



SHAKESPEARE'S
— HISTORY —

— GRAHAM HOLDERNESS —

Graham Holderness



*Shakespeare's
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Acknowledgments

The fact that this book's argument concentrates necessarily on criticism written before 1950 should not be taken to indicate that I assign no value to, or have learned nothing from, subsequent critical writing on the English history plays. The select bibliography attempts to redress this imbalance by listing important criticism not specifically addressed in these pages. Such general debts are always difficult to define: the following list of names is, however, a reasonably exhaustive catalogue of those who, in different ways, have offered more specific and individual assistance, either by suggesting or confirming ideas, providing information, stimulating thought or proffering practical help. The basic argument of the book developed out of collaboration with John Turner and Nick Potter; and large passages of it are little more than a record of conversations with my friend and colleague Christopher McCullough. The book's shortcomings are however entirely my responsibility. The dedication records the largest and least definable debt of all.

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Graham Holderness
March 1984

PART ONE
Shakespeare's History

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INTRODUCTION 1

Theory

Shakespeare

Others abide our question. Thou art free.
We ask and ask – Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge. For the loftiest hill,
Who to the stars uncrowns his majesty,

Planting his steadfast footsteps in the sea,
Making the heaven of heavens his dwelling-place,
Spares but the cloudy border of his base
To the foil'd searching of mortality;

And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know,
Self-school'd, self-scanned, self-honour'd, self-secure,
Didst tread on earth unguessed at. – Better so!

All pains the immortal spirit must endure,
All weakness which impairs, all griefs which bow,
Find their sole speech in that victorious brow.

(Matthew Arnold, 1844)¹

Matthew Arnold wanted to see literature steadily, and to see it whole. To see Shakespeare steadily and whole required a conversion of the celebrated Elizabethan dramatist into myth, into Platonic Idea, into the curious object embalmed in this sonnet. Seeing steadily and whole is a process of pure, rapt contemplation: the object contemplated is an image of divine perfection. The concept 'Shakespeare' manipulated here signifies not a man or a writer, but a canonised literary achievement into which the life of the man has been absorbed. The object constructed is a universal totality of human experience, embodying within itself all the pains, griefs and weaknesses

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of humanity, triumphantly and 'victoriously' controlled and integrated into a serene harmony, a pure transcendence disdaining all that man is, all mere complexities, 'the foil'd searching of mortality'.² Shakespeare, the work, can be integrated into that idealist totality only by wrenching it free from any organic connection with the historical conditions of its production, and by liberating it from any dependence on readership or audience. Shakespeare the writer has become 'Shakespeare', the purely autonomous producer of a pure autonomous object: 'Self-school'd, self-taught, self-honoured, self-secure'. The object itself transcends criticism, disdains question, repudiates its origins and its relations with the common life of humanity, the concrete social world of living history: 'thou art free'. The poem's cloudy idealism should not obscure the intensity with which Arnold insists on the *reality* of 'Shakespeare' as a transcendent object: not like the mountain, which could be scaled, surveyed or even moved, but like God, with an existence independent of human thought and activity.

A historical and materialist approach to Shakespeare must begin with this inherited myth, so intimately bound up with the institution of literature: for often this myth is not what we mean, but what is meant for us, when we pronounce the word 'Shakespeare'. Arnold's poem is a pure crystallisation, a remarkably extreme version, of the Shakespeare myth; and of course no contemporary criticism would adopt this overt ceremonial language of abject bardolatry. Our own century has witnessed, particularly in the ideological crises produced by the two world wars, serious and sustained attempts to historicise Shakespeare studies, which have fundamentally shaped the discipline so as to render *some* conception of Shakespeare's historicity unquestionable.³ But the Shakespeare myth is a potent ideological force and any historical study which does not begin with a conscious and systematic resistance to its pervasive influence is in danger of transmitting, rather than blocking, deflecting, subverting, *understanding*, its ideological power.

The Platonic Form of Arnold's poem finds its analogue, for example, in the fetishised literary text of orthodox criticism: which no longer believes in divine authorship, but certainly

retains its faith in the immanent verity of the eternal text. The authentic truth of the literary text is ultimately recoverable by scholarship and critical judgment; yet Arnold's heavenly mountain towers still beyond our penetration, eluding the foil'd searching of critical analysis. We are particularly well-sited today, thanks to the revolution in literary theory and critical methodology accomplished in the last decade, to recognise the partial and unsatisfactory nature of this persistent faith in the absolute text. A new awareness of the means by which 'literature' is constructed by criticism,⁴ enables us to see that any attempt to recover the 'real' or 'true' Shakespeare, involves peering through an enormously complex system of refracting prisms: the whole multifarious body of ideas, attitudes, assumptions, images, which have accrued over centuries of cultural activity centred on the writings of this particular sixteenth-century dramatist, and which constitute at any given moment the ideological problematic in which Shakespeare can be 'recognised'. Every writer, every mode of writing, has this kind of history: in the case of Shakespeare it is not merely the visible history of a literary reputation, but the enormous residuum of centuries of constructing and re-constructing a symbol: a symbol, pre-eminently, of British national culture.⁵ 'Shakespeare' is everywhere: not only in criticism and scholarship, theatre and education, television and film; but beyond these traditional media of national culture, the phenomenon appears as a component of popular culture, in the fabric of everyday common life. It is probable that every English-speaking citizen of Britain has heard of Shakespeare: not necessarily from plays or books, but from advertisements, tourist attractions, television comedies, the names of pubs and beers. In this context 'Shakespeare' (a concept which is evidently distinguishable from the writer of plays) appears as a universal symbol of high art, of 'culture', of education, of the English spirit. An agency offering elocution lessons advertises itself by a cartoon of a puzzled Shakespeare bewildered by the voice from a telephone receiver: to be understood by Shakespeare would be a guarantee of correct speech. In the TV series *Batman*, the entrance to the 'Batcave' is controlled by a switch concealed inside a bust of Shakespeare: the

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decorative property of a millionaire's house opens to activate an exotic world of drama and costume, of fantasy and adventure. If we acknowledge this history, writing about literature can no longer concern itself only with texts, biographical factors, historical background: it must at some point address that history which begins when a piece of writing or theatre embarks on its career of consumption by readership and audience: its long history of assimilation into the apparatus of culture, its incorporation into received traditions of the 'canon' of literature, its implementation in systems and structures of education. Any attempt to define what a literary work 'is' must be accompanied by an analysis of what it has become, what certain cultural and educational processes have made of it, how and why those operations took place.

II

This book, which is an investigation of some of Shakespeare's English history plays as historiography, falls therefore into two parts: the first of which attempts to describe as precisely as possible the *production* of Shakespeare's historiography, its origins, its qualities and its ideological capacities; while the other seeks to demonstrate the fate of those historiographical texts in that other history, the story of their subsequent *reproduction* in different phases of British society's historical development. An attempt to fulfil both these objectives must inevitably position itself on a site of contradiction: between those theories which seek to de-centre the text, dispose of it as a category, and de-construct the institutional apparatus of literature altogether – and those academic and educational practices which continue to install the text as the primary material of their characteristic activity. The traditional practice of critical and scholarly 'reading' must depend on confidence in the objectivity of its object. The logical conclusion of post-structuralist criticism is that this procedure is effectively meaningless, since there is no authentic text to recover, only a series of ideological reproductions to analyse:

It is this metaphysic of the text as we have called it – the concept of the text as an ideal form which has a ghostly

existence behind the variant real forms in which it exists historically – that must be broken with if Marxist criticism is to be rigorously historical and materialist. Ultimately, there is no such thing as ‘the text’. There is no pure text, no fixed and final form of the text which conceals a hidden truth which has but to be penetrated for criticism to retire, its task completed. There is no once-and-for-all, final truth about the text which criticism is forever in the process of acquiring. The text always and only exists in a variety of historically concrete forms.⁶

Here Tony Bennett concludes his argument about Russian formalism by rejecting the idealist metaphysic of the text in favour of a historically variable ‘text’ existing only in its various readings. Subsequently in an influential essay called ‘Text and History’ Bennett developed this position further, drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, who argues that a piece of writing can only function as literature if it possesses that infinitely flexible capacity for arbitrary reproduction, that ‘iterability’:

This ‘iterability’, Derrida goes on to argue, liberates the text from any possible enclosing context, be it the context of the originating moment of inscription favoured by interpretative criticism or the context of the semiotic code favoured by structuralism. The very structure of the written text is such that it carries with it a force that breaks with its context; and, indeed, with each of the contexts in which it may be successively inscribed during the course of its history. It cannot be limited by or to the context of the originating moment of its production, anchored in the intentionality of its author, because ‘the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it’.⁷

The attention of the student of literature should therefore be deflected from textual study towards ‘what might be called “the living life of the text”’; the history of its iterability, of the diverse meanings which it supports and of the plural

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effects to which it gives rise in the light of the variant contexts within which it is inscribed as it is incessantly re-read and re-written'.

Even where this argument is wholly accepted, a persuasive case can still be made for not throwing out the baby of the text with the ideologically contaminated bathwater of bourgeois criticism. In a materialist criticism the study of literature is conceived as a *practice*, an assemblage of cultural activities, generated and supervised by certain educational institutions. If that activity and those institutions are not perceived with clarity and analysed with political definition, radical cultural work becomes blindly complicit with the ideological processes it seeks to understand and master. On the other hand, if literature is a practice, and if the object is to speak intelligibly to those engaged in that practice, it is acutely necessary to intervene directly into the concrete activity at some meaningful point of access. The ideological reproduction of Shakespeare will continue with far stronger impetus, far greater resourcefulness, far suppler flexibility than the theoretical analysis of that reproduction provided by a materialist criticism: because the former has the power and adaptability of a dominant cultural apparatus. Opposition to that structure can best be focused by a dialectical strategy of simultaneous internal and external, practical and theoretical intervention: where 'reading', the practical analysis of an objective phenomenon (appropriately qualified by the awareness that one is developing *potentialities* of an object which can always offer alternative positions of intelligibility), can be strengthened by a clear-sighted description and evaluation of examples of such alternative readings and their ideological effects.

III

This pragmatic and strategic approach to criticism and teaching is widely advocated on the left⁸ and clearly it has much to recommend it. But I would also want to challenge the persuasive view that literary texts have *no* inherent qualities and have therefore infinite plurality of meaning. The basic philosophical premise of this theory is of course irrefutable: a

text only exists, only produces meaning, when it is subjected to the operations of reading, criticism, reproduction (in the case of Shakespearean drama the issue is further complicated by the fact that in the originating moment of their production these plays did not even exist as literary texts in a form recognisable to modern criticism; the implications of this crucial distinction are discussed below). Both meaning and value are produced only by certain operations of human intelligence working on the text: they are, self-evidently, historically variable. But if texts had no inherent qualities, literary criticism would be a much more efficiently organised conspiracy than it actually is: a solid tacit agreement, unbreached for centuries, to restrict readings to a particular series of problems, subjects, themes; achieved not by focusing on the limited area of meaning illuminated by the text, but by an astonishingly expert exercise of arbitrary cultural power. The text itself, I am suggesting, has a kind of authority, dependent certainly on its being situated within a certain context of discourse, but also indelibly inscribed into it by the specific conditions of its historical genesis. That authority is a matter of *meaning* rather than of *value*; and it needs to be sharply discriminated from the *authoritarianism* of those established orthodoxies which act coercively in criticism and education, effectively policing the perimeters of literary-critical discourse. But all readings, whatever their ideological tendencies, must observe the disciplined frame of reference, must inhabit the constrained area of meaning given by the text, if they are to remain in any way committed to the text as a category. Peter Stallybrass, discussing *Macbeth*⁹ in a manner designed (in Walter Benjamin's phrase) to 'brush history against the grain', and drawing on Bakhtin, Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Macherey and Robert Weimann, adheres nevertheless very firmly to a constellation of deeply ingrained topics – Stuart patronage, witches, and the tension between courtly and popular cultures. This is no criticism of his approach, which is admirable, but at no point does this typically radical analysis escape that limited area of interests prescribed by the authority of the text. Stallybrass begins not just with the play, but with important political questions of the present; it would be perfectly possible to begin with

other urgent contemporary issues, and thus manipulate the text into an external frame of reference: the morality of political assassination, or nationalism. The text would answer to those questions. Other external modes of address would require ingenuity on the critic's part, but could conceivably be made to intersect with the text's range of preoccupations: abortion, baby-battering, cookery. But if we sought to mobilise the text for a discussion of unemployment, pit closures, poverty, the wages struggle, there would be no answer: the identity of the text would deny, would refuse to *authorise*, the relevance of those issues to its imagined world.

This is not, I hope, a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Derridan position, but a practical application of its theoretical assertions. Seeking to dispose for ever of the pure autonomous text, this methodology approximates in practice to the very metaphysical idealism it opposes. Like Shakespeare in Matthew Arnold's poem, the text is free, expropriated from its author's intentions, liberated from the historical determinants operating on its original production, stripped even of the apparently accessible public meanings inscribed in its language and form. The text is free – to be arbitrarily manipulated and strategically mobilised by any cause and in any direction. This boundless plurality of the text is yet another fetishising of the historically concrete: a metaphysical faith in a theoretical ultimate which is never, in practice, explored or charted. To reserve the space of infinity while never in practice occupying more than a limited part of it would be called, in any other sphere of discourse, religion.¹⁰

IV

To deny the literary text the freedom guaranteed to it by the polysemic plurality of de-constructionism, and to argue for some conception of intrinsic identity or authority inherent in it (though the *inherence* can only be inferred from empirical observation of the practice of reading, an activity determined by considerations other than the character of the text) is a dangerous procedure; but the methodology I am advocating is in no sense a return to the objective text of orthodox criticism. To insist that a text belongs to a history of reception

in important ways separable from the conditions of its production, in no way diminishes the significance of that moment of production: the text is a part of history as it is produced and as it is consumed. The latter assertion would hardly be contested by orthodox criticism, though there is room for considerable dispute about how a text's 'historical' character should properly be disclosed. De-constructionists on the other hand, grudgingly acknowledging the relevance of this initial history, deny its *primacy* as a determinant:

The position which a text occupies within the relations of ideological class struggle at its originating moment of production is . . . no necessary indication of the positions which it may subsequently come to occupy in different historical and political contexts . . . the specific constellation of determinations characterising the originating moment of a text's production may be regarded as of unique significance. But these are in no sense ontologically privileged in relation to the subsequent determinations which bear upon the text's history.¹¹

While agreeing with Bennett that 'marxist criticism has sought to historicise literary phenomena only one-sidedly', I would confer much more significance on the specific character of the originating moment of production as a historical determinant shaping both the text and its subsequent history of reproduction. The latter history can tell us how a drama like Shakespeare's becomes constituted as a central symbol of artistic and national culture, and what social forces have required of it that ideological function; it cannot however demonstrate why in particular *Shakespeare's* drama should have been chosen, except in terms of some well-organised conspiracy arbitrarily selecting one writer for installation at the peak of the cultural hierarchy. Since it cannot be shown that literary texts contain immanent *aesthetic* values, are there not particular *historical* reasons why the drama of Shakespeare should have been chosen for the purpose? I shall be arguing in the following pages that the specific historical conditions attending the genesis of Shakespeare's drama inscribed into it patterns of meaning determining the materiality of the texts, and the subsequent history of their repro-

duction as a central focus of British national culture. To attempt an analysis of those conditions is to recover the literary text, not as a self-contained repository of meaning, but as a specified arena in which particular struggles for meaning (ultimately, though not necessarily immediately, political struggles) once took place, and can therefore be taken up again. Not any and every meaning, but those meanings and values which fall within the text's circumscribed range of significances:

Literature or fiction is not a knowledge, but it is not only a site where knowledge is produced. It is also the location of a range of knowledges. . . .

While on the one hand meaning is never single, eternally inscribed in the words on the page, on the other hand readings do not spring unilaterally out of the subjectivities (or the ideologies) of readers. The text is not an empty space, filled with meaning from outside itself, any more than it is the transcription of an authorial intention, filled with meaning from outside language. As a signifying practice, writing always offers raw material for the production of meanings . . .¹²

V

The preceding argument, though advocating a criticism of *praxis*, a dialectical unity of literary theory and critical practice, has been conducted at a somewhat rarefied level of theoretical discourse, employing the category of the 'text' as an abstract formulation. A historical criticism must always acknowledge the specific, concrete, *material* forms in which texts actually appear in history, must always interrogate the notion of the 'text' if the category is not to be re-fetishised. It has already been hinted that in a particular fundamental sense Shakespeare's 'text' eludes the abstract formulation, the changeless fixity of the immanent text, because its original form is that of *drama*: a cultural practice in which the text is necessarily external to, therefore ancillary to, the enacted performance. The alliance between literary criticism and the theatre, often a relationship of great cultural

and ideological conflict, has been developed in the present century to an intimate rapport, particularly on the ground of Shakespeare's drama,¹³ a rapprochement of literary and theoretical practices which suppresses and elides the contradictions between them. Historically, however, the plays were *drama* before they were *literature*: and it is clearly of the utmost significance to this argument that at the originating moment of their production those plays had no recognisable existence as literary texts.

The 'text' of a Shakespeare play widely taken for granted by contemporary criticism and education is the modern edition, the result of centuries of scholarly enquiry, bibliographical analysis and critical discussion, in which the 'play' appears supplemented with scholarly and critical introductions, explanatory notes, appendices giving extracts from sources, etc. The 'play' itself has been constituted as a literary object, held firmly in place by the constricting frame of scholarship and criticism which mediates the play to the modern reader. This form of the 'text' originated in the scholarly editions of the eighteenth century; and though the licence taken by Augustan editors would scandalise more reverential 'moderns', the text is recognisably similar in each case. Stripped of all critical apparatus, the text of a play in a modern edition resembles with sufficient exactness the play as it appeared in the first compilation of Shakespeare's works, The First Folio of 1623. Naturally these variant forms bear the traces of their institutional uses: the modern text clearly a text for 'critical study', assimilated to the needs of the educational system; the heavyweight eighteenth-century version a text for antiquarian exploration; The First Folio a text for reading. The earliest printed editions display much more inconsistency in their transmission of the play, because of their proximity to the specific economic and cultural practices of those individuals and groups responsible for writing, owning, performing and printing the plays.

A typical Elizabethan play designed for performance in a public playhouse was written for, perhaps commissioned by, an acting company, and became the company's property. There was no copyright in the modern sense:¹⁴ to speak of performance, copying or printing 'rights' is in any case