

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

*Shakespeare and the Political***Shakespeare's Dialectic of Hope**

At a famous and pivotal moment in Shakespeare's tragicomedy *The Winter's Tale*, the old shepherd who has just found and taken up the abandoned newborn child Perdita says to his son (a witness to the gruesome death of a man eaten by a bear and the loss of all hands in a simultaneous shipwreck): "But look thee here, boy. Now bless thyself; thou met'st with things dying, I with things newborn."¹

These are remarkable lines – utterly simple, having a clear literal meaning, but radiating out suggestions of broader and deeper significations. Taking advantage of art's status as an artificial form that references but does not simply reproduce the human lifeworld, they convey a message about art itself and about dramatic structure and genre. They evoke an important thematic point about the potentialities of human life. And, above all, they convey a utopian message of hope, one that inverts the traditional life-story that begins with birth and ends in death.

This inverted pattern is, of course, not universal in Shakespeare's works. There are, to take the obvious cases first, two extreme examples of highly pessimistic, nonutopian plays early and late in Shakespeare's tragic period. The first of these, the generically ambiguous but bitter *Troilus and Cressida* (1601–02), enacts the prevalence of unrestrained power, political and personal, and ends in despair. The second is the late tragedy (c. 1606) *Timon of Athens*, another despairing play (with perhaps a few moments of utopian relief) that features the story of a misanthrope who disdains humanity for its ingratitude and depravity.² The inverted pattern emerges just after the (probable) composition date of this play, around 1606, inaugurating Shakespeare's last artistic period.

In the first half of Shakespeare's career, then, the utopian was largely confined to comedy, and the histories and tragedies were about the workings of power as *Realpolitik*. After that, the depiction of power grows

more and more critical, and intimations of alternative ways of life can be glimpsed with varying degrees of faintness in the tragedies of 1601–1606, with the exception of the two extremes mentioned above. Beginning with *Antony and Cleopatra*, I will argue, the utopian becomes a more and more prominent element of Shakespeare's final plays.

In what follows, I will first discuss the 1599 *Julius Caesar* as an instance of a political play largely lacking in utopian content; it is a much less despairing play than either *Troilus* or *Timon* for several reasons, though similar to them in its relative lack of utopian elements. Its positivity is asserted in its depiction of complex, powerful, and at times idealistic personalities caught up in the workings of a power they fail fully to grasp. In contrast, *Macbeth*, the subject of Chapters 2 and 3 – while it also depicts power in relentless operation – has, like most of the middle tragedies, intimations of the utopian vision that will dominate Shakespeare's last plays.

This book aims to study the workings of the dialectic between the political and the utopian in readings of five distinct plays from different phases of Shakespeare's career – two from the period of political plays (*Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*), two from his most utopian period at the end of his career (*The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*), and a transitional work between these two periods (*Antony and Cleopatra*). The book thus charts a trajectory from plays largely focused on political issues to late tragicomedies that focus on the necessity of utopian vision in worlds of injustice, violence, madness, and death. Of course, in these plays the element of hope does not do away with recognitions of suffering and death. This is true also of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* – a tragedy with strong elements of tragicomedy within it – and even, as mentioned above, of *Macbeth*, which in its interstices intimates the possibility of a world of refuge from the relentless violence and suffering it depicts.

All five plays, however, begin in political contexts out of which, in the unlikely way of utopian art, hope can develop. The political situations vary, from *Julius Caesar*'s dangerously factional Roman republic (in which hope is hard to discover), to *Macbeth*'s misty, barbaric, and violent kingdom, to the power-driven, pleasure-seeking world of *Antony and Cleopatra*, to the fanciful, tyranny-plagued kingdom of Sicilia in *The Winter's Tale*, to the Machiavellian Renaissance world of Italian city-state politics and incipient colonialism in *The Tempest*. In all of them but *Julius Caesar*, unconstrained wills-to-power create injustice and desire before succumbing to a variety of ingenious Shakespearean plot devices that reverse the valences of tragic emotion and leave us with hope. In short,

the later plays turn to the utopian as a specific dialectical response to a Shakespearean diagnosis and indictment of instrumental politics, capitalism, and modernity generally. These are revealed as largely disastrous developments leading to an empty world devoid of meaning, community, and mutual support.

This book charts the artistic and philosophical trajectory that produced this outcome over the course of Shakespeare's career. The trajectory makes use of a variety of dialectics contrasting and connecting the political with an aestheticized version of utopian thinking. We could start the story almost anywhere outside the comedies, but I have chosen to take up the narrative beginning with the 1599 *Julius Caesar* and following it through to the 1611 *The Tempest*. In the plays selected here from that timeframe, Shakespeare varied both the representation and evaluation of political life, of aesthetic ideas and practices, and of utopian visions. In the chapters that follow, I trace the development of a dialectic from the "thesis" of political plays to the "antithesis" (or arguably, perhaps, "synthesis") of the late utopian plays.

Drama is an inherently dialectical form, and within many of Shakespeare's plays beyond these five, various forms of resistance to power can be found. There are powerful, critical subjectivities like Falstaff, Brutus, Hamlet, Cordelia, and Edgar probing, questioning, and sometimes acting against power. Eventually, Shakespeare has recourse in the late plays to a motif of several of his comedies, utopian "green worlds" in complex relations to the realm of power politics to which they react. This dynamic creates a dialectical negation producing a utopian response – and in the process affirming art's ability to imagine alternatives to existing reality. In the four late tragicomedies, this process results in a radically new aesthetic form (for Shakespeare) in which utopian vision triumphs over (but does not annihilate) the destructive effects of a new and developing reified society of autonomous power, commodity fetishism, and changing worldviews.

The political, the aesthetic, and the utopian are the three key concepts of this work, and they are tightly interconnected as used here. My discussion of the political shapes the first chapters of this book, focusing on Shakespeare's changing views of politics. Accordingly, the political will be the focus of this introduction, and I will defer the theoretical discussion of the utopian and the aesthetic until the second half of this study, in an introduction to the chapters on *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. The point is to avoid conflating the two major poles of the dialectic at issue and instead to give each one independent attention.

Although this division coheres with the development of Shakespeare's practice, it is also prompted by my theoretical commitment to Walter Benjamin's idea of the need to fully separate the poles of a dialectical binary. "Dialectics at a standstill," he called the procedure and used it to help define both Baroque images and the connection of past and present in the act of reading and interpreting a work from the past.³ It is an important part of the Baroque aesthetic he defined – and which I believe Shakespeare used as well, as will become apparent in the chapters that follow. Here, I want to produce a similar stasis, a similar sense of dialectics at a standstill, in giving each of my two major polarities, the political and the aesthetic-utopian, its individual moment as well as examining their interactions.

The aesthetic is of course a crucial category in this study and, as noted, will be discussed in more detail in the Introduction to Part II, primarily as a vehicle for the utopian vision that is also one of this work's central themes. But there is also another meaning of the term relevant to the discussions that follow: aesthetic in the sense of the specific version of form, style, and structure particular to individual times, places, and artists. In this case, accompanying Shakespeare's turn to the tragic and then tragicomic late in his career was an aesthetic-stylistic turn as well – a turn toward what I will call a Baroque aesthetic, at work in all the plays discussed here in different ways and levels, though least of all in *Julius Caesar*. It is an aesthetic that values complexity, dissonance, and ambiguity, and those qualities are important in the deployment of the utopian vision in the plays at issue in what follows. But, because I have discussed early modern Baroque aesthetics elsewhere, I don't wish to make Shakespeare's changing styles and individual aesthetic (in a narrower sense of the word) a major topic of discussion here.⁴ I do introduce the term and give a brief explanation of its meaning in Chapters 2 and 3 and refer to it when it seems to me relevant thereafter. The label "Baroque" will be helpful to some readers, but it can remain merely a stylistic marker for others. This book is primarily about something else, focusing on the changes in dramatic form and thematic content that create Shakespeare's trajectory toward utopian art. The nature of Baroque aesthetics is a fascinating, complex issue related but not exactly central to my main argument here, and in my judgment its full exploration is best reserved for another occasion.

I begin with *Julius Caesar* (1599) as a kind of baseline against which to measure the changes in question. It is the last of a series of history-based plays written in 1595–1600 and presents the Roman political system at a

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moment of crisis occasioned by Julius Caesar's defiance of the Senate and his assuming an unprecedented position as Consul-for-life. Politics in the play is depicted as an instrumental, largely autonomous system of power contested by a series of agents, none of whom is egregiously good or evil. The play was written in the period I have called in previous work Shakespeare's Machiavellian Moment.⁵ Its aesthetic strategy is largely mimetic and embodies the tragic and historic forms and themes of the contemporaneous English theater, taken both from previous Elizabethan playwrights and Shakespeare's own previous practice, especially from the four recently written histories, *King Richard II*, *1 and 2 King Henry IV*, and *King Henry V*. And it is almost completely devoid of any meta-aesthetic or utopian spirit or vision: an ironic reference to future dramatists' displaying the assassins' violence in "ages hence" is the only possible exception.⁶ In fact, in Shakespeare's early political plays, the utopian is largely a null category. I'm thinking of plays like *Richard III*, *Titus Andronicus*, the Henry IV tetralogy, and *Julius Caesar*.

The next stage in the development in these themes takes place in the so-called tragic period, from about 1600 or 1601 to about 1608. It is represented here by *Macbeth* (1606–07). In all these middle tragedies, and *a fortiori* in *Macbeth*, the represented political systems are subject to a distinctly moral, value-laden probing and judgment different from that of *Julius Caesar* and the plays associated with it. In *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, there are clear distinctions between good characters and evil ones (nuances notwithstanding), and the audience is emotionally inducted to take sides – unlike the earlier "Machiavellian" works. The aesthetic of the middle tragedies, as in the case of *Macbeth*, is more Baroque, more given to complex figures and modes of representation. There are subdued intimations of utopian vision as well, differing in each play – in *Macbeth* seen through invocations of the natural world and even in aspects of the Weird Sisters. But they remain far from the more dominant display of utopian vision that characterizes all the late tragicomedies, most especially the two discussed below, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

The transitional play in this latter stage of development, as noted above, is *Antony and Cleopatra*, a tragedy, but one with a markedly utopian conclusion that prepares the ground for the tragicomedies to follow. It is a development marked by a greater consciousness of the aesthetic as such and a commitment to unlikely, optimistic endings that seem to take a more sanguine view of human development than did the earlier histories and tragedies. In short, Shakespeare ends his career investigating hope. It is

a complex, uneven trajectory, but an easily discerned one that has been discussed in many different forms by Shakespeareans for a long time. By putting these issues in a new context and drawing on neglected theoretical resources highly relevant to them, I hope to bring new light to their discussion at a moment in our current history when they are more relevant than ever.

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Power – and the social arrangements that produce it and thereby produce politics in a given society – is one of the leading themes of Shakespeare's oeuvre. The histories and tragedies are centrally about political power and who holds it, who wants it, and the dramatic struggles over it that ensue. The comedies explore sexual politics centrally, but they also glance at macro-political issues, as in plays like *As You Like It*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Merchant of Venice*, or *Much Ado About Nothing*, to name some obvious examples. If the late tragicomedies are comedies, as the First Folio suggests for most of them, then they should be added to the list of comedies greatly interested in political issues. The majority of Shakespeare's plays are fundamentally political, although a certain kind of formalist critic might greatly qualify this assertion. Nevertheless, I would argue, Shakespeare's interest in politics has long been noted.⁷ The debate has been largely around what kind of politics he supported.

Shakespeare and the Political in the Recent Past

For the first half or more of the twentieth century, Shakespeare was seen (at least by the majority of academic critics) as an order-loving, conservative Elizabethan who had absorbed the prevalent political views of his time. This was the argument of the vastly influential *The Elizabethan World Picture* by E. M. W. Tillyard, which made the most developed case for this view.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, as generations changed in Shakespeare scholarship, this view began to be questioned. By the late 1980s and the 1990s, it was more or less swept away by the rise of two related critical movements, cultural materialism in the UK and the new historicism in the US – including feminist versions of each. At the present critical moment, these approaches themselves have aged, and the field is visibly engaged in experimenting with a variety of approaches to succeed them. However, I would argue, the paradigm shift brought about by these

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older developments is in many ways still in place, and many of the newer approaches – presentism, ecocriticism, political theology, a new feminism, race studies, objects studies, and the history of the book, for example – take the now aging historicizing approaches as starting points and retain many of the previous criticism's assumptions. The guiding idea of the current study is less how we can replace the older methods than how we can build on them and produce new insights and interpretations of Shakespeare. In what follows, I want to review some of the key issues debated in the ferment of the paradigm shift of the recent past with a view to using them to help define how Shakespeare himself evolved in his thinking about politics and moved to a dramatic practice at the end of his career that ended in utopian visions.

New historicism and cultural materialism produced a variety of different approaches to Shakespeare's representation of politics. Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy* saw Shakespeare, along with other Jacobean dramatists, as a skeptical, questioning, and ultimately radical thinker whose plays conveyed these ideas in a variety of ways. "Unlike the influential movements in recent literary criticism," he wrote, "the response of the drama to crises was not a retreat into aesthetic and ideological conceptions of order, integration, equilibrium and so on; on the contrary, it confronted and articulated that crisis, indeed it actually helped precipitate it."⁸

Other approaches, however, emphasized Shakespeare's participation in the ideologies and structures of power of the day. Leonard Tennenhouse argued that Shakespeare's plays were implicated in maintaining the power of the monarchical state, even when, as in the case of romantic comic heroines like Rosalind of *As You Like It*, they appeared subversive.⁹ In a variation on this approach, Jonathan Goldberg saw Elizabethan and Jacobean literature as generally functioning as part of the overall power apparatus of state and society – but he partially exempted Shakespeare from this. Agreeing with Stephen Greenblatt, he says, Shakespeare is neither a "Tudor propagandist" nor a "Marlovian rebel," but one who creates a theatrical space "where all the beliefs of the culture are trotted out, tried on, but where none is ultimately adopted." But he adds: "his theatrical space is inscribed in a cultural theatre" and always has political dimensions.¹⁰

As Goldberg's description suggests, Stephen Greenblatt's pioneering new historicist approach to Shakespeare recognized the realities of power politics in Shakespeare's world, but also recognized the complexity of Shakespeare's art. This was something of an exception in a time when

“aesthetics” was not a positive term in the prevailing critical discourses. And Greenblatt’s refusal to provide a simple yes or no answer to the question of whether Shakespeare was complicit with the repressive political regimes of his day became widespread as time went on. There were, in fact, very good theoretical reasons for this as well, though Greenblatt did not himself make an issue of them. In general, Greenblatt’s approach to his authors is implicitly celebratory (or at least sympathetic), even while he inserts them into previously unfamiliar (at least in the mainstream English studies of the period) contexts of anticolonialist politics, Marxist theory, anthropological analysis, and the new theory of power that Michel Foucault had recently introduced into left-wing theoretical circles.

Greenblatt, as I have argued elsewhere, avoids the homogenizing tendencies of Althusserian “ideology” (to be discussed further briefly below). Instead, he downplays theory as such, although a quick review of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and *Shakespearean Negotiations* will show a broad range of theoretical sources employed, including many Marxist-influenced ones, such as Marx himself, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas, and, in limited applications, Louis Althusser. And besides these Marxist sources, there was also a large influence from anthropologist Clifford Geertz and, less overtly but decisively, from Michel Foucault, with the result that his tendency was to more microscopic, context-sensitive Foucaultian “discourses” than to the more sweeping, inclusive “ideology” of neo-Althusserian theory. And something else was at work (and continues in his later writings): a positive appreciation for *aesthetics* existing beside, but going beyond, *ideology* in works of art. He wrote, for example, in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, “The idea is not to strip away and discard the enchanted impression of aesthetic autonomy but to inquire into the objective conditions of this enchantment, to discover how the traces of social circulation are effaced.”¹¹ This, as I wrote of this passage in my *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, is not all that far from the very aesthetics-affirming neo-Marxist theory of Theodor Adorno.

This refusal to make blanket political judgments about Shakespeare’s works became, I would argue, the most common one in “progressive” Shakespeare criticism from the 1990s onward. Most of these critics, with various degrees of grace and cogency, make extremely energetic, positive, and ultimately quite persuasive cases for interpreting Shakespeare in a politically critical, insurgent mode that had been quite outside the acceptable canons of professionalism of English studies more or less since its inception at the turn of the previous century – it has subsequently become

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largely contained and professionalized, but that's a story for another occasion. But, except for a few isolated phrases here and there, none of these works attacked Shakespeare's plays as retrograde or as taking up too much time and space in the curriculum.¹² Even Kate McLuskie's "Patriarchal Bard" – her contribution to *Political Shakespeare*, which has been cited more than once as a clear example of such a position¹³ – is careful to level her attack not against that no longer quite viable critical concept "Shakespeare himself," but rather at the "process of the text's reproduction." Criticizing some early American feminists, McLuskie argues against simply taking the woman's part against the man's or "merely denouncing the text's misogyny":

A more fruitful point of entry for feminists is in the process of the text's reproduction. . . . Sexist meanings are not fixed but depend upon the constant reproduction by their audience. In the case of *King Lear* the text is tied to misogynist meaning only if it is reconstructed with its emotional power and its moral imperatives intact. Yet the text contains possibilities for subverting these meanings and the potential for reconstructing them in feminist terms.¹⁴

That is to say, the text can in fact be subverted and reconstructed according to different values from those imputed to it by conservative critics. Necessarily, we see different facets of so rich a source as Shakespeare's plays as we experience historical change and development.

Today, I am arguing, the "political Shakespeare" constructed in recent decades is still highly relevant in our age of continuing political turmoil. But it needs contextualizing and broadening to avoid the reductionism and narrowing that too often accompanied it in the past. The aesthetic and the utopian are concepts that can help bring this about, and they help structure the present work. Neither is complete, however, without reference to and contextualization within the political worlds of past and present. To help create this broadening of the realm of the political, the theoretical work that helped produce the aging approaches of cultural materialism and new historicism is still relevant, if no longer sufficient, and I will review some of its issues next.

Earlier Political Criticism's Theoretical Sources

Despite their much greater political content and rhetoric, the early documents of cultural materialism clearly owe an enormous theoretical debt to the deconstructive turn of literary criticism in the late 1970s and 1980s. In America, Louis Montrose showed the connection in his much-quoted

definition of new historicism as “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.”¹⁵ In the UK, the connection worked largely through Louis Althusser’s redefinition of “ideology,” which transformed the meaning of that older Marxist term to what was in effect a theory of textuality.¹⁶ Without weighing this section down with a detailed discussion of theoretical nuances, we can say that British cultural materialism assimilated a post-Althusserian version of the theory in which there was no longer a binary opposition between “science” and “ideology” (as in Althusser’s original argument), but instead a more radical indeterminacy in which all discourse could be considered to be (various forms) of ideology – that is, not as “science” (read, in effect, “truth”), but as interested, value-laden, and variously distorted discourses – which, however, are all that we have available to us as we attempt to capture the world in language.

James Kavanagh usefully articulated this in his sole foray into Shakespeare studies, a contribution to *Alternative Shakespeares*, “Shakespeare in Ideology.” Kavanagh borrows a critique from Catherine Belsey to help explain this, a critique of

the common-sense “expressive realist” assumption, shared until recently by most marxist as well as bourgeois critics, that “literature reflects the *reality* of experience as it is perceived by one (especially gifted) individual who *expresses* it in a discourse which enables other individuals to recognize it as true.”¹⁷

Instead, Shakespeare confronts us with a clash of ideologies representing different social interests – and critics bring to their tasks their own interested ideologies. This being the case, the problem is not so much “Shakespeare himself” as it is the ideologies through which he is interpreted.

Other potentialities of this poststructuralist and postmodernist insight were developed in a series of path-breaking books on Shakespeare by Terence Hawkes. Today, these can be seen as the founding documents of contemporary literary Presentism, but they were first received and presented as examples of textual deconstruction – especially the much reprinted “Telmah” – and then as examples of cultural materialism, as Hawkes began to focus more and more on the enabling discourses used by a variety of classic Shakespeare critics (A. C. Bradley, J. Dover Wilson, and others) to produce what were at one time taken as canonic and authentic interpretations of the text. In Hawkes’ work, Shakespeare is constantly reproduced according to the pressures of the times and shaped to our needs – consciously or unconsciously – by contemporary readers and other