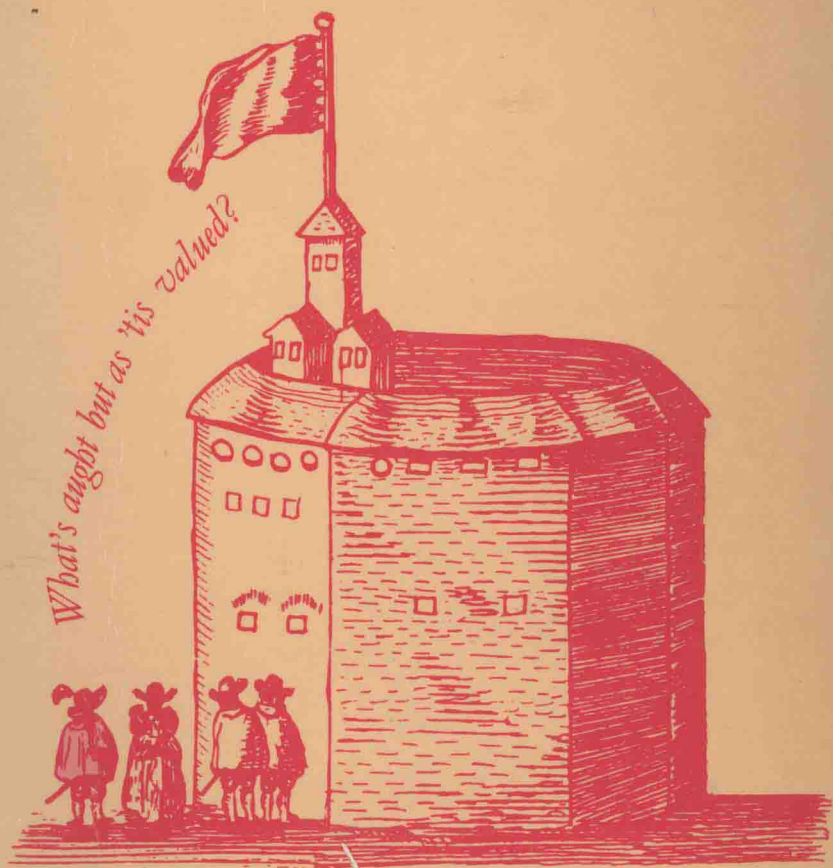


# SHAKESPEARE'S SCEPTICISM



GRAHAM BRADSHAW

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SCEPTICISM

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## Preface

Ted Hughes has described the Complete Works as a torture chamber in which Shakespeare carries on an endless quarrel about the nature of Nature. The plays themselves do indeed show how opposed visions of Nature yield opposed accounts of value, and the first chapter of the present study traces Shakespeare's explicit and developing preoccupation with that issue which Troilus so impetuously broaches when he asks, 'What's aught, but as 'tis valew'd?' This, I take it, provides one way of beginning to characterise Shakespeare's scepticism.

However, the relation of the second chapter to the first is intended to be corrective and complementary. Here my main concern is to emphasise those respects in which the processes of poetic-dramatic thinking are not like those of logical-discursive thought. For example, we need to understand why the fact that a Falstaff or Thersites speaks only in prose is itself a constituent of dramatic meaning—regardless of whether this presents a consciously purposive creative decision, or the more or less instinctive reflex of a poetic dramatist used to thinking *through* his medium. Here my argument is in some ways parallel to that in Joseph Kerman's pioneering *Opera as Drama*: just as Kerman insists that, although the libretto of a music drama provides its conceptual references, the drama is articulated through the music, *poetic* drama is articulated through its poetry. The kind of poetry or prose a character speaks, and its place within the poetic drama's system of reciprocal relationships, contribute to our thinking—to the way the play is thinking—about the character and his or her potentialities. Here Shakespeare's

scepticism reveals itself not in the explicit 'play of ideas' found in dramatists like Shaw or Lessing, but in a subtly appraising play of intelligence. One result, as I try to show in discussing *Hal* and *Hotspur*, is that a single speech may prompt opposed valuations of a character or of an issue like 'love' or 'honour'; in such cases, the process of thinking may be all the more challengingly exploratory, in being non-linear.

Criticism itself is necessarily linear and discursive, so that one or the other of these chapters had to come first. Yet my argument depends, ultimately, on the proposition that the relationship between Shakespeare's concern with acts of valuing and his poetic-dramatic perspectivism is irreducibly complex. Neither of these two ways of characterising Shakespeare's scepticism properly precedes the other, since neither is to be seen as the other's cause or effect. Rather, they are complementary and interdependent, representing an essentially interrogative mode of radically sceptical 'thinking' which makes it appropriate to recall Blake's great maxim, 'As a man is, so he sees', or Nietzsche's constant insistence that we interpret the world as we interpret a text.

Because Shakespeare is in this respect his own deconstructionist, we short-circuit the process of poetic-dramatic thinking whenever we give a particular character or speech a privileged, supra-dramatic significance. Nowadays, few would defend E. M. W. Tillyard's habit of doing this, when, as a kind of wartime effort to be compared with Olivier's wartime film of *Henry V*, he leant on whatever speeches might make the plays seem to present a sustained hymn to Order and Degree; but it may be less obvious that those 'radical' critics like Jonathan Dollimore or John Drakakis, who are riding a contemporary Zeitgeist in their 'materialist' readings, are not so much correcting Tillyard's approach as standing it on its head, by privileging those anti-humanist, anti-essentialist perspectives which most threaten Tillyard's Elizabethan World Picture. In either case the exploratory, interrogative effect of Shakespeare's perspectivism is defeated, when the critic determinedly identifies one perspective with that of the author or (more warily) that of 'the play'.

That the final version of this book makes so little attempt

to set Shakespeare's thought in the context of Renaissance ideas may surprise or disappoint some readers. There are several reasons for this, and showing is better than telling; but one very pressing reason for feeling that I had to start rewriting the first draft of this book as soon as I had finished it was my increasingly vexed sense of the problematics of 'matching' supposedly analogous ideas.

To take just one instance: it *may* be helpful, when we are pondering Hamlet's 'There's nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so', to consider Montaigne's essay 'That the taste of goods or evils doth greatly depend on the opinion that we have of them', or Donne's observations that 'There's nothing simply good, nor ill alone . . . The only measure is, and judge, Opinion' (*The Progress of the Soul*) and that 'There is no externall act naturally evil' (*Biathanatos*). And yet before we can know what might enter into, and justify or qualify, any such comparison we must first decide what meaning Hamlet's utterance takes within the poetic drama. In context, Hamlet's assertion sounds more like a painful question than Troilus's question, 'What's aught, but as 'tis valew'd?', which sounds more like a glib assertion. Nor would the content of Hamlet's utterance be quite the same, if it were spoken by Thersites, Iago, Edmund, or the Belmont Portia who observes that 'Nothing is good I see without respect'. Some critics assume, like Harry Levin, that Hamlet says what he means; others assume, like Harold Jenkins (who objects to the supposed parallel from Montaigne), that Hamlet cannot mean as much as he says. Nor should we suppose that there is general agreement about what Donne or Montaigne 'really' mean and believe.

The immediate point of these remarks is to suggest why this book offers so little discussion of discussions of Shakespeare's and other Renaissance writers' 'thought': my concern is not with a body of ideas which supposedly corresponds with Shakespeare's 'thought' or even his 'beliefs', but with the processes of the plays' poetic-dramatic thinking. Similarly, although I develop a distinction between terminal or dogmatic scepticism and what I call radical scepticism, the distinction's relevance to the experiential process of watching or reading a Shakespearean poetic drama must be established first—whether or not we go on to consider its relevance to

the difference between Charron and Montaigne, or between the so-called 'libertines' and Donne.

Anybody who has written a book on Shakespeare will know, all too well, that collecting one's sense of indebtedness is impossible. Certainly, I should begin by expressing my gratitude to John Spiers and to Sue Roe for showing so much faith in the book. Some material appeared in the *London Review of Books*; in an essay on Ted Hughes and Shakespeare which was included in Keith Sagar's *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester University Press); and in a discussion of Verdi and Boito as 'translators' which provided the Epilogue in James Hepokoski's *Verdi's Falstaff* (Cambridge University Press). I am grateful to Karl Miller, John Banks and Michael Black for granting permission to reprint (or restore) this material.

The works to which I refer in the book itself are listed in the Select Bibliography, but this cannot reflect my deep indebtedness to some critics I should mention here. A. P. Rossiter's *Angel with Horns* still seems to me the most illuminating critical book on Shakespeare to be published in the period separating Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* and Norman Rabkin's *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*. Both Rabkin's book and Wilbur Sanders' *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* have been crucial in shaping my sense of what makes the Shakespearean 'play of ideas' so distinctive. What I say about reflexivity draws on Anne Barton's *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, J. L. Calderwood's discussions of Shakespearean 'metadrama' and Stephen Booth's work. There is a more general indebtedness to S. L. Goldberg's *An Essay on King Lear*, and to Jonas Barish's discussions of style.

My extensive obligation to the editors of the *New Arden Shakespeare* and other modernised texts should be emphasised, since it may be obscured by my decision to quote from (and on occasion silently correct) Folio or Quarto texts. This, largely for the reasons that would be taken for granted in any scholarly or critical work on a lesser writer of this period; the arguments for playing safe and quoting from a respected modernised text are in my view good but not compelling. For the reader's convenience I have supplied line references

## Preface

from Peter Alexander's one volume edition of Shakespeare.

I am grateful to the University of St Andrews for a period of study leave and to my various hosts in Australia when I held a Visiting Fellowship at the Australian National University's History of Ideas Unit. Being able to try out some of this book's arguments both at the Unit and at the Universities of Sydney, Monash and La Trobe was invaluable. Special thanks are due to Wilbur Sanders, Harriett Hawkins, Jonas Barish and Marta Gibińska for their comments on some parts of the book, and to my students and colleagues in St Andrews. But the greatest indebtedness is to Michael Tanner, S. L. Goldberg and Jane Adamson, for sacrificing many hours and many days to going through a book which was even longer before they finished with it.



It might be said—every poet does no more than find metaphors for his own nature. That would be only partly true. Most poets never come anywhere near divining the master-plan of their whole make-up and projecting it complete. The majority cling to some favoured corner of it, or to remotely transmitted Reuter-like despatches, or mistranslate its signals into the language of a false nature. Shakespeare is almost unique in having unearthed the whole original thing, learned its language, and then found it such a cruel riddle that he could not rest from trying to solve it.

Ted Hughes

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	ix
1. Nature and Value	1
Troilus's question	1
Hamlet's honour	5
Double vision	14
Appraising: Venice's Jew and Belmont's Moor	22
Apprehending and comprehending	32
2. Framing Perspectives	50
Registers	50
Framing: the play's 'world'	65
Reflexivity: the two worlds	80
3. <i>Hamlet</i> and the Art of Grafting	95
The problem of the problem	95
<i>Hamlet</i> without the prince	101
Coming of age in Shakespeare's Denmark	112
Grafting problems	121
4. The Genealogy of Ideals: <i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	126
Unpacking motives	126
Hector's <i>volte-face</i>	132
Rank and degree	145
Unbodied figures in dumb cradles	156
5. Tempering Mercy with Justice: <i>Measure for Measure</i>	164
Vain pity	164
Timing	180
Kind pity	192
Real and fancied problems	210

## Contents

6. Imaginative Openness and the <i>Macbeth</i> -Terror	219
Is <i>Macbeth</i> frightening?	219
The interpretative leap	230
The natural touch: two marriages	236
Mindfalls	243
<i>Bibliography</i>	257
<i>Index</i>	264

## ONE

# Nature and Value

Look round this Universe. Whan an immense Profusion of Beings, animated and organiz'd, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious Variety and Profundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living Existences, the only Beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own Happiness! How contemptible or odious to the Spectator! The whole presents nothing but the Idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by a great vivifying Principle, and pouring forth from her Lap, without discernment or parental Care, her maim'd and abortive Children.

David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

### Troylus's question

'What's aught, but as 'tis valem'd?', asks Troylus—with little sense of what makes his question terrifying. Hector's reply is prompt, and shows a confidence to which the play he inhabits gives little or no support:

But value dwels not in particular will,  
It holds his estimate and dignitie  
As well, wherein 'tis precious of it selfe  
As in the prizer: 'Tis madde Idolatrie,  
To make the service greater then the God,  
And the will dotes that is inclineable  
To what infectiously it selfe affects,  
Without some image of th'affected merit.

(*Troylus and Cressida*, 2.2.53–60)

On this view values are in some sense 'out there', where they can be judiciously appraised and recognised, or, as some modern philosophers put it, 'read off'. In this Trojan debate

both Troilus and Hector are jockeying for position; Hector's speech is intended to establish the superiority of his judgement, and his immunity to 'infection'. By seeing value as a property of the valued, existing *in* the prized 'as well' as 'in the prizer', Hector asserts that the human mind—or his superior mind—is able to establish and measure any discrepancy between imputed value and inherent value.

Hector's clever play on *infect* and *affect* recalls Theseus's no less confident distinction between *apprehending* and *comprehending* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lovers, lunatics and poets are all subject to 'shaping phantasies, that apprehend/ More then coole reason ever comprehends' (5.1.5–6), and the 'tricks' of 'strong imagination' ensure that 'if it would but apprehend some joy,/ It comprehends some bringer of that joy' (19–20). Indeed, this suggests why Hector's use of the word 'image' does not help his argument: in Theseus's speech the sense of *comprehend* shifts, to allow that the object of supposedly rational comprehension may itself be one of 'fancies images', a product of 'shaping phantasies'. Moreover, Theseus's use of the word 'trick' anticipates the way in which the word 'cheat' would be used, nearly a century later, in two instructively complementary passages. In his preface to *Religio Laici* (1682), Dryden opposes reason and imagination:

The Florid, Elevated and Figurative way is for the Passions; for Love and Hatred, Fear and Anger, are begotten in the Soul by shewing their Objects out of their true proportions; either greater than the Life, or Less; but Instruction is to be given by shewing them what they naturally are. A man is to be cheated into Passion, but to be reason'd into Truth.

Dryden assumes, like Hector, that reason can establish the true proportions of things and show what they *naturally* are. Eight years later *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* appeared, and in his discussion 'Of the Abuse of Words' (Book III, Chapter 10) Locke writes:

All the artificial and figurative applications of words Eloquence hath invented are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgement, and so indeed are perfect Cheat . . .

And while these passages are before us I shall add one more, to pose a question which seems all the more pressing as we ponder the basis for Troylus's disagreement with Hector. F. R. Leavis's essay 'Tragedy and the Medium' includes this arresting remark on 'the tragic experience':

It is as if we were challenged at the profoundest level with the question, 'In what does the significance of life reside?', and found ourselves contemplating, for answer, a view of life, and of the things giving it value, that makes the valued appear unquestionably more important than the valuer, so that significance lies, clearly and inescapably, in the willing adhesion of the individual self to something other than itself. (1952:132)

Just what sense should be attached to Leavis's use of the word 'appear' in relation to what he regards as 'clear and inescapable'?

I shall return to that question later, but we may observe here that Leavis himself is in some danger of making 'the service greater than the God'. My immediate concern is with that difficult triad, *value*, *valuer* and *valued*. To see how Shakespeare—not the man with laundry bills, but the disposing, directing intelligence at work within the works—keeps returning to Troylus's question is a good way of attending to the plays' imaginative integrity and creative continuity: so I shall argue in this chapter. And once we try to trace this continuing creative preoccupation with the act of valuing, two closely-related points emerge.

The first is this: in very varied ways, Shakespeare repeatedly exposes what may be called a process of *disjunction*. Once someone or something has been endowed with value a disjunction occurs, so that the value *appears* to be inherent in the valued and detached from the valuer. Perhaps, if Dr Johnson had not been so convinced that values are 'out there', he would have been less quick to object to a supposedly mixed metaphor in *Othello*—which actually represents the process of disjunction in a precise and moving way:

But there where I have garner'd up my heart,  
Where either I must live, or beare no life,  
The Fountaine from the which my currant runnes . . .  
(4.1.58-60)

The idealistic Othello first endows, or invests, Desdemona with unique significance, garnering up his heart by making her his storehouse of value; and then he sees her as the fountain or source, from which his life *derives* significance and value.

The second point is that different views of the nature of Nature yield different accounts of value. To see why this so important we might consider a passage from one of Wordsworth's letters, which A. P. Rossiter quotes in *Angel with Horns* (295):

What I should myself most value in my attempts is the spirituality with which I have *endeavoured to invest* the material universe, and the moral relations under which I have *wished to exhibit* its most ordinary appearances.

The italics are of course mine not Wordsworth's, and the italicised phrases show a process of disjunction so blissfully complete as to be altogether immune to irony or doubt. After observing that it is hard 'to see how anyone who *thinks* about Nature can have any faith in the famous lines' from *Tintern Abbey* about how 'Nature never did betray/ The heart that loves her', Rossiter recalls Dorothy Wordsworth's end as a paralytic imbecile and comments: 'Nature *does*; Nature did' (305, 310). The main thrust of Rossiter's fierce assault on 'the national park of Wordsworthian Nature' is that Wordsworth's vision of Nature and 'humanity' is 'so highly selective and exclusive' because it suppresses or fails to see that *under-nature* which is so terrifyingly present in *King Lear* and 'invites artistic expression in terms of agony, distortion, clashing paradox, diabolism'. The passage from Hume at the start of this chapter presents the conflict between two mutually exclusive visions of the nature of Nature in a clashing paradox which recalls *Hamlet* and Montaigne's essay on Sebonde.

In Shakespeare this conflict is closely connected with, and gives incomparable urgency to, his presentation of the idealists, cynics and nihilists who figure so prominently in the plays produced in the first decade of the new century. On the one hand, there is the sustaining humanistic vision of *natura naturans*, of 'great creating-Nature'; but there is also

the utterly amoral 'Goddess' to whom an Edmund can appeal, and whose 'multiplying Villanies' will (if any 'Divell-Porter' opens the gate) 'swarme upon' a Macbeth, Angelo or Othello. The two visions yield opposed accounts of value. In the affirmative, humanistic view of Nature, Nature itself provides a sanction for human values, which then appear to be discovered, or recognised: they are, as Hector professes to believe, somehow 'out there'. So, for example, in *De conscribendis* (which Shakespeare certainly knew from the English version in Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetorike*, and drew on in his sonnets) Erasmus wrote:

Naye sir (you will saye) we muste folowe vertue, rather then Nature.  
A gentle dishe. As though e anye thinge can be called vertue that is  
contrary unto Nature. (116)

But the opposed view of Nature allows no such affirmation: on the contrary, man is 'unaccommodated', exposed to the terrors of what Rossiter called the Shakespearean *under-nature*, and values appear to be created or invented.

## Hamlet's honour

A few examples should suggest how and why these creative preoccupations are so closely related. I shall take my preliminary examples from plays which are later examined in more detail, since I can here only indicate briefly how the local effect of the examples depends on their dramatic context. We see this, for instance, when Hector wants to deflect Troylus's question with an account of value which many of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have been ready to take for granted. The audience knows, although the assembled Trojan council in 2.2 does not yet know, of that challenge which Hector himself sent to the Greeks in 1.3: Hector has *already* committed the Trojans to a course of action which his arguments against Troylus would prohibit. And this means that, even as the crucial discussion of the problematic nature of valuing is released into the play, the audience must regard Hector's more attractively conventional argument with some unease. If Hector *believes* that Helen is 'not worth what she



doth cost the keeping' (2.2.52), and that the moral laws of nations both coincide with and by implication derive from universal moral laws of Nature (184-90), why has he sent that challenge? Conversely, if he does not really believe his professed 'opinion' of the 'truth' (189-90), what principles or motives actually direct his actions? If we were taking this scene in isolation and attending to its philosophical implications, we could suppose that it presents a debate between a thoroughgoing sceptic and a man who believes in those natural laws of which Aristotle writes in the *Ethics* (V.7) and which Hooker assimilates to Christian belief in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (I.iii-x); and the terms of such a debate are indeed relevant to Shakespeare's play. But the play introduces a further complication, and a deeper uncertainty about principles and motives, by suggesting that neither Troylus nor Hector is unequivocally committed to the opposed philosophical positions which they appear to represent.

Here *Troilus and Cressida* recalls *Hamlet*, and might even be regarded as that play's afterbirth; but there are less provocative ways of pointing to *Hamlet*'s pivotal place within the *oeuvre*. One point is so obvious as to be easy to forget: by the end of the sixteenth century Shakespeare's fame and not inconsiderable fortune were based on the series of 'histories' and romantic comedies, and he might, like so many writers who become established and successful, have stopped trying to break new ground. *Hamlet* shows a remarkable redirection of creative energy, and was followed by a remarkable period of restless, radical experimentation. Moreover in *Hamlet*, the collision between opposed views of Nature and value is not only terrifyingly extensive; it is also internalised, to an unprecedented degree, so that the protagonist's own fractured view of the nature of Nature is at the centre of the play's nervous system.

One locus is provided, ironically enough, by a sentence which Ian Macdonald, a government spokesman during the 1982 war between Britain and Argentina over the Falklands/Malvinas, saw fit to lift from the 'How all occasions' soliloquy:

Rightly to be great,  
Is not to stirre without great argument,