Chapter I

SHAKESPEARE ON THE WARS OF ENGLAND

In these grim and heavy years, despite all their inroads upon leisure, it seems likely that Shakespeare is read more widely and loved more deeply in this country than for many generations past, and since foreign communiqués as well as British ministers of the crown have been known to quote from him, it may be conjectured that the world as well as these islands is sensible of a part of the debt that humanity owes him. Be that as it may, there is perennial refreshment in the blended wit and wisdom and fancy of his immortal pages, and a timely privilege for his countrymen in the fact that his histories dealt with anguished, bitter years. To be sure, we read him more for his timelessness than for his timeliness, and allow, with the speaker in *King John*, that 'He is but a bastard to the times, That doth not smack of observation'. Such observation is just philosophy; but even philosophy reacts to the stimulus of its immediate environment.

Therefore, although I have to show some effrontery in attempting this essay, I have less occasion for apology than might appear on the surface. I admit that I know nothing of stagecraft and am not a great playgoer; that I have the sketchiest knowledge of British history and no knowledge at all of Shakespeare's sources; that my savour for literature, such as it is, is little more than a loutish affection for words. These are grave defects, but there is nothing very presumptuous in attempting to set down some of the crude impressions of a mere reader of Shakespeare who loves his author. There are many in like case, and it would be sad if they had all to be dumb. No doubt there is an inevitable and a painful chasm between the littleness of the commentator and the amplitude of the master. That, however, would apply to most

commentators. For the rest of it, I should say that in things which have a universal appeal, a layman has a certain right to be vocal, although not as good a right as a specialist has.

So, rashly but humbly, I intend to proceed to my theme, but with one very significant restriction. In what is to follow I shall confine myself entirely to Shakespeare's histories of the kings of England, beginning with *King John* and ending with *Henry VIII*.[1] What I say may need correction from passages in the other plays that I do not now recall. That is another defect. Still, this restricted field is rather wide and is also rather intricate.

It was a sombre scene when 'Heaven itself did frown upon the land'. *King John*, the first of these histories, is a play that is relatively self-contained. It is the story of perfidy faintly redeemed by patriotism. Indeed, it is hard to tell whether John, or Philip of France, or Pandulph the Pope's legate was the most perfidious, although John, I dare say, won by a few necks. *The Famous History of the Life of King Henry the Eighth* which ends the series, and is also, pretty nearly, self-contained, is, in its way, a tortuous but magnificent introduction to great Queen Bess's christening; but it is Wolsey's fall 'like Lucifer' and Queen Katharine's beautiful patient fortitude that stick in the mind, bringing tears that are not tears of joy.

The other eight plays, *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, *Henry V*, the three parts of *Henry VI*, and *Richard III*, form a single connected dreadful story—dreadful despite their gleams of chivalry or glory and despite the art that gave us Falstaff, and Bardolph, and Justice Shallow, and Fluellen. When Richard banished Bolingbroke and confiscated the revenues of Lancaster (since John of Gaunt could not survive the sentence on his son), the act, so far from being statesmanlike, brought generations of disaster. Bolingbroke's return in arms, nominally to recover his dukedom and his estates, was a plain bid for the crown, and the Bishop of Carlisle, one of the few honest churchmen in these pages, foretold the meaning of the 'woeful pageant' of Boling-

[1] I am not referring to the order in which the plays were written.

broke's coronation. 'The woe's to come; the children yet unborn Shall feel this day as sharp to them as thorn.' The house of Lancaster had tried to do what all the waters in the rough rude sea could not do; it had tried to wash the balm from an anointed king. The balm stung; and the fault had to be expiated, not indeed by an inexorable fate or pseudo-philosophy of history called the 'logic of events', but in a groping, darkened development in the troubled minds of men.

Bolingbroke knew it. He turned his eyes towards a Crusade, and when Hotspur's rebellion stopped that project, he had good hopes that his son Harry Monmouth, despite his brawling tap-room ways, would reap in honour what had been so dishonourably sown. On his deathbed Bolingbroke said:

> God knows, my son,
> By what by-paths and indirect crook'd ways
> I met this crown; and I myself know well
> How troublesome it sat upon my head.
> To thee it shall descend with better quiet,
> Better opinion, better confirmation,
> For all the soil of the achievement goes
> With me into the earth.

It almost seemed so. Harry Monmouth re-interred Richard's bones and gave lavishly to the poor 'to pardon blood'. On the eve of Agincourt he prayed:

> Not to-day, O Lord,
> O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
> My father made in compassing the crown;

and if any victory could give the answer to the ordeal by battle Agincourt seemed to do so. The crowns of France and of England were to be united in Henry's son, should he have one, by a princess of France. But the reign of that son, Henry VI, gave the lie to all these hopes. Joan of Arc intervened. Henry's minority was long, his manhood all too long, more futile than saintly, though something saintly too. France was lost, England distracted, the nobles in arms, the roses, red and white, were thorny briers that

rent the land. There was neither rest nor hope for England till Richard III (according to Shakespeare a mere monster of militant evil) fell on Bosworth field.

That is the general picture, and war is a major theme in all the histories except two, one of which, the second part of *Henry IV*, is notable, nevertheless, for its recruiting scenes, the other being *Henry VIII*. What were Shakespeare's observations about these wars?

I have not noticed much that resembled a general philosophy of war in the histories. Perhaps it would be an anachronism to expect one even from Shakespeare, at any rate from the lips of the princes, barons, politicians, and murderers who do so much of the speaking. It seems to be assumed throughout that men will be men, and so will fight in organized bodies if they are organized at all. There is talk, it is true, of the Crusades,[1] but there is no indication that wars would cease if the cross annihilated the crescent and all other heathen emblems.

That being understood we are chiefly concerned with Shakespeare's attitude to wars.

Here the first and the most noticeable point is that it is the horror of war, not its pomp and glory if it has any, that was overwhelmingly present to Shakespeare's mind. Philip the Bastard's tirade in *King John*—

> O, now doth death line his dead chaps with steel;
> The swords of soldiers are his teeth, his fangs;
> And now he feasts, mousing the flesh of men,
> In undetermined differences of kings,

is only more eloquent than the sentiments of the others. For all the actors, war had the brand of Cain. Indeed, it should be sufficient to remark upon the attitude of Shakespeare's greatest hero, King Henry V. That monarch was not only punctilious to obtain the blessing of the church upon his cause, but also humane. 'We give express charge' he said after hearing about the malmsey-

[1] It was not till 1683 that John Sobieski destroyed the Ottoman menace to Europe at Vienna.

nosed Bardolph's offences, 'that in our marches through the country, there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner.' Few were more sensible than he of the blessings of peace, 'dear nurse of arts, plenties and joyful births'. He deplored the desolation of France:

> Her vine, the merry cheerer of the heart
> Unprunèd dies; her hedges even-pleach'd
> Like prisoners wildly overgrown with hair,
> Put forth disorder'd twigs; the fallow leas
> The darnel, hemlock and rank fumitory
> Doth root upon.
>
> Even so our houses and ourselves and children
> Have lost, or do not learn for want of time
> The sciences that should become our country:
> But grow like savages—as soldiers will
> That nothing do but meditate on blood—
> To swearing and stern looks, defused attire
> And every thing that seems unnatural.

Yet it would be hard to exceed the detailed matter-of-fact savagery of Henry V's threats to the citizens of Harfleur:

> The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
> And the flesh'd soldier, rough and hard of heart,
> In liberty of bloody hand shall range
> With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass
> Your fresh-fair virgins and your flowering infants.
> What is it, then, to me, if impious war
> Array'd in flames like to the prince of fiends,
> Do with his smirched complexion, all fell feats
> Enlik'd to waste and desolation?
>
> ...in a moment look to see
> The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand
> Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;
> Your fathers taken by the silver beards,
> And their most reverent heads dash'd to the walls,

> Your naked infants spitted upon pikes
> Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
> Do break the clouds as did the wives of Jewry
> At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.

Indeed, in Shakespeare's histories even the entry into war was, almost always, a joyless business. 'Our doctors say this is no month to bleed.' That is the usual story. Certainly there were adventurous spirits whose courage mounted with occasion. There was jollity in the archdeacon's house at Bangor when Hotspur, Mortimer, Glendower, and their ladies were almost ready for the great enterprise. Of general, joyful alacrity, however, there was very little, the main exception, as usual, being Henry V's campaign. Then expectation sat in the air:

> Now all the youth of England are on fire
> And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies;
> Now thrive the armourers, and honour's thought
> Reigns solely in the breast of every man.

It being allowed, then, that war is a dreadful evil, the question arises whether war is more abhorrent in some circumstances than in others. To that question the answer of Shakespeare's histories appears to be that civil war is the worst of all, that there is something unnatural in the presence of a foreign foe in England, and that war within Christendom is less defensible than a Crusade.

The first point needs no proof. All the histories are massive evidence for it. 'Blood against blood: self against self.' The thing is summed up in Richmond's (Henry VII's) speech after Bosworth Field:

> England hath long been mad, and scarr'd herself;
> The brother blindly shed the brother's blood;
> The father rashly slaughter'd his own son,
> The son, compelled, been butcher to the sire.

The second point is linked with the first in the famous lines that end *King John*. England was and would be unconquerable

'but when it first did help to wound itself'. It is the marrow of John of Gaunt's still more celebrated speech in *Richard II*:

> This fortress built by Nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war,
> This happy breed of men, this little world,
> This precious stone set in the silver sea
> Which serves it in the office of a wall
> Or as a moat defensive to a house.

The thought, however, is constantly recurring in the histories. There is a mystic sanctity in what Neptune or Nature has done for England, girding her with the ocean. Salisbury says so in *King John*, the gardeners say so in *Richard II*, Warwick says so in *Henry VI*. All these speakers, it is true, were Englishmen, somewhat forgetful of the Welsh and the 'weasel' Scots; but the Duke of Austria says the same in *King John* although without any mysticism. The idea is not that England could not be invaded. On the contrary, small-scale inroads, largely foreign, were quite common in these histories. What is meant is that England is marked out by Nature to be self-sufficient.

The third point is much less prominent but it exists. 'Shall not you and I', said Henry V, wooing his French princess very briskly despite the language barrier, 'Shall not thou and I, between Saint Denis and Saint George, compound a boy, half French, half English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard? shall we not? what sayest thou, my fair flower-de-luce?' In due time, the boy so compounded said the same:

> Ay, marry, uncle; for I always thought
> It was both impious and unnatural
> That such immanity and bloody strife
> Should reign among professors of one faith.

It is usually thought that war is justified when the cause of it is righteous. It is sweetened by patriotism, and burnished by martial honours. We may therefore try to question the histories about these things.

On the point of morality it is hard to distil much good out of all this iniquity, though we may perhaps discern like the royal

saint (who was always lucid in Shakespeare's pages) that 'things ill got have ever bad success'. The plain fact is that all the combatants, whatever their treachery or ambition, called confidently and cheerfully upon God and St George to fortify their arms. There were a few honest men among them, or, at any rate, men who were indifferent honest; but most of the leaders forswore their oaths, double-crossed their friends, were 'crafty-sick' when the crisis was rather too critical, murdered without compunction or (worse) with it, and in all sorts of other ways offended against the simplest moral codes. They committed the oldest sins in the newest kinds of ways. Indeed, it is with a sense of relief that we find some few of them abandoning all moral pretences. When John says sanctimoniously, 'Our strong possession and our right for us', his mother, Elinor, says frankly, 'Your strong possession much more than your right'. Edward of York was equally frank: 'But for a kingdom any oath may be broken; I would break a thousand oaths to reign one year.' Of Richard III's various sayings about conscience the Thrasymachean sentiment:

> Conscience is but a word that cowards use
> Devised at first to keep the strong in awe

rings the truest. In short it is unprofitable to pursue this aspect of the matter. Henry V, an exception as usual, obtained the blessing of Canterbury and of Ely upon his claim to the throne of France, but his dying father, according to Shakespeare, had given him the sinister charge, 'Therefore, my Harry, Be it thy course to busy giddy minds With foreign quarrels.'

I have already said something about patriotism in connection with Nature's or Neptune's intentions. As Hastings put it: 'Let us be back'd with God and with the seas Which he hath given us for fence impregnable.' But I shall add some further remarks.

Truculent patriotism was common enough. Any one English soldier was held to be the equal of a considerable though finite number of Frenchmen. The English were said to win their fights when they were starving, thus refuting the slander that their

courage was just meat extract. There was plenty of truculent patriotism in Richard III's oration to his soldiers:

> Let's whip these stragglers o'er the seas again;
> Lash hence these overweening rags of France,
> These famished beggars, weary of their lives;
> Who, but for dreaming on this fond exploit,
> For want of means, poor rats, had hang'd themselves:
> If we be conquered, let men conquer us,
> And not these bastard Bretons; whom our fathers
> Have in their own land beaten, bobb'd and thumped
> And in record left them the heirs of shame.

Nor was the truculence necessarily hollow. Cœur de Lion's bastard (*né* Faulconbridge), who spoke the concluding lines in *King John*, was a born adventurer, a 'rash, inconsiderate fiery voluntary' who was so incensed at the negotiated peace that, railing against 'Commodity' (i.e. accommodation, compromise, or appeasement), he concluded, 'Since kings break faith upon commodity, Gain, be my lord, for I will worship thee.' Nevertheless, despite all his swagger, Philip the Bastard served his king with unflinching loyalty, and firmly believed that naught would make us rue if England were only true to herself. His royal master was a patriot too, not on the easiest lines since he challenged the Pope:

> Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England
> Add this much more, that no Italian priest
> Shall tithe or toll in our dominions:
> But as we, under heaven, are supreme head,
> So under Him that great supremacy
> Where we do reign, we will alone uphold,
> Without the assistance of a mortal hand.

Patriotism of the deeper sort, the twining of the roots of a man's being in the dear and friendly soil of his native land, is everywhere present in the histories. Since it is subtle and seldom vaunts itself it is the more difficult to illustrate. I shall give but one example

here, Mowbray's speech on his banishment by Richard of Bordeaux:

> A dearer merit, not so deep a maim
> As to be cast forth in the common air
> Have I deserved at your highness' hands.
> The language I have learned these forty years,
> My native English, now I must forgo:
> And now my tongue's use is to me no more
> Than an unstringed viol or a harp,
> Or like a cunning instrument cased up,
> Or, being open, put into his hands
> That knows no touch to tune the harmony.
>
> I am too old to fawn upon a nurse,
> Too far in years to be a pupil now;
> What is thy sentence, then, but speechless death,
> Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?

Let us turn from patriotism to martial honour. What have the histories to tell us about that?

Martial honour is pretty different from common morality, but can seldom afford to be so completely dissociated from it as in the high-born ruffians who fill so many of these pages. Even in a military sense York and Somerset could scarcely be excused for their selfish failure to support Talbot, or Northumberland for his prudent sickness when Hotspur put all to the touch. It is impossible to conjoin any sort of honour with the career of Cardinal Beaufort or much with Bolingbroke who, having persuaded Exton to murder Richard of Bordeaux, coolly told the murderer that 'they love not poison that do poison need' and bade him, wageless, 'with Cain go wander thorough shades of night'.

These things are so clear that it is needless to do more than mention them. In the chaos of the times something more primitive than honour took the reins. 'Thy father killed my father: therefore die.'

On the other hand, there are beautiful scenes of chivalry and daring. Hotspur, though not quite disinterested, deserved all his conqueror's praise: 'This earth that bears thee dead, Bears not