers self-consciously to look to Shakespeare for precedents for their own late work. The idea of 'late Shakespeare', in other words, contributed to the establishment of what I will call a *discourse of lateness* – that is, a construct, ideological, rhetorical and heuristic, a function not of life or of art but of the practice of reading or appreciating certain texts within a set of predetermined parameters. The history of Shakespearean criticism foregrounds the attribution to late style of the status of a kind of apotheosis, an almost mystical seal attached to the life of a genius, and readings and appropriations of the late plays continue to provide instances both of the persistence of lateness as a controlling concept in the contemporary default understanding of the creative process and of the utility of the established understanding of Shakespearean lateness for the construction by others of modern and postmodern creative selfhoods. I aim here both to chart the construction of the idea of a Shakespearean late phase and its impact on subsequent models of lateness and to demonstrate the inadequacy of the idea of late style as a means of understanding a group of plays created in the conditions of early modern English professional theatre. By situating a particular set of late works in their historical and institutional context and by assessing the limitations of our current understanding of the function of the word 'late' in the phrase 'late style', I hope to offer a case study for a critique of the overarching, interdisciplinary concept.

My subject, then, is late style; my exemplar Shakespeare. And the question I wish to ask is this. What difference does it make to think about late Shakespeare in the context of the general understanding of late style?

Before I proceed, however, I wish to make a few matters clear. First and foremost, I want to emphasise that this is not a book about Shakespeare's late plays. It is, rather, a book about a particular critical *idea* of Shakespeare's late plays and, by extension, about the late work of a highly select cohort of writers, artists and composers who have come to be

considered geniuses. It is, in other words, a reception history, an account of the process through which a group of plays came to be understood in certain ways, not a critical assessment that addresses them one by one in the classic manner, relying on close analysis for support in the development of a reading of those plays. I may one day write that book, but this is not it. In any case, in its function as a critique of the persistent determination of Shakespeareans to read the work through the unfolding of the life, this book need not, in a sense, be about the late plays at all. It could equally easily be a book about readings of Shakespeare's early comedies as apprentice works – there is, as Kenneth Clark once argued, 'nothing more mysterious than the power of an aged artist to give life to a blot or scribble; it is as inexplicable as the power of a young poet to give life to a word' – or of his major tragedies as instances of the maturity of a great writer.[5] It could, in other words be a book about any given set of plays as they are assessed in relation to the period of the playwright's life in which they were written. That said, the idea of late writing brings with it certain resonances which make it an especially productive object of critical attention – more so, arguably, than either 'early work' or 'mature work' – for a study of this kind, resonances which cover a lot of ground both spiritual and material, from teleology to gerontology, from theatre history to connoisseurship. But, principally, the idea of late writing offers a critical focus for our persistent belief in genius, for our insistence on the centrality of biography to critical analysis, and thus for the way we treat the relationship between creator and creation in all fields of artistic endeavour, enabling us to examine the interaction between an artist's work and the conditions within which the artistic career is achieved, and to assess the extent to which the artist in question is able to determine his or her future reputation and thus dictate to posterity.

My second caveat is that this is not a book about style. Or, rather, it is not a book that offers sustained stylistic analyses of the Shakespearean (or any other) late work. I have been unusually fortunate in the writing of this book that my work has run alongside that of Russ McDonald on his *Shakespeare's Late Style* and I am indebted to his detailed and precise account of the technicalities of that style. I have chosen the term 'late writing' in my title rather than 'late style' per se because it seems to me that the concept of lateness, though grounded in assumptions about poetic or painterly style, is by no means limited to questions of stylistics and I wish to make this apparent. Shakespeare's last plays unquestionably mark a change in style, one which McDonald describes closely and which is in various ways different from his former styles – though it is not as uniform and

consistent a style as some would wish, and it comes under considerable pressure as soon as more plays than the 'central' three (or four) are acknowledged as constituents of 'late Shakespeare'. My interest, however, lies primarily not with the minutiae of that style as it emerges but with the way in which the recognition of a stylistic shift in late Shakespeare stems from, and to a certain extent produces, an overarching understanding of late style as transcending time and place. I wish, in other words, to analyse the way in which certain habits of pen or mind have, through a process of critical construction over time, metamorphosed into a transhistorical, transcultural phenomenon.

Thirdly, in the context of questions of close reading and of stylistic analysis, it is perhaps worth stating immediately that this book is not a contribution to the so-called 'new formalism'. By this I do not mean, I should point out, that I object to close reading as a fundamental procedure in the interpretation of texts – on the contrary, close reading remains for me an essential first step for any historical, material or cultural reading – though this book, as I have noted, happens to offer little in the way of close readings of plays. Rather I refer to the tendency in recent years of certain critics, mostly in the United States, capitalising both upon the ebbing of the tide of New Historicism and upon certain received notions about the late plays as highly aestheticised works, to deploy those plays in order to make large and retrograde claims for the ahistoricity of art. This book sets out to demonstrate the contingency both of creative work and of such claims. It is highly unfortunate for the late plays that, for reasons I will in due course examine, they have become directly associated with the aesthetic at the expense of the historical. Criticism over the last twenty or so years, kickstarted in the mid-eighties by postcolonial readings of *The Tempest*, has worked hard to redress that balance, situating the late plays in their ideological and material contexts and demonstrating the various ways in which traditional formalist assumptions about the plays, about their underlying serenity and their essential or theological qualities, elided a wide range of political complexities and severities. At the same time, however, New Historicist criticism – followed in the late nineties by analyses of the affective qualities of early modern theatre – perhaps unwittingly sustained the aesthetic associations of the late plays by dwelling on the sense of wonder that, it is held, is their controlling emotion.[6]

Partly as a result of this, the late plays have been particularly prominent in recent years as exemplary texts for the exponents of what has become known as the new formalism. In readings of this kind, the plays become the embodiment of the purity of Shakespeare's engagement with high matters

of style and emotion and thus serve as a bulwark against the philistine forces of materialist theory. This position, I would argue, has its roots in the idea of late style itself – in, for instance, Henry James's celebration of *The Tempest* as Shakespeare's 'high testimony to th[e] independent, absolute value of Style'.[7] The late plays are thus regularly detached from the material and institutional conditions in which they were produced and are presented instead as the direct manifestation of the author's mind at the point of particular clarity and perspective that is only achievable by certain artists at the very end of the journey. The word 'late' itself locates the plays strictly in their relationship to a particular authorial chronology, ignoring context. Thus our persistence in reading these plays as 'late plays' can provide an opening for the reversal of much that has been gained in the understanding of early modern drama through the turn to history and to materiality. Failure fully to interrogate the given of lateness – to understand the origins of the association of these plays with transcendence and essentialism – opens the plays up to analyses that use them as a stalking horse for attacks on a swathe of valuable developments in criticism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.[8] They deserve better, frankly.

I wish to offer a fourth caveat – addressing one of the most sensitive issues with which a student of late style is obliged to engage – by stating right away that this is not a book about writing in old age. It has become very clear to me in the course of writing this book that many people have a deep-seated belief in the special quality of late work, particularly when it is defined as work produced in old age. When, over the course of the last four or five years, I have discussed the question of late style with others, my interlocutors have often been happy enough for me to explain the problems I have with the idea of late Shakespeare, but they have tended to draw the line when I turn to the work of their favourite ageing artist or composer and suggest the inadequacy of the idea for understanding those works, or when I suggest that the larger concept of lateness is itself a critical construct. I can understand this very readily. After all, a great deal of the pleasure I have had in writing this book has been in discovering for the first time for myself some of the profoundly accomplished and moving works produced by artists, composers and writers in old age: Rembrandt's overwhelming *Lucretia* in the Minneapolis Institute of Art, say (which kept me transfixed when I should probably have been attending papers at the Shakespeare Association conference that had brought me to Minnesota), or Strauss's magnificent *Four Last Songs* as sung by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (to which I was first directed by Jonathan Dollimore) or, in an entirely different location and tradition, the remarkable works of art produced, in an

eight-year period beginning when she was seventy-eight, by the Aboriginal artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye (in particular, the abstract and diffuse paintings of the 'Last Series', introduced to me in Canberra by Caroline Turner). These are truly astonishing works of art and their status is unquestioned: it is what is *said* about them as exemplars of a perceived transhistorical phenomenon that at times can be debatable.

Clearly, for creative artists in any genre, old age can produce a profound concentration, an intense focus of attention and a tendency to look back over the career that preceded, and enabled the particular form of, that attention, and it is undeniable that work produced in old age frequently embodies certain characteristics. Robert Butler's notion of the life review, for instance, 'in which older people feel forced to confront the ghosts of their past in order to make peace with themselves', is a useful point of reference for critical studies of work produced in old age.[9] In this book, though, I focus not on these characteristics per se but on the accretions and associations superimposed upon them, on the conflation of the idea of an 'old-age style' with the broader category of late style – that is, with work produced at the end of the artistic life *at whatever age* – and on the underlying assumption of universal application that seems always to characterise analyses of late work, preferring to examine rather than to elide the impact of contingencies and complicities on the ascription of a late style. In other words, my interest lies in the construction of the myth of late style and in the impact of that myth on the work of a writer, not in the nature of creativity in old age. Others have written and are writing specifically about old-age style and about the interrelations of gerontology and criticism, and although I will touch on that work in Chapter 5, it is not my intention in this book directly to work within the field of humanistic gerontology as delineated by Thomas Cole, Robert Kastenbaum and Ruth Ray in their *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*.[10] Nevertheless, it seems to me that Kathleen Woodward is right when she claims that the repression of ageing is an intrinsic component of contemporary western culture, and I would argue that the concept of late style is designed less to celebrate than to *deny* the difference represented by old age and to substitute for it a myth of synchrony, a projection of a transcendent late style that is the same for all supreme creative artists at all times, opening up access for a handful of geniuses to a world of archetypes beyond history and chronology, which has nothing to do with the ageing process.

My critical scepticism, then, is directed not at certain celebrated works produced in old age but rather at the overarching metaphysical category said to tie them together (and to tie them to certain works produced at the

ends of creative lives where the artists in question did not live into old age) and at the process through which that category is applied in ways that, I would argue, obfuscate rather than illuminate the achievements of ageing artists. Late style is precisely *not* limited to writing in old age, and in Chapter 5 I will suggest a series of ways in which *Altersstil* and *Spätstil* (the canonical German terms for 'old-age style' and 'late style') are by no means synonymous. It seems to me, on the contrary, essential to distinguish between 'old-age style' and 'late style' because the importance accorded to late work is not always the product of a privileging of old age per se (even the old age of a genius) but rather of a celebration of a particular liminality – of, that is, the proximity of death. Late work is, in other words, borderline activity, a creative response to death, a kind of eschatology. Since death does not always wait patiently for old age, the significance of late work can be said to lie in its primary relationship to death, not in its contingent relationship to old age, and the attribution of a late period to an artist who dies in middle age or even in late youth causes distinct problems for any attempt to equate 'late style' and 'old-age style'. Moreover, the late phase is something attributed by critics only to a very few creative artists, a limited handful of acknowledged geniuses. Death comes to all of us; old age to most; a late phase – in the sense in which it has been applied to composers, artists and writers – to very few indeed.

This is not, then, a book written about or against old age. That said, it is a book about a topic more often than not discussed, understandably enough, by critics late in life. Edward Said is the most recent instance, concluding his career with a book on endings as he began it with one on beginnings, and celebrating in particular the resistant strain in late writing, writing that refuses to go gently into the night. It would seem self-evident that someone who has lived a long time and experienced a long career has the potential for greater empathy with a creative artist at the end of life than does someone only a certain way along that road. But personal engagement of this kind has disadvantages as well as advantages. Whichever stage of life you discuss (and this seems especially true of the end of life), you are bound to feel as if you understand it better when you inhabit it yourself – 'That is why,' Havelock Ellis said of Michelangelo, 'his later work fascinates us endlessly as, slowly, after many years, enlightened by the long course of our own experience, we begin at last to understand what it means' – yet you are also likely to identify with it in a way that may well make you complicit in its construction and in the elisions it effects.[11] It is perhaps predictable that C. J. Sisson, best known for his mocking attack on biographical readings of Shakespeare in a British Academy lecture of 1934, should ease gradually