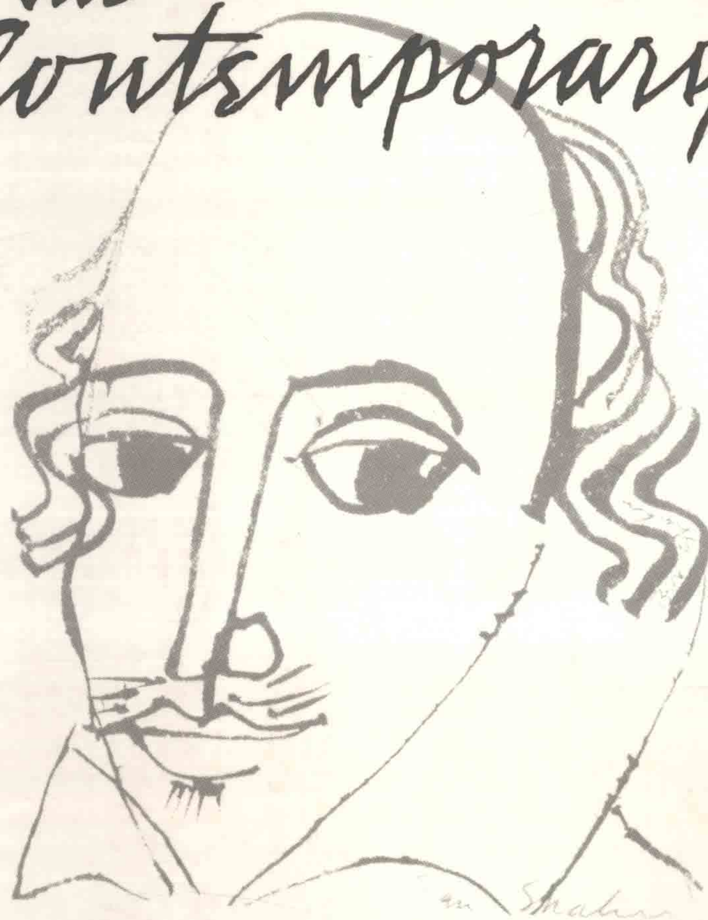
Shakespeare our Contemporary



By JAN KOTT

SHAKESPEARE
OUR CONTEMPORARY

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To Lidia

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Preface

I first met Jan Kott in a night club in Warsaw: it was midnight: he was squashed between a wildly excited group of students: we became friends at once: a beautiful girl was arrested by mistake under our eyes: Jan Kott leaped to her defence and an evening of high adventure followed which ended at about four o'clock in the morning with Kott and myself in the supreme headquarters of the Polish police trying to secure her release. It was only at this point when the tempo of events was slowing down that I suddenly noticed that the police were calling my new friend 'Professor'. I had guessed that this quick-witted and combative man was an intellectual, a writer, a journalist, perhaps a Party member. The title 'Professor' sat ill on him. 'Professor of what?' I asked as we walked home through the silent town. 'Of drama,' he replied.

I tell this story to point to a quality of the author of this work which is to my mind unique. Here we have a man writing about Shakespeare's attitude to life from direct experience. Kott is undoubtedly the only writer on Elizabethan matters who assumes without question that every one of his readers will at some point or other have been woken by the police in the middle of the night. I am sure that in the many million words already written about Shakespeare – almost precluding anything new ever being said by anyone any more – it is still unique for the author discussing the theory of political assassination to assume that a producer's explanation of his actors could begin: 'A secret organization is preparing an action ... You will go to Z and bring a case with grenades to the house No. 12.'

His writing is learned, it is informed, his study is serious and precise, it is scholarly without what we associate with scholar-

ship. The existence of Kott makes one suddenly aware how rare it is for a pedant or a commentator to have any experience of what he is describing. It is a disquieting thought that the major part of the commentaries on Shakespeare's passions and his politics are hatched far from life by sheltered figures behind ivy-covered walls.

In contrast, Kott is an Elizabethan. Like Shakespeare, like Shakespeare's contemporaries, the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit are indivisible: they coexist painfully in the same frame: the poet has a foot in the mud, an eye on the stars, and a dagger in his hand. The contradictions of any living process cannot be denied: there is an omnipresent paradox that cannot be argued, but must be lived: poetry is a rough magic that fuses opposites.

Shakespeare is a contemporary of Kott, Kott is a contemporary of Shakespeare – he talks about him simply, first-hand, and his book has the freshness of the writing by an eyewitness at the Globe or the immediacy of a page of criticism of a current film. To the world of scholarship this is a valuable contribution – to the world of the theatre an invaluable one. Our greatest problem in England where we have the best possibility in the world for presenting our greatest author is just this – the relating of these works to our lives. Our actors are skilled and sensitive, but they shy away from overlarge questions. Those young actors who are aware of the deadly issues at this moment at stake in the world tend to shy away from Shakespeare. It is not an accident that at rehearsals our actors find plottings, fights and violent ends 'easy' – they have clichés ready to deal with these situations which they do not question – but are deeply vexed by problems of speech and style which though essential can only take their true place if the impulse to use words and images relates to experience of life. England in becoming Victorian lost almost all its Elizabethan characteristics – today, it has become a strange mixture of Elizabethan and Victorian worlds: this gives us a new possibility of understanding Shakespeare side by side with an old tendency to blur and romanticize him. It is Poland that in our time has come closest to the tumult,

the danger, the intensity, the imaginativeness and the daily involvement with the social process that made life so horrible, subtle and ecstatic to an Elizabethan. So it is quite naturally up to a Pole to point us the way.

PETER BROOK

INTRODUCTION

Great works of art have an autonomous existence, independent of the intention and personality of their creators and independent also of the circumstances of the time of their creation, that is the mark of their greatness. The tragedies of Aeschylus, the paintings of El Greco, the poems of John Donne have a significance to twentieth-century man of which the contemporaries of their creation could not have had the remotest notion. In the light of psychoanalysis, of the experiments of the expressionists, of the poetry of Rilke or Pound, the *Oresteia, The Burial of Count Orgaz,* and *The Anniversaries* assume new and deeper meanings. The writing of history and, above all, literary criticism can, and must, always be understood as an attempt to find in the past aspects of human experience that can shed light on the meaning of our own times.

In the case of Shakespeare this process is particularly clear: Samuel Johnson's Shakespeare is very different indeed from the Shakespeare of Coleridge or Hazlitt, very different from the Shakespeare of Georg Brandes or Harley

Granville-Barker, and equally different from the Shakespeare of our own time. And likewise the angle of vision changes with the place, as well as the time, from which the great, the autonomous work of art is seen. The significance of Shakespeare is very different in the English-speaking countries from what it appears to be in Germany, Scandinavia, France, or Eastern Europe. In many Eastern European countries, for example, the national literature, and therefore national consciousness itself, had crystallized around translations of Shakespeare. Only after a language had passed the test of being able to accommodate the form and content of the greatest drama (and Shakespeare is seen as that) could it lay claim, in the eyes of the people concerned, to be regarded as a vehicle for the highest flights of thought and poetic expression. Once a language had its fully adequate version of Shakespeare it became able to support the foundations of a nation, its institutions, its political autonomy. Only the Bible rivals Shakespeare in this aspect of archetypal significance.

No wonder, therefore, that to the nations concerned Shakespeare may appear more urgent, more vital, more crucially important than to the English-speaking world where familiarity has blunted the impact of shock in the presence of genius, where the great thoughts have become eroded into the clichés and commonplaces of the school essay, and the analysis and criticism of the bard's work is by now so well-worked and well-trodden a field that any newcomers have to concentrate on more and more atomized and specialized aspects, until the monumental outlines of the whole disappear in the myopic gaze of the examiners of microscopic detail.

Moreover, a curious conjunction of time and place occurs occasionally: there may be, that is, for each epoch an optimum place from which to view the great autonomous work of art—a place, in fact, from which the experience

of an epoch is most intensely felt and epitomized, a place from the experience of which the significance of the great work of art may emerge most clearly for an entire age; thus the French interpretation of Greece and Rome determined the way in which the culture of the classical age was experienced throughout Europe in the seventeenth century, while in the late eighteenth century the art of Greece and Rome tended to be seen through the eyes of German scholars and critics like Winckelmann.

Where, in the world of the mid-twentieth century, shall we seek the vantage point from which Shakespeare can be seen and reinterpreted with the highest degree of relevance, of fresh, revitalized significance for our own age?

In the light of Jan Kott's book, which is here made available to an English-speaking public, it might be argued that this point of vantage might well be situated in Eastern Europe, and in Poland in particular.

If it is true that the determining, traumatic experiences of our time are modern war in all its destructiveness, occupation by invading armies, life in bombed cities, the *univers concentrationnaire*—that whole Dante-esque inferno of concentration camps, gas chambers, genocide—and the world of ghettoes and their systematic destruction; if it is furthermore true that the debate with totalitarianism in all its forms, whether fascist or Stalinist, is the crucial political and ideological issue of our age, then indeed Poland could well be regarded as a focal point of the mid-twentieth century. Poland has been through the whole gamut of that experience: it suffered (in contrast to France or Italy, for example) occupation by both German National Socialists *and* Soviet Stalinists and has thus had ample opportunity to compare these two brands of the contemporary heresy in bitter practice. Poland was the hub of the Second World War, the point from which it started as well as one of the chief bones of contention

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around which the postwar division of the victorious camp into East and West crystallized. On Polish territory stood the extermination camps of Auschwitz and Maidanek, which may well emerge in centuries to come as the best-remembered, the most characteristic feature of our age; and the bulk of the victims of these camps were Polish Jews.

Poland, moreover, not only suffered this experience, it also possesses the sensibility and the tradition to express it. Poland has a population that, among all the peoples of Eastern Europe, is truly Western in its culture as well as deeply rooted in ancient Slavonic tradition; having been a great power in its day in both the political and the cultural sense, Poland has the breadth of feeling, the self-assurance that makes it possible to evaluate all this experience without the resentments and inferiority complexes of nations still struggling for their own identity. Hence Poland could be relied on to produce outstanding individuals with the intelligence and power of perception to record the impact of these archetypal events with the highest degree of sophistication. (It is no coincidence, for example, that one of the subtlest analyses of the malaise of our time, a short play by the Polish poet Tadeusz Rozewicz, is called *The Witnesses.*)

There is, beyond this, another vital factor which buttresses Poland's claim as the critical vantage point for our age: after the astonishing liberation movement of October 1956, Poland was the first, and may well remain the only, East European country to achieve a degree of cultural autonomy and freedom of expression far-reaching enough to allow this experience actually to be brought to light and discussed in a valid and objective manner in conditions of relative intellectual freedom.

In the crucible of so apocalyptic an experience, a great deal of the cultural heritage of the past—everything that

was facile, complacent, and sentimental—was bound to be burned to ashes. Much of the optimistic and moralizing literature of the past must have suddenly appeared a mockery of reality to human beings of taste and sensibility who had to live at the very borders of the human condition for so many years. The testing that any set of beliefs, any ideology, had to undergo in these conditions was truly merciless. The facile nationalism of 1939 when the Poles still hoped that the bravura of their cavalry could withstand the German tanks and Stukas was as cruelly unmasked as the hopes during the period of German occupation for effective liberation by the West, or the illusion that communism would provide conditions of material well-being or intellectual freedom. In these circumstances, the best spirits were again and again driven away from generalizations and ideological formulae, back to the only record of human experience that is truly objective and truly concrete and particularized: the great autonomous works of art. Only there could they find the strength and consolation that must spring from a sense of communion with kindred spirits who have faced similarly extreme situations. It is in this context that a new critical confrontation with Shakespeare could acquire the urgency, the burning topicality, and the overwhelming emotional intensity that we find in Jan Kott's book.

Kott belongs to the generation that, in Poland as well as in Western Europe and in America, acquired its intellectual formation by its encounter with Marxism. Born in 1914, Kott, who at one time wrote surrealist poetry, like so many of his generation, became a Marxist because Marxism seemed to give a guarantee that the victories of nazism and fascism were bound to be short-lived: "I owed my personal salvation—my defence against the nightmare that kept me from succumbing to its horror—to the conviction that history is in the right, that it will always be

proved right, that fascism *must* be crushed and that it would be the Red Army that crushed it. Marxism taught me the laws of history, permitted me to believe in history. When I entered the A.L. [the extreme left-wing resistance movement] I stopped being afraid. . . ."[1]

This is the experience that countless intellectuals underwent in Europe and America throughout the immediate prewar and war periods. What distinguishes the experience of Polish intellectuals, however, is the fact that they had these beliefs tested in the most practical and exacting experimental situation: the reality of everyday life under Stalinism. In the ten years between 1945 and 1955 the Marxist intellectuals of Poland (as well as those of Hungary) learned a great deal. As a Polish critic has said of Kott, he fought for socialist realism in literature right up to the point when the first socialist realist books appeared. And Kott himself admits that there is a grain of truth in this assertion. In any case, at a writers' congress in Warsaw in 1950 he suddenly found himself at odds with the official line. "For the first time . . . I saw my opinion at variance with that of the party, and that in a matter which I had greatly at heart . . . the appreciation of the path along which literature was to develop. It was a very hard moment."

And so, faced with the bitter necessity of having to rethink his position if he was to keep his self-respect as a critic, Kott became one of the leaders of the movement of revaluation that culminated in the open breach with Stalinism in October 1956. As a literary and dramatic critic, as a university professor of literature, his reorientation towards the ruling ideology centred around the question of socialist realism. By 1956 he had come to define the

[1] Jan Kott, *"Les dix années que je viens de vivre"* (French version of an article in *Nowa Kultura,* 1955), in *Les Temps Modernes,* Paris, February-March 1957.

standards by which true realism should be judged: "The measure of realism is the objective truth contained in the work of art. The measure of realism in a literature is the understanding of the historical process in its contradictions and its development, the truth about man who creates history and who is subject to its laws: moral truth and psychological truth. . . ."[2]

This call for a return to truth became the watchword of the true intellectuals throughout the communist world after the revelations of Stalin's crimes by Khrushchev at the twentieth party congress had made it possible to speak more openly about the ideological position of Marxism itself. It was at this time—the late summer of 1956—that Brecht called for a "regeneration of Marxism from its total ideologization towards total secularization," that the Hungarian writers of the Petoefi circle issued their call for a return to reality and truth, and that the brilliant Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski (probably the most important thinker on Marxism active today, and a close friend of Jan Kott) formulated their position in the words: "The Communist intellectuals are faced with the task of fighting for the laicization of thought, against Marxist mythology and bigotry, against a magico-religious practice in politics and for the restoration of respect towards non-theological, unfettered reason."[3]

Thus, hand in hand with a rejection of absolutism on the political plane, these post-Stalinist intellectuals have reached a position in which they reject all absolutes in the realm of thought. As Kołakowski puts it in a brilliant

[2] Jan Kott, *"Mythologie et Vérité"* (French version of a speech made at a session of the Council for Art and Culture in Warsaw, April 1956) in *Les Temps Modernes,* Paris, February-March 1957.

[3] L. Kołakowski, "The Intellectuals and the Communist Movement," in *Nowe Drogi,* September 1956, quoted from the German version in *Der Mensch ohne Alternative,* Munich, 1960.

essay on "The Priest and the Jester" in which he traces the survivals of theological thought patterns in seemingly secular thought: "We declare ourselves in favor of the philosophy of the jester, that is, for an attitude of negative vigilance in the face of the absolute. . . . It is the option for a vision of the world that provides prospects for a slow and difficult realignment of the elements in our human action that are most difficult to align: goodness without universal toleration, courage without fanaticism, intelligence without apathy, and hope without blindness. All other fruits of philosophy are of little importance."[4]

It is against this background that we must try to see Kott's attempt at a contemporary view of Shakespeare. As against the vast and oversimplified generalizations of ideological thought, the finest creations of the human imagination appear as embodiments of the truth in its most particularized, most concrete form. Here the human condition emerges in the only shape in which it can be grasped without distortion—in the form of highly individualized, yet also clearly highly typical, examples of human destiny and passion. It is no coincidence that Shakespeare himself, in the conflict between the priest and the jester, between the theologian-ideologist and the clown, clearly prefers to come down on the side of the latter, and that Kott, in his essay on *Lear* as Endgame, quotes Kołakowski on jesters. It is one of the roots of Shakespeare's universality that his work seems totally free of any definite ideological position, that he presents the events of legend and of history not as examples of the workings of some generalized principles, but as examples merely of themselves.

To theatre audiences and critics in the English-speaking world, which, unlike most of the rest of the surface of the

[4] L. Kołakowski, "The Priest and the Jester," in *Twórczość*, September 1958; English translation in *The Modern Polish Mind*, edited by M. Kuncewicz, Boston, 1962.

globe, has managed to escape the ultimate manifestations of violence and foreign occupation even in the twentieth century, Shakespeare's world, in his histories and great archetypal tragedies, tends to appear a universe of fairy tale and legend, comfortably remote. To an intellectual of the erudition and sensibility of Jan Kott with the living experience of war-ravaged Poland, the violence and passion, the blood and tears of this Shakespearean universe are a familiar environment. Daily proximity to civil war, brutality, ideological intolerance, conspiracy and its bloody repression determined the life of Shakespeare's time (as we are all too apt to forget in our cosy view of the Elizabethan age as it emerges from children's books and travel posters) as it did and still does the atmosphere of mid-twentieth-century Eastern Europe. No wonder that to a critic like Kott, Richard III is anything but an exaggerated stage villain, a mildly comic bogeyman whose wickedness we cannot quite take seriously (hence Laurence Olivier played him with the ironic leer of a melodrama badman in his film). To Kott he is, as he surely must have been to the Elizabethans, an embodiment of concrete political reality; the fall of Hastings is to Kott no more, and no less, than a sober factual account of the fall of Beria or Bukharin.

What is more, Marxists in contemporary Eastern Europe are trained to look at the world as a manifestation of the historical process working itself out towards a preordained goal. In the last twenty years they have learned to appreciate the violence and mutability of history, but they have also learned to view the attainment of preordained goals with a healthy scepticism. In Shakespeare they can find the historical process itself, stark, violent, and relentless, but totally free of any vulgar teleological conception, a great wheel of power, endlessly revolving.

History, however, deprived of the goal towards which

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