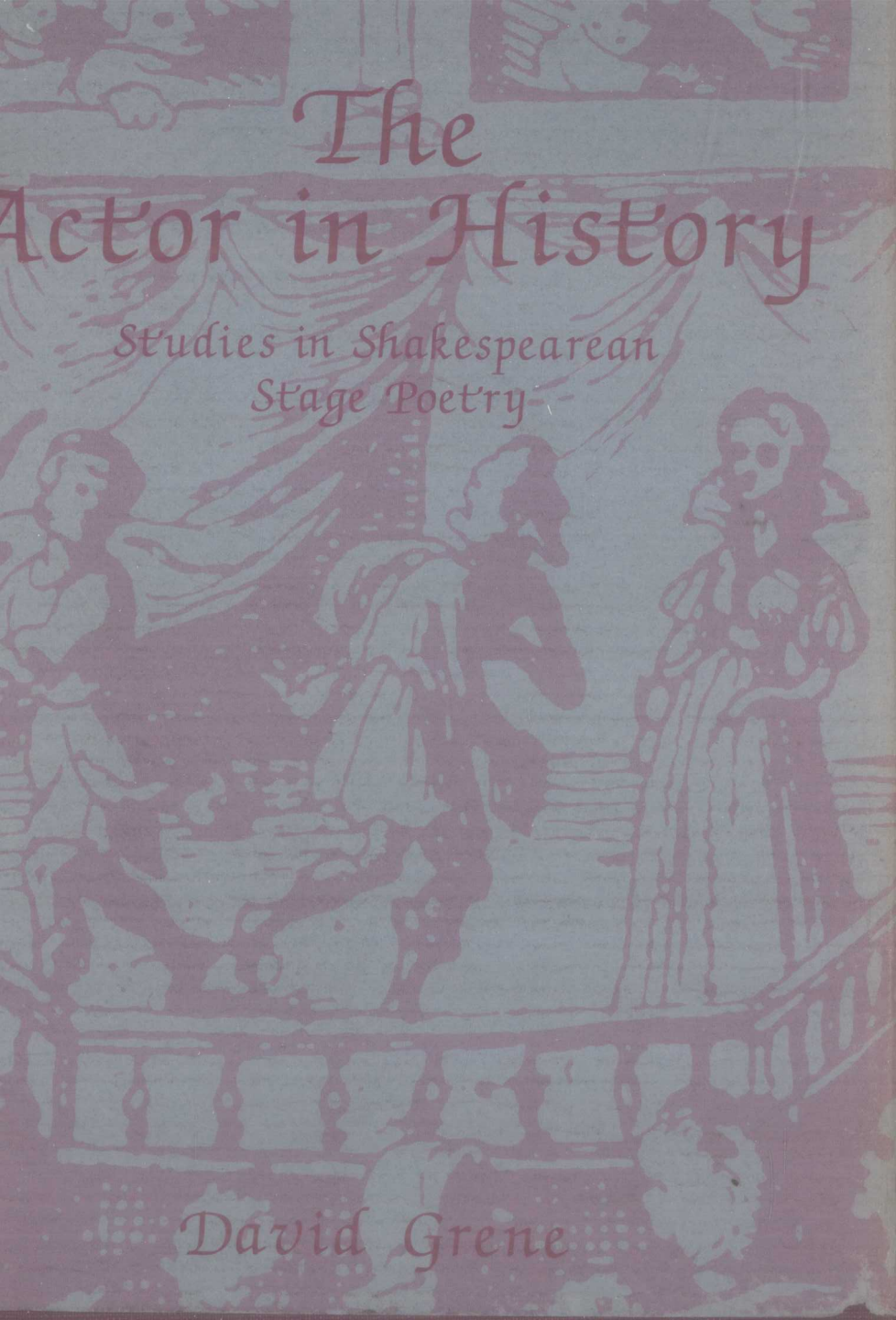
The Actor in History

Studies in Shakespearean Stage Poetry



David Grene

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A Study in Shakespearean Stage Poetry

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To Ethel and
Andrew and Gregory
with loving acknowledgment
of their loyalty and devotion

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Contents

Introduction

In this book I wanted to consider the relation which Shakespeare establishes between the values of the supreme world of Elizabethan and Jacobean reality, that of the kings and soldiers at the top of the tree, and his own domain, the poetry of the theater. Ostensibly, that poetry of the theater emphasizes straightforwardly the values of the plot of the play. By his poetry the king or soldier becomes more visible to us. We feel more compellingly his kingship, soldiership, because the rhythms of his voice, the verbal images and innuendos, reinforce the man and his acts as we see him in the regular story. Sometimes this is what happens. Henry V's famous speech before Harfleur ("Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more" [*H5* III.1]) connects us forcibly with the excitement, tension, and glory of the moment of the battle, in its own terms—and Henry's terms. "Friends, Romans, countrymen," sometimes at least, strengthens our impression of Antony's passionate grief for the dead Caesar. But sometimes what takes place is different. Sometimes the poetry starting from a more shadowy identification of the character with his position in the story begins to substitute its independent or nearly independent values—its power to charm and to threaten and expand the "meaning" of the actor vis-à-vis his role. The character we watch on the stage escapes into an area where the sensations with which his acting

affects us come also directly from his histrionic relation to us. He is more *actor, qua actor,* less actor of Brutus or Antony or Coriolanus. So Antony's "Sometimes we see a cloud that's dragonish" (*Ant.* IV.1.3) moves us by music and image to see the fragility of human individuality, as the actor can project it—not only or not chiefly as Antony can see or feel it. He so affects us because we know that the histrionic is a representation of the reality of emotion as definite and valid as impressionism is of the visual truth of the external world. What Shakespeare has done in certain of the history plays is to put at variance this, our sense of the histrionic, against the more usual values which we set upon political and military achievement.

Shakespearean histrionicism usually involves great richness and ambiguity of words and phrases in its dramatic expression—unlike Ibsen's haunted brevities and silences. When we listen to Antony and then to Octavian, we say: "Antony's world is an actor's world, but it covers more of the aspects of reality than Octavian's. I accept Antony's rather than Octavian's." The fantasy of Richard II is his escape from the harshness of the historical circumstances that belittle his capacity; clothed in poetry and growing into the actual presentation of the actor who rendered the part, it dominates us to the devaluing of the winner in the plot's completion.

My choice of the plays is personal, but, I hope, not very arbitrary. I have left out the three parts of *Henry VI,* and even the attractive *Richard III,* because the strength of the unified series *Richard II–Henry V* seemed, for my purpose, to supersede those earlier works dealing with the kings of England and the events of their reigns—because of the superior concentration that the later series possesses. I left out *King John* as hardly interesting enough and *Henry VIII* because of the problems of the joint authorship of Shakespeare and Fletcher.

Because I have sought to contrast what I have called Shakespeare's histrionicism most vividly with known historical deeds, as the raw material of the play, I have chosen those plays where Shakespeare has treated solid history for his subject; so I have chosen the chronicle plays, rather than those of prehistory or fiction like *Lear* and *Cymbeline* or *Macbeth*. Similarly on the classical side I have concentrated on the strictly historical Roman plays, such as *Coriolanus, Julius Caesar,* and *Antony and Cleopatra,* to the exclusion of the anachronistic *Troilus and Cressida* or *Timon of Athens*. Of course, even in the plays based on better-documented history, Shakespeare must invent tone, to some extent significance and emphasis, and even character, inside a given area of importance. But the importance is there already. The deposition and murder of Richard II, the conquest of France by Henry V, the murder of Julius Caesar, the victory of Octavian at Actium have an overwhelming actuality for a man of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The dramatist is pressed for an interpretation of a pattern which is deeply there before he touches the story. Therefore the acknowledgment, indeed the superior stress on the actor's quality in the rendering of reality, is the more striking.

The order of the essays needs some explanation, as perhaps their entire interrelation. At first sight, *Antony and Cleopatra* seems misplaced. Why is it not with the Roman plays, and indeed in its dramatic position as a sequel to *Julius Caesar?* Why, since it is the most patent example of my theme, does it not bring up the rear of the essays as a grand climax? Why is its chronological place in the order of Shakespeare's writing disregarded, since it is the latest of the plays I have included? But these essays are hardly a reasoned discussion of a subject by successive arguments. They are rather, I hope, an effective sequence of images as the plays capture various

aspects of the theatrical and histrionic in human reality, as human beings apprehend it. It is because I would have my readers more easily understand what I was talking about that I have put *Antony and Cleopatra* first. The hero and heroine almost consciously seek and explore the theatrical in their situation, and theirs is, in its effect upon the audience, a most brilliant, imaginative victory over the hard core of a more conventional reality which appears to overwhelm them. Their moment of victorious defeat lives in action, but action strengthened and transformed by the magnificence of poetry.

The histrionic in Antony is, truly, sometimes a feature of his defect of judgment, but in the play one cares less about the faltering of his good judgment, practically. We are too continually aware of the power of fantasy in both the protagonists, that power which has been created in each of them by their mutual passion. Antony and Cleopatra are, or were, hard-bitten realists. They would not accept for a moment the chance of failure if it were not that their love is driving them relentlessly, despite their moments of resistance from their former selves, to a new awareness of a different sort of victory, jointly shared.

Sometimes we understand their supreme moment through something more muted and ambiguous than the richness of poetry—in the harmony of an evocative simplicity of diction with a compelling emotion inherent in act or moment which conspicuously defies analysis. Why does Cleopatra's speech to Antony—"And welcome, welcome! Die when thou hast lived / Quicken with kissing. Had my lips that power, / Thus would I wear them out" (IV.15.38)—move us so extraordinarily? Because it goes along with the absurdities of a pretended struggle to hoist the heavy Antony up to the monument, as Cleopatra, too cowardly to descend, reaches to embrace him? The reaching of the woman's hands, the near

recognition of the formalization of the lifting, the kiss itself fade into the longing and the cowardice. The words live halfway between a literal simplicity and the outrageous fantasy of "Had my lips that power, / Thus would I wear them out." This is the distillation of the histrionic in the *act,* which the poetry has seized and expressed. It works on us the audience as well as on the man and woman on the scene. That is why *Antony and Cleopatra* comes first in this short book—so that the reader may see first, in the perfectness of dramatic achievement, what the subject is which I have chosen.

For it is in a slightly different way, within *Richard II,* that the histrionic reveals itself: in the psychology of the man in whom it is native. We see how he experiences it, and how it hinders him practically, as it kindles his imagination. Richard has always been a dreamer; we become conscious of the changes in him, in how we judge him and dislike him, or judge him and still are carried away by what he makes us *see.* The conceit of the buckets full of tears (IV.1.181), the buckets which also symbolize his destiny and that of Bolingbroke, is intolerable in its aching self-pity and the grotesqueness of the combined metaphor. Yet it belongs in a continuum which climaxes in the tremendous abdication speech, which is perfect. In Richard, the emphasis always falls on the instability of mood, the back-and-forward of depth and truth and vanity and frivolity of the actor-by-choice. It explores a certain dimension of theatricality and instability in practical determination which is there in *Antony and Cleopatra,* but in that play not importantly, as of only one factor in the complexity of the action.

Richard comes before us as an actor, an amateur actor, so that it matters that we see both his imperfect shot at the sublime effort and his moments of perfection. In his role he is well suited, because he is a king (truly, I think, a sixteenth-

century English king rather than one of his proper dramatic date) who is both himself and a nearly conscious actor of a role, the quasi-divine persona. This royal histrionic role he further transforms by fusing it with that of the Christus patiens.

Richard is inspired by theatrical reality; that is, he is keenly aware of a vision (shared with us his audience) of human reality which lives in images of voices, movement, personality of men and women, before us on the stage, speaking to our ears, challenging us by likeness and difference. He is inspired by the *sense* of this theatricality, and he is himself, somewhat uneasily, its conscious fabricator, as actor or poet. Not a little of the play is full of his dramatic posturizing, the preliminary exercises for his final dramatic triumph. The link between acting and kingship is vital in *Richard II* and the Henriad. We see it in its most explicit form in the contrast between Richard and Bolingbroke. Both are actors, for a king must be such, since the royal function is inseparable from acting. But the distinction between the two is between one who is an actor by choice, or weakness, depending on how you see the play, and the man who deliberately exploits his royal role to gain political ends, who puts off and on his part at the dictates of advantage or ambition.

In *Richard II* and the Henriad, decisive political power must rest in the hands of the king. He must be strong and resolute or the kingdom collapses into the anarchy of the warring nobles. The king may or may not be imaginative, that is, he may or may not see his position as an enlarged and vivid image of humanity rather than as a puzzle which demands solution. It would be fair to assume that either Hamlet or Fortinbras might be a competent monarch. But a dramatic imagination, mirroring in the actual stage presentation that amateur-actor quality in Richard II, is something special.

There lies the temptation to render the moment with an independence and inevitability just its own. Richard really disregards the necessity of a single choice, as for instance to fight for his crown or not to, because he explores avidly the emotions inherent in alternative courses both for our benefit and his own. So his natural inclination is constantly at loggerheads with political success, which is represented as lying in single-minded planning and ruthless execution of the plan.

But it is in *Richard II* that we begin to equate this political defect of Richard with a general sensitivity which is sympathetic to us as audience, which is constantly overextending itself to win our response, and which is in fact constantly blurring the difference between the actor whose profession it is to render the part for us and the character he represents within the mimic reality of the plot. Failure seems the price of this sensitivity, and, contrariwise, Bolingbroke comes before us as a man of interested hypocrisy and brutality and, above all, success. We are not at all surprised by his success or the final murder of Richard and his rival's repudiation of it.

For me, the two parts of *Henry IV* and, retrospectively, *Henry V* are dominated by the contrast of two sorts of drama. One is the contrivance of Prince Hal to play all his moves in the light of his final revelation as the proper Prince of Wales; the other is the spontaneous and genuine theatricality of Hotspur and Falstaff. Can anyone deny those moments of knowing that Hotspur is a more significant person than Hal? And, despite Hotspur's firm denials of any liking for poetry, isn't our admiration of him largely rooted in his immensely funny rendition of the battle scene starring the nobleman with the delicate nose? (*1H4* I.3.29) Isn't our sympathy for and love of Falstaff (and our discontent with Henry V's later discarding of him) tied up with the fictitious dia-

logue-reconstruction of the interview of Henry IV and his son? (*1H4* II.4.389)? Both of these impromptu renditions are humorous in effect. But the humor and the drama buttress one another and are used to reveal a level of sincerity, depth, and effectiveness of communication which undermines the stuffier values of the plot proper. Of course, it is the careless nobility of Hotspur, the comic vitality of Falstaff, which overwhelm us, and not simply the two scenes I have mentioned. But it is in those scenes that the two dangerous enemies of the Prince's future sober rulership define themselves, by the devastating power of mimicry and acting to challenge the solidity and seriousness of Hal's *contrived* drama, and indeed implicitly the importance of politics and history which are the materials of the plot.

In the Roman plays, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus,* the tragedy again turns on the incompatibility of the political game with two of its chief players. Though the inner sources of the failure to cope seem different, the failure itself runs a predictably similar course. Both Brutus and Coriolanus go down because they have an inner vision which denies the value of winning by other people's rules. Brutus, if he is to be a leader, wants to lead a freed people to an old-fashioned Roman state, certainly never real in any historical era near his own and conceivably never real at all. Coriolanus wants to lead soldiers, in unending wars, under the banners and orders of an aristocratic Utopia. Both can only reject their contemporary world by adherence to a strongly prescriptive role which gives form to their ideals, and both find that form from their parentage. Brutus is trying to become his ancestor who drove out Tarquin, Coriolanus to become the perfect knight of his mother's dreams. Yet both move with all the passionate love of life filling the formal molds of their beliefs, and hating the insinuating fluidity of a winning pragmatism.

Both associate their inner certainty with glimpses of its theatrical aspects. Brutus sees the murder of Caesar as complete only when he sets the scene of the conspirators dipping their hands and swords in his blood, as the model for actors of the future (*JC* III.1.105); Coriolanus identifies himself as the winner of a new "title" as Rome's destroyer and, frustrated by his mother's intervention, says, "Like a dull actor now / I have forgot my part, and I am out, / Even to a full disgrace" (*Cor.* V.3.40).

Measure for Measure is in the book because of its mood and its structure. As I see the historical plays, in the chronicle and Roman versions, it can be a strange kind of commentary on them. The vision and fantasy of a particular man—a Richard II or Antony—confronts what the choric positions of the play assert as reality. The vision or fantasy is projected stagily, that is, in the stage trappings, the histrionicism, the slight exaggeration of theatricality which is the stage version of the dramatic itself. *Measure for Measure* plays with this staginess. But it plays with it in its relation to our active sympathy. For the activity of our sympathy implies a reality to evoke it, and it is with the nature of reality behind the sympathy and the theater that *Measure for Measure* deals.

The Duke's plans for Vienna and Angelo's acts are stagy. They arrive disarmingly into our minds as a sort of titillating melodrama. Not so the danger of death to Claudio and his reception of it, not so the complexity of feelings we see as existing between Isabella and Angelo. Angelo and the Duke, whose puppet Angelo is, belong to a political world where acts and counter acts can achieve any result, and factual reform and redemption work on every wrong. Such a political world and its management belong to fairy land. Tragedy, with another end superimposed, becomes comedy alternating in tone between verisimilitude and unconvincingness.

The rules of the theater *almost* obtain and are then perforated by arrowshots of doubt.

How does this comedy reflect our sense of reality as it lies behind our participation in the play? The comedy is very black humor. Let the corrective action be shown with all seeming gravity, what are to make of the legal distinction between Angelo the husband and Angelo the criminal when they have, between them, only one head to be chopped off? Or of the demands of a justice which can be satisfied by one of any number of heads—Claudio's or Barnardine's or Ragu-zine's? Or Isabella's pleading for Angelo's life, because he had only *wanted* to enjoy her against her will, whereas Claudio's penalty was just since he had actually lain with his woman to their mutual happiness? All these cases involve with mocking emphasis the winning out of what is inhuman, while logical in formulation. This is presented as the typical *legal* reasoning.

In the historical plays it is usually the man of subtler feeling, with words to match, who loses against his cruder and philistine rival. In *Measure for Measure* the matching is between acts themselves and the emotions involved in them, both translated into a kind of play-on-the-stage. Yet our sense of reality haunts us too as we watch the play; there is a recognizable appeal to our feelings directly—in the hatred Angelo awakens in us by his victimization of others, in the discomfort of our judgment on Isabella when her natural austerity finally joins forces with her indignation to provoke her open hatred of the brother she is supposed to wish to save, maybe finally in our ambiguous view of the Duke's bland maneuvers. More than anywhere else in Shakespeare, perhaps, we wonder what is the true commentary on a reality which reaches us so completely through a theatrical atmosphere. In *Measure for Measure* the reality which evokes sym-

pathy is present as a conflict; between the facts, as they exist in an Alice-in-Wonderland law court—a fantastic archetype of the "real" world—and the tangle of emotion they awaken in us. The emotions part company with the story and yet retain some uncomfortable structural relation to it, leaving us full of pity, anger, laughter, and finally a mysterious sense of truth and correctness, the point of its application inexpressible. It is a play about ruler and rulership, about law and politics. But most, in its black comic mood, it is a unique study of the relationship of reality and the theater itself, the theater as the strongest expression of the personal awareness of reality, and its modifier.

A word about secondary sources. I have used only a few of these out of the many that were available; but I have used those that I thought especially relevant to my particular subject. Such books as I have quoted have mostly been written within the last thirty years, with the exception of some by Derek Traversi and Dover Wilson. I make my apologies to those who think that to do as I have done reflects an inadequate concern with professional English scholarship and so excludes me from constantly continuing arguments on points arising from the Shakespearean plays. Perhaps this is true. But I am not a professional English scholar but a strayed classicist, with a lifelong interest in theater from Aeschylus to Ibsen and Synge. If what I have talked about as my theme in this book is not interesting in itself to the general reader who shares my concern, it will certainly not become so through a more rigorous or complete citation of all those who have discussed anything like my subject already. It is solely to the uses of the intelligent general reader that these essays are dedicated.