What Can be Learnt about Shakespeare from His Plays

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INTRODUCTION

Peter Alexander in his book on Shakespeare was sceptical of "the many attempts to supplement the details of the poet's life by conjectures suggested by episodes in the plays".[1] Critics have tended to refrain from pursuing such a line of inquiry because Shakespeare always seemed disposed to write himself out of his work. Yet the wish to know more of Shakespeare has remained a perennial source of interest. The recent attempt to marry "early modern and postmodern perspectives" which appears as the subtitle of *Shakespeare and Religion*, edited by Kenneth S. Jackson and Arthur Marotti, has been reviewed by Tiffany Werth, who acknowledges that "the fascination with Shakespeare's identity reflects a zealous scholarly preoccupation".[2] While Peter Alexander has indicated the danger of regarding views expressed in the plays as necessarily those of the greatest poet-dramatist the world has ever seen, inferences can, I believe, be made from the way in which certain things in the plays are expressed or conceived, even though these need to be approached with an appropriate level of caution.

One of the more remarkable and Herculean endeavours of scholars devoted to studying the plays of Shakespeare was Caroline Spurgeon's much earlier and clearly defined attempt to learn something about Shakespeare the man by making an inexhaustibly detailed study of his imagery. In doing so she was trying to ascertain what his plays might indirectly suggest. Ms Spurgeon's mammoth undertaking, first published in 1935, sought to approach the imagery as a "creative" impulse revealing Shakespeare's "symbolic vision", and hence likely to reflect something about the dramatist's habit of mind or way of thinking. She was concerned to suggest how a "detailed examination of Shakespeare's images" might "throw new light on the poet and his work", though she quite properly never assumed that a character was mouthing Shakespeare's own view. She fully realized the boundaries to be set to what could be inferred from the work of the world's greatest poet-dramatist. Aware of "the danger and futility of trying . . . to deduce from Shakespeare's dramatic utterances what Shakespeare

himself" thought and felt, she acknowledged that "through these utterances Shakespeare himself for ever eludes us, and the reason is . . . he is with all his characters and feels with them all", as a man of the "greatest imagination" must inevitably do. Yet Ms Spurgeon was hoping her book would produce "knowledge" of "significant small things about him" – what "thrilled him with pleasure, what offended him and revolted him, what were his personal tastes and interests and how did these change or develop". She also hoped to discover "what was his attitude towards the universal things which concern us all, life and love and death".[3]

Any attempt to make inferences from his plays about Shakespeare's daily life or views, especially about such soul-searching matters as "life and love and death", is clearly not something his work encourages. Later Wolfgang Clemen, who rightly acknowledged Caroline Spurgeon's "pioneer work" in the field of Shakespearean imagery, himself focused on dramatic rather than personal issues arising from the imagery. Yet in discussing *Timon of Athens* he came to regard it as "an open question" whether "any conclusions regarding Shakespeare's personal life" should be drawn from an "increase in sickness imagery". Clemen noted that "the conspicuous employment of these images in the later plays perhaps suggests some connection with Shakespeare's own increasingly pessimistic outlook".[4] Pessimistic is arguably not the right word to indicate the dramatist's attitude during his later working life since it would seem unwarranted to regard any of the endings of his late mature comedies—*Cymbeline* or *The Winter's Tale* or *The Tempest*—as pessimistic. Yet from Clemen's using the word "pessimistic" we are at least alerted to what besides the dramatic Shakespeare's imagery and use of language might reflect.

In *Shakespeare the Thinker*, A. D. Nuttall, while noting Shakespeare's "copious body of superlative dramatic writing" is accompanied by no written records, pointed out that this amounted in effect to "a huge vanishing act". Nuttall cited the view, expressed in Richard Wilson's *Secret Shakespeare*, that Shakespeare's work represents "a chronicle of immaculate absenteeism", adding, "the driving idea of his book is that Shakespeare took care to hide any hint of specific allegiance", noting at the same time the relevance of this to "the political and religious import of his work".[5] Richard Wilson had stated that "the commonsense historian Blair

Worden is sufficiently bemused by this chronicle of immaculate absenteeism to imagine that, while the relationship between an artist's life and work is always problematic, 'there can be no other writer since the invention of printing for whom we are unable to demonstrate any relationship at all'."[6]

What Nuttall had said was "the driving idea" of Wilson's book is described by Stephen Greenblatt's words printed on the book's back cover:

> *Secret Shakespeare* is a passionate, even obsessive attempt to penetrate the bland, affable mask that Shakespeare fashioned for himself. For Richard Wilson what lurked behind that mask was an Elizabeth *politique*, guardedly loyal to the Catholic faith in which he was raised but unwilling to give himself over to the desperate, wildly perilous resistance organized by Jesuits and other intriguers. *Secret Shakespeare* is not so much an "outing" of a closeted Catholic, then, as an exuberant, indefatigable analysis, inevitably speculative but richly detailed, of the fantastic cunning with which the closet was constructed.

Richard Wilson himself states of *Secret Shakespeare*: "The theme of this book has been that the genius of Shakespeare was to create *a drama out of silence*, by resisting the resistance and thereby avoiding the 'Bloody Question' of loyalty and faith". The words on the book's back cover conclude by stating: "It is because we can never 'pluck out the heart' of his mystery that Shakespeare's writing continues to resist interpretation and retain the secrets of the crypt". While the copious historical and religious details the author advances warrant consideration, what he seeks to reveal might often, I believe, require a different emphasis. On my reading of the plays, particularly the later plays, it is questionable whether any mask exists in precisely the terms envisaged by Wilson.

Wilson acknowledges that, though it might seem on the face of it otherwise, oblique references to a Catholic identity permeate his work throughout his writing life from at least *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* onwards. He records that Shakespeare's sympathy for Catholic resistance to the government, as well as a devout commitment to the Catholic faith, though never openly stated, might be guessed from his mother Mary Shakespeare being an Arden, his schooling at Stratford, which was the centre of a notable Catholic

district, and even a family link with the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion, who brought back from Milan, a centre of the Counter-Reformation, Cardinal Borromeo's Spiritual Testament, a copy of which was found in the 18th century by workmen in the roof of John Shakespeare's old house in Henley Street. Wilson states:

> What seems to have defined Shakespeare's relation to his times was, in fact, his refusal to bow to blackmail or coercion to speak for either the regime or its resisters in the great drama of conscience that was acted out in England from the day in 1580 when Edmund Campion arrived on his fool's crusade. All the evidence now points to the conclusion that the dramatist was born into a Catholic elite up to its neck in plots against Elizabeth on behalf of Mary Queen of Scots, in a suicidal Counter-Reformation milieu where whether "to take arms" against persecution was, as Hamlet asserts, "the question" of the age.[7]

This reference to *Hamlet* provides an example of how Wilson illustrates his thesis from passages in the plays. Robert Greene's dying curse on Shakespeare as "an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers" provides him with a further example:

> Whether a rival was here tarring him implicitly with the Catholics of Tyburn, through the stock caricature of Jesuits as "massing crows" who flocked about the scaffold, the black legend of the dramatist as a fellow-traveller of hooded treason persisted long enough for the Puritan historian John Speed to out him in 1611, alongside the Jesuit Robert Parsons, as "this papist and his poet, of like conscience for lies, the one ever feigning, the other ever falsifying the truth". In fact, the picture of the Jesuit "black-robe" as a carrion crow was one which Shakespeare would himself use to dissociate from papist terrorism, when he wrote of the evil hour "the crow / Makes wing to th' rooky wood" (*Macbeth*, 3.3.51-2) in denunciation of the Masses hosted by the conspirator Ambrose Rookwood at Clopton House, near Stratford, in the darkening days before the Gunpowder Plot. "Night's black agents" (54) was then Shakespeare's term for such ill-omened "birds" winging to his own backyard.

In noting such details, Wilson underlines how violent yet secretive was the religious conflict during much of Shakespeare's writing life, and he states: "it must be significant that Shakespeare grew up in the labyrinth of priest-holes, attic chapels, and underground passages that honey-combed houses

of the Warwickshire gentry, as the material determinants of an entire lifestyle of self-concealment".[8]

Wilson considers Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* in the context of the "Bloody Question" of 1588, which forced Catholics to choose between death and allegiance to the Queen: "If the Pope were to send over an army . . . whose side would you be on, the Pope's or the Queen's"? The Jesuit poet Robert Southwell, distantly related to Shakespeare through his mother's family, responded to one of the manuscripts of *Venus and Adonis* "with a poem of his own in identical stanzas, entitled *Saint Peter's Complaint*, which he prefaced with a dedication rejecting Shakespeare's image of poetry as a passive distillation of experience and deploring the waste of his artistic gifts". Southwell's poem is taken to offer "a scalding sermon on betrayal, in which the poet's choice of profane over sacred verse . . . is equated with St. Peter's denial of Christ". In noting "Southwell seems to interpret *Venus and Adonis* as an example of the craven capitulation to the Crown that followed the introduction of the notorious 'Bloody Question' in 1588, when all English Catholics were confronted with a deadly test", Wilson sees his poem as marking "Shakespeare's early disengagement from Catholic extremism".[9]

The general tenor or thrust of *Secret Shakespeare* is that Shakespeare kept himself aloof from the dangers that could result from commitment as a devoted Catholic, while always retaining a deep commitment to the Catholic religion or belief. While this may well have been so, it also appears highly possible that Shakespeare's undoubted and wide-ranging human intelligence led him to question or recoil from an otherworldly belief that caused so many committed Catholics to suffer *in extremis.* Their lot in life must have seemed somehow irrelevant to representing on stage what Shakespeare conceived as the constant drama of life. Given his ability to sound so many registers on the organ of human experience, which led Wordsworth to acknowledge his "intuitive knowledge of Human nature",[10] he might certainly have welcomed a greater tolerance being displayed to those who in conscience held a different belief from whatever was currently ordained by the state. Wilson's book, however, duly records the sectarian violence that existed in Shakespeare's lifetime. People had not only been burnt

during the reign of Mary Tudor, but hanged, drawn and quartered during the reign of Elizabeth.

Although it has been said that Shakespeare died a papist, one cannot be sure what this might ultimately have meant. Shakespeare nominally died a Catholic, but this would not necessarily have meant that he had the depth of conviction as a Catholic that Richard Wilson would appear to assume. Wilson nevertheless acknowledges the research of Jeffrey Knapp, who likened Shakespeare to Sir John Harrington, who was "nearly an exact contemporary". Sir John Harrington pictured "his own religious impartiality in his *Tract on the Succession to the Crown*". As Knapp states: "Urging the warring sects of the day to 'attempt by reason and not by rigour to win the adverse part', Harrington exhorted his readers to reject hidebound sectarian thinking". Knapp argues for what he terms Shakespeare's accommodationist view: "Just as he aimed to represent true Christian faith as larger than any sect, so Shakespeare strove to dramatize true Christian fellowship as larger than any one nation". Knapp claims that "throughout the choruses" of *Henry V*,

> Shakespeare appears to disclose his own belief that players can help forge a similarly congregational fellowship in the theater by encouraging the imaginative participation of their audiences. If community in the theatre must be fashioned without the aid of preaching, so much the better, Shakespeare's reticence about religion implies. . . . Shakespeare seems to have conceived that players could spiritually unite audiences through a shared examination of human 'frailty' – especially erotic turmoil, the carnal simulacrum of Christian fellowship.

Knapp cites the words of the Clown in *All's Well That Ends Well*: "For young Charbon the puritan and old Poysam the papist, howsome'er their hearts are severed in religion", their cuckold "heads are but one".[11] As the Clown goes on to say, "they may jowl horns together like any deer in the herd".

Whatever might have been going on in Shakespeare's head with respect to his plays or playgoing, there are, I believe, despite claims to the contrary, legitimate inferences that are sometimes able to be made about his personal attitudes from the way in which dramatic events are conceived or presented.

An example of this that occurs in very different plays involves the weight to be given to a young woman's wishes in her pursuit of love. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hermia's father Egeus wants his daughter subject to the rigors of the law because she will not marry Demetrius, since she is in love with Lysander. The law requires, if she will not bend to her father's wishes, that she will either be put to death or be required to forgo forever the company of men. The action of the play, however, makes it clear that Demetrius falls in love with Helena, while the mutual love of Hermia and Lysander is only further confirmed after the play's various frolicking through the agency of Puck with a magic potion. When therefore Egeus later appeals to Duke Theseus, about to be married to Hippolyta, to have the law invoked against his daughter, Theseus, having earlier strongly advised Hermia dutifully to follow her father's wishes and abide by his judgment, says to her father he has changed his mind:

> Egeus, I will overbear your will;
> For in the temple, by and by, with us
> These couples shall eternally be knit.

Do we see in Theseus's change of heart something Shakespeare would have agreed with?

The question is worth asking since a similar situation occurs in *Hamlet*, though there with disastrous consequences. The meddlesome old courtier Polonius dismisses any thought that Hamlet can be interested in his daughter, because he is too far above her. When Ophelia tells him of Hamlet's "many tenders" of "affection to me", Polonius says:

> Affection? Puh! You speak like a green girl
> Unsifted in such perilous circumstance.

He orders her "from this time forth" not to "so slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet". It is clear from scenes in the play that she and Hamlet have the intense interest in each other that potentially suggests a mutual love, but since this cannot be pursued because of her father's injunction, it leads to an estrangement that results in Ophelia's death. How wrong Polonius was in taking the stand he did is seen in the great love for her Hamlet expresses at her graveside:

> I loved Ophelia; forty thousand brothers
> Could not with all their quantity of love
> Make up my sum.

And what caused such tragedy is also reflected in Gertrude's words at her graveside:

> I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.
> I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
> And not t'have strewed thy grave.

That a father was expected to have the final say in being able to influence his daughter's choice is also clear from the first scene of *Timon of Athens*. An Old Athenian complains to Timon that his servant Lucilius has won his young and only daughter's love. Thinking Lucilius has not adequate means to marry his daughter, he tells Timon:

> If in her marriage my consent be missing,
> I call the gods to witness, I will choose
> Mine heir from forth the beggars of the world,
> And dispossess her all.

It is only when Timon tells the father that whatever he bestows, "in him I'll counterpoise, / And make him weigh with her", that the Old Athenian thanks Timon for his generosity and says, "she is his". When this example is added to those previously mentioned, it would seem reasonable to infer that Shakespeare was open to questioning the authority a father was traditionally, even legally, accorded when it ran counter to his daughter's wishes.

There are at least two occasions in the plays which would seem to enable Shakespeare's attitude to be rather strongly inferred. In *2 Henry IV* Falstaff is upbraided by Prince John for his late arrival at Gaultree Forest after the rival army has left the field as a result of the Prince's treacherous bargain:

> Now, Falstaff, where have you been all this while?
> When everything is ended, then you come:

> These tardy tricks of yours will on my life,
> One time or other break some gallows' back.

Falstaff was never inclined, as well as being physically unable, to hurry to a battlefield. Urged to make haste to Shrewsbury in *1 Henry IV*, he'd said when Prince Hal and Westmoreland departed:

> To the latter end of a fray, and the beginning of a feast
> Fits a dull fighter and a keen guest.

Never short of something to say, Falstaff says in answer to Prince John's criticism of him:

> I never knew yet but rebuke and check was the reward of valour. Do you think me a swallow, an arrow, or a bullet? Have I, in my poor and old motion, the expedition of thought? I have speeded hither with the very extremest inch of possibility. I have foundered nine score and odd posts; and here, travel-tainted as I am, have in my pure and immaculate valour taken Sir John Colvile of the Dale, a most furious knight and valorous enemy. But what of that? He saw me and yielded, that I may justly say, with the hook-nosed fellow of Rome, "There, cousin, I came, saw, and overcame".

Since Colevile had been ready to yield to him, he must obviously have believed reports that Falstaff had defeated Hotspur at Shrewsbury. Prince John, however, remains entirely unresponsive to Falstaff's words, saying: "It was more of his courtesy than your deserving". Not having arrived at Gaultree Forest in time to witness John's unspeakable act of treachery, which in Kenneth Tynan's words "would have astonished Hitler",[12] Falstaff, on hearing Prince John say he would speak of him "better" than he deserved, says on seeing his back: "I would you had the wit: 'twere better than your dukedom. Good faith, this same young sober-blooded boy doth not love me, nor a man cannot make him laugh. But that's no marvel, he drinks no wine".

Without adopting Falstaff's view why Prince John failed to be of interest, we can conclude from the action of the play that the poet might have agreed with Falstaff's criticism of those who were devoid of a sense of humor. From experience we often find that dealing with such people can be rather

heavy going, and Shakespeare might have thought the same thing. He always has the fat knight in the *Henry IV* plays looking for "good-fellowship" from those around him. Indeed it may be said Falstaff's characteristic readiness to embrace humanity may well reflect what was a feature of Shakespeare himself as a dramatist.

Another telling example of what might have been Shakespeare's view occurs in *The Tempest.* Prospero, as the ousted Duke of Milan, takes continuing and telling revenge on those who had deprived him of his dukedom. The sprite Ariel, whom Prospero's magic art had released from being cruelly "imprisoned" in "a cloven pine" for "a dozen years", was committed to serve Prospero for a time. After raising a huge storm that wrecks the ship containing the King of Naples and all his company, he has them land on an inhospitable shore, where Prospero continues to take his revenge. He notes how his "high charms" have worked because his enemies "are all knit up / In their distractions"; and he leaves them to suffer now they "are in my power; / And in these fits". Observing his "enemies" are at his "mercy", Prospero asks Ariel, "How fares the king and's followers?" Ariel replies, "confined together", mentioning that "the king, / His brother, and yours, abide all three distracted", with "the remainder mourning over them, / Brim full of sorrow and dismay". Ariel ends by saying: "If you now beheld them, your affections / Would become tender". When Prospero is inclined to demur, "Dost thou think so, spirit?", Ariel replies, "Mine would, sir, were I human".

To the extent that Prospero can been seen as Shakespeare in his last play saying goodbye to his life's work of dramatic art, Ariel's comment is revealing. It stresses the fundamental importance of acting with humanity, for Shakespeare's plays are quintessentially about humanity and humane values. Dr Johnson described Shakespeare as "above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life";[13] while Harold Bloom subtitled his book on Shakespeare, "*The Invention of the Human*". Prospero, though "struck to the quick" by the "high wrongs" of those who had deposed him, ultimately realizes the need to display a greater humanity in the light of Ariel's comment, who was after all only "air", as well as to show that "the rarer action is / In virtue, than in vengeance". Because his enemies have

become "penitent", Prospero's "purpose doth extend / Not a frown further". Telling Ariel to release them, he says, "My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore, / And they shall be themselves". In the days when his world was riven by sectarian violence, perhaps Shakespeare wanted people to have the kind of freedom of conscience that would allow them to be themselves.

In the chapters that follow, I shall consider first his English history plays to see if they contain material that allows us to make inferences about certain of Shakespeare's views and attitudes. I shall then look at his four great tragedies to see what these might reflect about his attitude to human life and death. In the penultimate chapter I shall consider in detail three comedies, *As You Like It*, *Measure for Measure*, and *The Winter's Tale*, which in various ways allow us to infer that Shakespeare attached importance to women in respect of what they should be able to express, and of the role they ought to be able to occupy in life. And he was ahead of his time in realizing what women could suffer as a result of gender inequality and male domination. By contrast with the view of his contemporary Sir Francis Bacon, Shakespeare was in the importance he gave to women clearly ahead of his time. The final chapter may serve as a fitting conclusion in offering a brief consideration of *The Tempest*.

Notes

1. *Shakespeare*, London, 1964, p. 41.

2. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 65 (2012), 300.

3. *Shakespeare's Imagery and what it tells us*, Cambridge, 1965 (paperback edn), pp. ix, 201, 204-5.

4. *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, London, 1977 (2nd edn), pp. 9, 15, 173.

5. *Shakespeare the Thinker*, New Haven and London, 2007, pp. 11-12.

6. *Secret Shakespeare: Studies in theatre, religion and resistance*, Manchester and New York, 2004, p. 11.

7. Ibid., p. 295.

8. Ibid., pp. 12, 23.

9. Ibid., pp. 126-8.

10. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, Oxford, 1933, pp. 946-7.

11. *Secret Shakespeare*, p. 6; *Shakespeare's Tribe: Church, Nation, and Theater in Renaissance England*, Chicago and London, 2002, pp. 52-54.

12. *Curtains: Selections from the Drama, Criticism, and Related Writings*, London, 1961, p. 94.

13. *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson), ed. Arthur Sherbo, New Haven and London, VII (1968), 62.

ENGLISH HISTORIES

M. M. Reese maintained Shakespeare "used history to glorify England, to teach moral and political lessons and to assert the intrusive sway of providence".[1] He noted how "the sixteenth century was seldom far from civil war". Robert B. Pierce regarded Shakespeare's English histories as "political drama" in that "central to them is a contrast between order and wise government on the one hand and disorder and war on the other".[2] Wars in Europe had been prompted by the Reformation, and England was not without disturbances during Shakespeare's lifetime. The Rising in the North of 1569 occurred when two powerful Earls, Charles Neville, 6th Earl of Westmoreland, and Thomas Percy, 7th Earl of Northumberland, supported Mary Queen of Scots' claim to the throne. As a young Warwickshire lad Shakespeare would have been old enough to witness soldiers marching north to repel the rising forces. Before Shakespeare wrote his first history play the Armada had been defeated, but in subsequent years there were fears of a new attempt by Spain. Internecine warfare had been a feature of English history with varying claims to the throne during the Wars of the Roses. This conflict lasted until Lancastrian Henry VII defeated Richard III in 1485 at the battle of Bosworth, and in the following year took as his queen Elizabeth, Duchess of York, daughter of Edward IV, thereby uniting the warring houses. Shakespeare portrayed the events of these wars in his first tetralogy of history plays, the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*.

In his second tetralogy Shakespeare depicted the previous reigns of Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V, which included Henry's victory at Agincourt and England's acquisitions in France, which were lost during the subsequent reign of Henry VI. This tetralogy also recounts the strife caused by Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) after he usurped the throne from Richard the Second. Chroniclers and writers of history before Shakespeare supported an ordered succession, as can be seen from a passage in the preface to Edward Hall's *Chronicle*, which was quoted by E. M. W. Tillyard in his *Shakespeare's History Plays*: "as King Henry the Fourth was the beginning and root of the great discord and division, so was the godly matrimony the

final end of all dissensions titles and debates".[3] Robert Pierce regarded "one major link in the chain" that led to the Wars of the Roses was "Bolingbroke's seizure of the throne, displacing Richard II's rightful line";[4] while Irving Ribner regarded "the question upon which any interpretation of Shakespeare's political philosophy must ultimately depend" was "the precise political position taken by Shakespeare in the conflict between Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke".[5]

Shakespeare recorded in *2 Henry VI* how Henry IV had "seized on the realm" and "deposed the rightful king". This passage and others in his later tetralogy offer little doubt that at a time when Elizabeth's succession was of concern Shakespeare favoured an ordered succession. Ms Spurgeon said he feared or disliked "disruption of the social order" and welcomed what held "human society" together.[6] An ordered succession was, indeed, what his age in general looked for. Richard II's reference at his deposition to the "Pilates" that delivered him to his "sour cross" gives a sense of the kingship of England being deprived of a certain sanctity with the succession of Henry IV. Though the succession might therefore have been conceived by some as never able to be quite the same again, it is clear from the text in the *Henry IV* plays that, whenever the question of the succession came up between Henry IV and his son, Prince Hal's intention of "redeeming time" came to include for Shakespeare the sense of an ordered succession in the way as Prince of Wales he determined to succeed his father.

The 1590s saw Shakespeare's first decade in London as a practising dramatist, and it is not difficult to envisage the kind of enthusiasm Shakespeare would have felt in writing John of Gaunt's words in *Richard II*, which describe England, "this sceptered isle", as "this royal throng of kings", "this other Eden, demi-paradise",

> This fortress built by Nature for herself
> Against infection and the hand of war.

Shakespeare describes his native country with a vivid sense of what it means to him, featuring its impregnability and intrinsic unity and value as "this precious stone set in the silver sea". It is summed up in Gaunt's speech as "This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England". Because of the

national feeling these words illustrate, it is not difficult to imagine, after the defeat of the Armada, how Shakespeare would have endorsed the Bastard's final lines in *King John*:

> Come the three corners of the world in arms
> And we shall shock them! Nought shall make us rue
> If England to itself do rest but true!

It has been pointed out that "serious matters with an immediate gut appeal to the militarism which set sail in England against the Armada soon took a grip on the repertory",[7] so that Shakespeare's three parts of *Henry VI* would have found a willing audience – one, moreover, likely to respond whenever lines like the above were uttered. And we shall, indeed, find that Shakespeare's dedication to his own part of the world also applied in his English histories to his being from Warwickshire. Yet his sense of inner loyalties never blinds him to a sense of what caused human conflict, which he ascribed to human behaviour, rather than imagined was caused by, in Reese's words, "the intrusive sway of providence".

"Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!" When the first line of *1 Henry VI* was spoken on the London stage in 1592, it should have been evident that a remarkable new talent had arrived on the scene. A London audience would have warmly endorsed the bravery of the English soldiers in France as well as celebrating the achievements of English warriors like the mighty Lord Talbot. One can also imagine how earlier victories like that of Agincourt, in Shakespeare's later *Henry V*, would have been received, and how thrilling it would have been for English Londoners to hear Henry's stirring words to his men before the battle. Looking back now on Shakespeare's career in writing English histories during his first decade in London, we can infer the fledgling dramatist must have sensed the opportunity of dramatizing for a London audience the sweep of previous history which was contained in the chronicles of Holinshed and Edward Hall, and which included the wars with France, and the dynastically motivated Wars of the Roses.

Shakespeare's opening line in *1 Henry VI* recording the death of Henry V is followed by words indicating an unbridgeable gulf between the young

king's protector, Henry V's younger brother the Duke of Gloucester, and the young king's great uncle Henry Beaufort, afterwards Bishop of Winchester and Cardinal. Further argument between them prompts young Henry to say:

> Civil dissension is a viperous worm
> That gnaws the bowels of the commonwealth.

To the extent Shakespeare was revealing previous history to an Elizabethan audience, he dramatizes how dangerous any form of disunity could be at a time when Elizabeth had been on the throne for nearly forty years and was without an heir. As Michael Hattaway has noted, Elizabethans were aware of "parallels between past and present", and Henry VI's reign "was a pattern of disorder, a mirror for Shakespeare's contemporaries of the disasters caused by the type of dynastic strife, centred on personalities and not ideology, which could so easily have broken out upon the death of Elizabeth".[8]

A threat to stability could inevitably follow when power was in some sense wanting, while a threat of disorder could be seen to furnish the need for a requisite authority to re-establish order. Both situations are seen to develop in *2 Henry VI*, not only with the rise of Jack Cade, but also with the ambitious plans of Richard Plantagenet, the Duke of York. Cade's follower Bevis says: "I tell thee Jack Cade the clothier means to dress the commonwealth, and turn it, and set a new nap upon it". The Duke of York, an aspirant for the throne who traced his descent from Lionel Duke of Clarence, Edward III's third son, having been provided with men to put down a revolt in Ireland, reveals his intention of stirring up in England "some black storm / Shall blow ten thousand souls to heaven, or hell". He envisages "this fell tempest shall not cease to rage / Until the golden circuit on my head",

> Like to the glorious sun's transparent beams,
> Do calm the fury of this mad-bred flaw.

Cade and his rebels have their own reasons for linking conditions and events. Despite all the preposterous reasons Cade gives for executing Lord Say, the messenger who announces him as "a prize, a prize!" links the loss

of towns in France with the exorbitant taxes Lord Say had forced the country to pay.

That a weak ruler also invited challenges becomes evident when the young, weak and seemingly retarded Henry VI succeeded the exemplary reign of Henry V. A feuding aristocracy not only hastened the loss of the French territories, but exploited the festering argument about what should be the line of succession that descended from Edward III. Almost immediately after the disagreement in *1 Henry VI* between Gloucester and the future Bishop of Winchester, two messengers arrive, singly reporting not only the loss of England's French territories and the "several factors" and disputes which meant a lack of English soldiers in the field, but also the Dauphin Charles being "crowned king in Rheims", joined by several other leaders. A third messenger reports the dearth of English forces in his account of "the stout Lord Talbot" who,

> Having full scarce six thousand in his troop,
> By three and twenty thousand of the French
> Was round encompassed and set upon.

Bedford might have blamed "comets" and "bad revolting stars" for consenting "unto Henry's death", but Shakespeare, with a commonsense view of historical change, realized English losses arose not from cosmic influence but because of disruptive political differences. He recognized political disasters had human causes, and he consequently linked French losses with the Wars of the Roses as a result of political intrigue among feuding nobles who held different views of the rights of succession. Sir William Lucy appears as a character in the play and reinforces what the messenger reported, describing the death of Talbot from "private discord" between "noble York and Somerset", which had denied the levies that should have lent Lord Talbot aid. Sir William Lucy was Sheriff of Warwickshire during Henry VI's reign, and Shakespeare's coming from Warwickshire might well have prompted him to give Lucy a role supporting what the messenger had said. Hattaway suggests "Shakespeare may have used Sir William's name because he was an ancestor of Sir Thomas Lucy (1532-1600), a local magnate, of Charlecote near Stratford-upon-Avon".[9] No doubt Shakespeare introduced Sir William Lucy as a character supporting

the messenger's remarks because he could associate him with his own region of England.

The Earl of Warwick is also given a positive role whenever he appears in the history plays. Though Shakespeare conflated Richard de Beauchamp and his son-in-law Richard Neville, the 13th and 16th Earls of Warwick, in *2 Henry IV,* it is Warwick who gives the king welcome advice about the state of his kingdom, and predicts Prince Hal will behave better after his father's death than the king thought possible. In *1 Henry VI* it is Warwick the 16th Earl, known as the "Kingmaker", who seeks agreement between the feuding Gloucester and Winchester. When King Henry remarks, "how this discord doth affect my soul", Warwick says:

> Yield, my lord protector; yield, Winchester;
> Except you mean with obstinate repulse
> To stay your sovereign and destroy the realm.

The Earl of Warwick would also seem to effect a moderating role in the Temple Garden, during the scene Shakespeare devised to record the deep disagreement that led to the Wars of the Roses. After Somerset has plucked a red rose off the "brier" in response to Richard Plantagenet who has plucked a white, Warwick appears to seek to lower the temperature by stating:

> I love no colours; and without all colour
> Of base insinuating flattery
> I pluck this white rose with Plantagenet.

Richard Plantagenet, restored to his executed father's title as 3rd Duke of York, was through his mother Anne Mortimer of the line which descended from Edward III's second surviving son Lionel, Duke of Clarence, while he was also a direct male-line descendent of Edmund of Langley, Edward III's fourth surviving son. The Lancastrians descended from Edward's third surviving son, John of Gaunt, which meant that Richard inherited from his mother a stronger claim to the throne.

In *2 Henry VI* Warwick the Kingmaker is praised by his father Salisbury for his "deeds" and general behaviour, having "won the greatest favour of the

commons". Hearing York outline his descent from Lionel, Duke of Clarence, Warwick persuades his father to kneel and acknowledge York as "our rightful sovereign":

> My heart assures me that the Earl of Warwick
> Shall one day make the Duke of York a king.

After Gloucester is murdered, Warwick calls Suffolk "pernicious blood-sucker of sleeping men". To Suffolk's riposte, "Thou shall be waking while I shed thy blood", Warwick responds:

> Unworthy though thou art, I'll cope with thee
> And do some service to Duke Humphrey's ghost.

Active in supporting the York line against King Henry and his scheming Queen Margaret, daughter of Reignier of Anjou, Warwick clearly wants a smooth transition of power subsequent to Henry's death, saying to York "*coming from the throne*", "Long live King Henry! – Plantagenet embrace him". To this Henry responds, "And long live thou, and these thy forward sons". Though York claims, "Now York and Lancaster are reconciled", his sons Edward (later Edward IV) and Richard (later Richard III) are not prepared for their father to play a waiting game, and convince him to break his oath and pursue the crown. This he does, but is defeated by Margaret's forces and slain, though not before denouncing her "tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide". With Warwick's help her forces, led by the young Clifford, are later defeated, and Warwick orders Clifford's head replace Edward's father's on "the gates of York". Warwick adds:

> And now to London with triumphant march
> There to be crowned England's royal king.
> From whence shall Warwick cut the sea to France,
> And ask the Lady Bona for thy queen;
> So shall you sinew both these lands together.

But when news comes that King Edward is marrying another at the very time Warwick is seeking from Louis of France his sister's hand, he changes his allegiance and undertakes to restore Henry to the throne. Richard of Gloucester tells his haughty brother that Warwick "is now dishonoured by

this new marriage"; while a messenger informs the king that Warwick says he has done him "wrong", and will "uncrown him ere't be long".

Throughout the changing of sides that goes on, it is difficult to equate what Shakespeare himself might have thought and felt on such occasions with the attitudes and views that Warwick adopts. Yet given events that occur up to Warwick's death, Shakespeare might well have been behind the nobleman from his own part of the country. When King Edward is captured by Warwick in a surprise attack at night and called "the duke", Edward remonstrates at this, saying: "when we parted last / Thou call'dst me king!" Warwick roundly tells him why the case is changed in lines that might have mirrored Shakespeare's view. Since he "disgraced" him in his "embassade", Warwick now degrades him by creating him "Duke of York". On many counts Warwick denies he should "govern any kingdom", since he knows not "how to use ambassadors", or in general how to act "for the people's welfare".

Before dying, Warwick muses at length on past achievements, finally realizing what these amount to when he is in the presence of death:

> Why, what is pomp, rule, reign, but earth and dust!
> And, live we how we can, yet die we must.

Though Warwick bids "all farewell" and looks forward to meeting "in heaven", he realizes nothing remains for him in this life. Though the Earls' general ability to be discriminating and weigh conflicting claims may reflect a tendency on the part of their creator to be similarly discerning, Warwick the Kingmaker's realization of what it is that life finally amounts to may well be compared with what Shakespeare's tragedies variously elicit, where he explicitly avoids making consolation a part of the effect they offer. Shakespearean tragedy, unlike most Greek tragedy, makes no attempt to assure the audience that all is in some way well according to the will of the gods. Though the heroes of Shakespeare's four great tragedies are given leading roles and have therefore provided an important focus for critical analysis, it is above all important to respond to the different tragic experiences these plays evoke. It is, after all, this which constitutes an essential part of their impact.

King Richard III, the last of Shakespeare's first tetralogy of history plays, is the only one described in the First Folio as "a tragedy". As Janis Lull has pointed out, in *3 Henry VI* Richard of Gloucester "first emerges as an arch-villain". In his mocking of his brother Edward's "love of women Elizabeth Grey in particular", she quotes the lines illustrating the beginning of "the process of fashioning himself into the monster he will be":

> Ay, Edward will use women honourably.
> Would he were wasted, marrow, bones, and all,
> That from his loins no hopeful branch may spring,
> To cross me from the golden time I look for!

In the latter half of the play she notes Richard, with shrunken "arm" and a "mountain" on his back, confides "his treacherous self-absorption to the audience even as he pretends to support" his brother as king, and by the end of the play has murdered "King Henry in the Tower . . . not for his brother, but for himself".[10] Richard says, "I have no brother, I am like no brother", and he wants what is called "love" to be "resident" in others "And not in me: I am myself alone".

This second half of the play therefore allows us to witness evidence of a greatly developed approach to dramatic characterization which becomes a hallmark of Shakespeare's achievement as a poet-dramatist. Yet even much earlier in the play there is a telling hint of what is to come. In Act 1 Richard says to his father as Duke of York:

> Why do we linger thus? I cannot rest
> Until the white rose that I wear be dy'd
> Even in the lukewarm blood of Henry's heart.

Richard's "lukewarm" suggests that the king's lack of warmth or zeal is both characteristic of him as a person and can be applied to him as monarch. Yet the word also reveals Richard's inner character and intentions, and hence something of his role and complexity as a dramatic character. He is imagining in that reference to "lukewarm blood" the kind of action that would make the king less alive, as though seeing the effect of his sword-point penetrating Henry's heart. His words, in evoking what is potentially his inner intention, anticipate his central statement in the later play, "I am

determined to be a villain" – words which bring to mind the concept of free will versus determinism, enabling this historical "tragedy" (given the way it was described in the First Folio) to be linked with Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*. That such a linking is possible suggests Shakespeare was interested in the debate between free will and determinism which, having so engaged Christian thinkers during the Middle Ages, was for some time afterwards a subject of scholastic debate.

As a misshapen creature, Richard – "That bottled spider, that foul hunch-backed toad" – acts in a way to compensate for what he has been dealt by being determined to obtain what he regards as life's greatest prize. His physical deformity, which has been staged in various ways, would seem inextricably to lie at the root of his deceitful, treacherous conduct. In determining to be "a villain", it is as if this has been determined for him, so that what on his part might seem to be a matter of choice inevitably follows. It is therefore as if his action cannot be otherwise. In putting his conscience to the test "for hateful deeds committed by myself", Richard rejects being a villain because his "conscience has a thousand several tongues" – evidence of which is seen in the line, "I am a villain. Yet I lie, I am not". An audience or spectator is, however, caught up by the rapidity with which he acts, and this is early in evidence in his witty, guileful, and successful wooing of Lady Anne as she is accompanying the late king's body to its place of burial, even though Richard has been responsible for the death of her husband and her father-in-law Henry VI. Shakespeare's vivid enactment of this and other examples of Richard's constant treachery raises the unsolvable problem to what degree is human action predetermined, which is emphasized in Richard's later self-searching soliloquy. This involves not so much a choice as such, but an assertion of his will that seems in some sense predetermined. Margaret, the aged queen of Henry VI, whose words are prophetic, calls Richard "a hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death". Shakespeare, contrary to historical fact, has her still alive before the Battle of Bosworth; and the intensity and substance of the cursing in Act 4 scene iv – delivered by Margaret, Richard's mother, the Duchess of York, and Elizabeth, Edward IV's queen – suggest that Shakespeare himself deeply felt the evil of political instability. This would appear confirmed not only by what the ghosts of the slain express to Richard and Richmond the night before the

battle, but also by Richmond's final words anticipating a new peace and royal dynasty, the Tudor dynasty, to which Elizabeth I belonged.

In *Richard II*, the first of the later tetralogy of history plays, Shakespeare presented a depth of inner feeling in the king which marked a noted development in portraying character, subsequently evident not only in the character of Falstaff, but also within a few years in the roles of Rosalind and Hamlet. In describing after the Second World War the two *Henry IV* plays as "the twin summits of Shakespeare's achievement", Kenneth Tynan's estimate was seemingly based on the kind of loyalty towards king and country which such a period called for. His remarks appear indicative of a time when the British nation experienced very real danger and came through it. He indeed added of the *Henry IV* plays: "More than anything else in our drama they deserve the name of epic. A way of life is facing dissolution"; "The odd, irregular rhythm wherein societies die and are reborn is captured as no other playwright before or since has ever captured it. In Hal's return to honour and justice the healing of a national sickness is implied".[11] When in the *Henry IV* plays Hal becomes Henry V, he is concerned to restore the nation's "formal majesty", putting the kingship on a seemingly new footing.

Shakespeare's second tetralogy of history plays emphasizes the strife that can result from disrupting an ordered succession. When Henry Bolingbroke incited events causing Richard II's "blood" to stain "Pomfret's stones", and subsequently proved untrustworthy even to those of the Northumberland family who had helped him to the crown, England became open to rebellions and, as described in *2 Henry IV*, a virtually diseased state, until Prince Hal's accession to the throne. Though the evils of Henry IV's usurpation of the crown are directly stated, the point is dramatically made in *1 Henry IV* through Shakespeare's use of imagery during the battle of Shrewsbury. Having various nobles wear his own colours in order to increase his protection against the rebels, Henry was virtually declaring himself to be like a counterfeit king. The Scot Douglas. who goes around slaying all those who wear the king's colours, suggests as much when he eventually meets up with King Henry:

> Another king? They grow like Hydra's heads.
> I am the Douglas, fatal to all those
> That wear those colours on them. What art thou
> That counterfeitest the person of a king?

An evocative use of imagery serves to make a similar point when Prince Hal sees Falstaff lying on the ground. Assuming him dead, Hal appears with some warmth to regret his loss, saying he would "have a heavy miss of thee / If I were much in love with vanity". Having himself just killed Hotspur, he addresses his old companion:

> Embowelled will I see thee by and by,
> Till then in blood by noble Percy lie.

Falstaff, however, is only feigning death, having fallen down to prevent being struck down by the Scot Douglas; but this Prince Hal does not know, as he places Falstaff "in blood by noble Percy". Editors have noted that "the Prince speaks truer than he knows, for a hunted deer, said to be 'in blood', is vigorously alive like the shamming Falstaff".[12] Shakespeare had utilized the same idea in *1 Henry VI* when the valiant Talbot, hopelessly surrounded in France by overwhelming numbers, had rallied his men by telling them the enemy would "find dear deer of us, my friends". When Hal leaves, Falstaff gets up, and what he goes on to say about not being a "counterfeit" because still alive, can be contrasted with the picture we are given of Hal's father Henry IV as a counterfeit king, one who gained the throne by usurping it.

Overturning the legitimate succession was seen as a grave moral error with disastrous consequences. In *2 Henry IV* a dying King Henry says to his son in referring to his usurping the crown:

> 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 seemed to me
> But as an honour snatched with boisterous hand,
> And I had many living to upbraid
> My gain of it by their assistances,
> Which daily grew to quarrel and to bloodshed,
> Wounding supposed peace.