

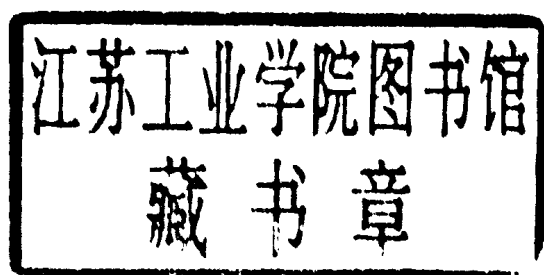
MALLIN

Inscribing the Time

Shakespeare and the End of Elizabethan England

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*Shakespeare and the End
of Elizabethan England*



Eric S. Mallin

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For my mother,
and the memory
of her mother

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Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	i
1. Emulous Factions and the Collapse of Chivalry: <i>Troilus and Cressida</i>	25
2. Word and Plague in the Second Quarto <i>Hamlet</i>	62
3. Succession, Revenge, and History: The Political <i>Hamlet</i>	106
4. “A twenty years’ removed thing”: <i>Twelfth Night</i> ’s Nostalgia	167
Notes	221
Index	271

Introduction

I

History never repeats itself, but it offers analogies.

J. E. Neale, Essays in Elizabethan History

This book is a study of three Shakespeare plays—*Troilus and Cressida*, *Hamlet*, and *Twelfth Night*—in their contemporary historical contexts. These plays disclose three very different accumulations of English political and social anxiety during the tense transitional years between the Elizabethan and Jacobean regimes.¹ I argue that the dramas imagine their stories as versions of contemporary history: they contain formations and deformations of plots, ideologies, events, and psychological accommodations at the end of the Elizabethan era. Throughout I shall claim that “history”—by which I narrowly mean the specific past of Renaissance sociopolitical and literary conditions—proves in Shakespeare’s theater to be a constant force with variable coefficients. Sometimes history is the direct referent of the dramatic business; more often it is the deferred, submerged conspirator in the plot; at still other times it proves to be an alienated, hostile presence dislodging the work from secure moorings or meanings.

Shakespeare’s Troy, Denmark, and Illyria are not repetitions of England; they are, as the epigraph from J. E. Neale is meant to suggest, analogies.² As analogies of history the plays constantly approximate and appropriate forms of the real—governmental organizations, physiologi-

cal processes, spiritual struggles—in their fictions. My arguments depart from some new-historical studies by taking the texts' topicalities not only as referent but as literary *structure*; the contemporary history materially shapes and misshapes the drama. I examine in the first chapter the way divisive Elizabethan court politics and self-delusional ideologies are mapped into the chiasitic relationships of violence in *Troilus and Cressida*. In chapter 2 I consider another cultural fact with structural implications for the plays: epidemic disease. In *Hamlet* (as to a lesser extent in *Troilus and Cressida*), the idea of contagion afflicts the root relations of language, mind, and rule, and these relations have clear historical correlates—not necessarily determinants but, again, definite analogies.

The study of plague in *Hamlet* continues figurally in the third chapter with a reading of selected contaminating histories in James's royal succession. By a "contaminating" history I mean an episode or memory that problematizes the tidy order and meaning of the new reign—specifically, a set of events that interacts with and undermines Shakespearean theatrical architecture. In *Hamlet*, contagion and succession are complementary topical anxieties, but to come to terms with these we must confront an even more sharply focused issue of locality: the status of the text itself. In chapters 2 and 3, I examine the second or "good" quarto of *Hamlet* because that text registers most suggestively, and recoverably, the material interactions of imagination and history. Of course, just because a text interacts with its environment does not mean that it necessarily becomes culture's glassy essence. *Hamlet*'s formal and textual perturbations are anything but passively reflective of the turmoil at the end of Elizabeth's reign. Aesthetic products typically rewrite their surrounding circumstances. To do so, however, they often submerge or displace the historical referent to ease the stress of the moment—thus speaking volubly about that moment and subliminally reintroducing stress. In the final chapter, on *Twelfth Night*, I attempt to dislocate my own premises, that is, to read referentiality that has moved away from the moment of theatrical production. In Illyria, Shakespeare shifts the contextual frame away from 1601. With its memorial treatment of "a kind of Puritan" threat, its mediated courtships, and its unalloyed feminine triumphs, *Twelfth Night* tries to evade the present and sets itself back in the historical middle distance.

These texts sometimes ruthlessly display, sometimes avoid or inter history's most upsetting implications. They convey multilevel anxiety, concentrations of cultural trauma that they do not, indeed cannot, fully

organize or analyze. And 1600 to 1603 are especially good years—keeping in mind the Renaissance double edge of the phrase “good years”—to examine.³ The late Elizabethan era had a preternatural sense of its own ending; the close of the period was self-consciously likened to the end of Troy, a great civilization in its death throes. At the same time, the hope of a new king compensated for the debility, as many male courtiers saw it, of an aged queen. This was, in other words, a period bristling with half-revealed personal, ideological, and political activity. My original idea for this study was to seek in historical information some wattage to brighten these plays’ dimmer passageways. But as the inquiry progressed, it became apparent that “information” itself offered only elusive simulacra of historical meaning; and the semantic slipperiness, the limited capacity of histories to fix their own (let alone Shakespeare’s) significances, led me to the present set of readings, which seek to analyze how language and local knowledge codetermine Shakespearean evasiveness.

This book, then, attempts to illuminate three temporally contiguous plays by excavating their possible relations to historical origins and contexts. To some extent, however, the idea of origins is a fiction, a magic bullet that shatters interpretive obstructions to the past; an origin, like a reference, is really only an infinite regress of references. Like origin and reference, context too represents a construct shaped from a desire to know, to stabilize what is always in motion. The notion of context in postmodernity must seem a quaint and factitious convention. Nonetheless, it is an indispensable one. Understanding that the historical context is to some extent an arbitrary construct does not alter the fact that such constructs are epistemological necessities which orient cognition in crucial ways. If we connect verbal texts to social ones, we cannot but admit that people live, know, converge, fail, fight, create, and adapt in contexts, experienced not as arbitrary but as the bounded real. This reality is factored through a wide array of social possibilities: gender and sexuality, class and status, race and creed. What makes the idea of contexts epistemologically thorny is that persons in different subject positions move through a broad range of experience or Althusserian “lived relation to the real”; “the real” changes, depending upon one’s aesthetic or historical contextualization of the particular subject position. Context inevitably alters the understood nature of persons and their histories.

This interdependence of text (historical subject, aesthetic object) and context (historical moment, ideological condition or structure), however lacking in explicit social reference, is neatly figured in Wallace Ste-

vens's well-known poem "Anecdote of the Jar." This work smartly reverses polarities of text and context, properly erasing each as a separate entity. The poem's speaker sets or has set an object, a text of sorts, in a notoriously general region or context:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.⁴

Even though uncontained, the context is "made" to do the bidding of the text; the jar enforces compliance from the wilderness. But the text, the jar, is itself literally a container: it is a figure for context, ajar to the possibility of (semantic) openings and closings; and the slovenly wilderness, seemingly the frame for the jar, itself stands for a very traditional artistic *text*—unruly nature, tamed by art. So Stevens's opening stanza engulfs in one landscape of understanding the interpenetration of text and context, both of which inhabit and disrupt the frame that describes them. Some of the theoretical difficulty of contexts can be alleviated in a Stevensian way, by seeing them as continuous with or transparent to the text—or better still, as having been created or made to surround the text *by* the text, even as the jar eventually "took dominion everywhere" inside the poem and inside the landscape it controls.

Shakespearean contexts always recreate this border indeterminacy: the plays extend from the formations that are their subtextual subject. Far from being the preserve of disinterested cultural information, this theater is always a version of what it contains, implicated in the world it describes. As Fredric Jameson has said:

The literary or aesthetic act . . . always entertains some active relationship with the Real; yet in order to do so, it cannot simply allow "reality" to persevere inertly in its own being, outside the text and at a distance. It must rather draw the Real into its own texture. . . . The symbolic act therefore begins by generating and producing its own context in the same moment of emergence in which it steps back from it, taking its measure with a view toward its own projects of transformation.⁵

A flexible category in and of itself, "context" varies dramatically as well among recent Renaissance literary theorists. For some new historicists, a relevant frame for interpretation may be far displaced from the text's temporal or spatial vicinity. The margins of context can stretch out over oceans, years, and artistic forms. For example, to Stephen Greenblatt, an Albrecht Dürer print shows something critical about the representa-

tional status of rebellion which is reconfigured in Shakespeare's 2 *Henry VI*; a story about French hermaphroditism furnishes a way of understanding sexual homologies and erotic exchanges in *Twelfth Night*.⁶ Walter Cohen calls this interpretive technique "arbitrary connectedness": "The strategy is governed methodologically by the assumption that any one aspect of society is related to any other. No organizing principle determines these relationships: any social practice has at least a potential connection to any theatrical practice. . . . The commitment to arbitrary connectedness inevitably limits the persuasiveness of much new historicist work."⁷ Cohen proceeds to expose some of the contradictions in Greenblatt's work, but he admits that because "theater itself is a contradictory institution," the desultory evidentiary procedures of new historicism are somewhat mitigated "at a higher level of abstraction." Cohen is right to perceive virtues and flaws in the technique. This mode of reading tends not to be *specifically* explanatory because it so often strays far from the text at hand; but it does often work "at a higher level of abstraction" to dissolve the notion of context in a productive rather than reductive way. This hermeneutic reminds us that an element of arbitrary connectedness inheres in every interpretive act. What, after all, counts as a "relevant" piece of information? The "arbitrary" or perhaps nonlocal form of new historicism reconstructs ideological or discursive formations and practices and relates them to semantic flash-points in a given text. But for all its sophistication, the method frequently depends on the presumption of a stable set of historical meanings which, however unpredictably connected, tend to cast an even light over the ragged surfaces of the text. "Power," "authority," even "gender" have often worked similarly in new-historicist readings over severely differing contexts, and history in this discipline can come to seem too disciplined, a surprisingly confined signifier.

For better or worse, I have sought to limit arbitrariness by focusing on a specific temporal region of disruption: the transition from the Elizabethan to the Jacobean regimes. I have also tried to convey the sense of flux and destabilization inherent in this historical moment. As much as possible, I confine my inquiries here to local pressures that operate, often unpredictably, within a space of change.⁸ Because I am not describing a general "poetics of culture" so much as a particular poetics of the theater's use of culture, I am pledged to pertinent contexts insofar as these can be determined and curtailed. Locality, employed as a main interpretive template, allows the critic to read the literary text through its *most probable* stresses and histories and to delimit the profusion of

narratives that cause both arbitrary and likely influences to blend. Local reading can narrow the bewildering semantic range of the plays by pinning them to a nearby context; it can also, however, enlarge a drama's signifying potential should the text (like *Hamlet*, for instance) fail to specify limitations to contextual meanings. Because contexts, like "historical moments," are theoretically infinite, construing them always involves an act of containment, a resistance to the alluring fact or alternative story.

Here, then, are some of my self-imposed interpretive guidelines in this book. Although it is difficult to mark the termini of historical moments, I have generally confined my analyses to the period defined in the book's subtitle, or—as in the case of Scottish succession history and the early Puritan movement, discussed in chapters 3 and 4 respectively—to those histories which have clear and ongoing implications for this period and these texts. Likewise, I have attempted to limit context spatially. This book assumes that these are English histories that Shakespeare is on the verge of writing; their foreign settings distantiate reference only to secure, not frustrate, local interest. Given the fact that fashion, religion, and even genre circulate among nations, it may seem unnecessary to restrict topicality to English concerns, which could never—as some of the breathless reports of foreign ambassadors attest—remain strictly English. But in this particular historical niche, Shakespeare's plays concern themselves with the cultural peril of specifically English politics and ideology. These dramas are hardly cogent vehicles for jingoistic sentiment; but their central concerns are local, however broadly representative (i.e., "universal") that locality manages to be. Finally, I proceed on the assumption that historical contexts must demonstrably *play into* plot, theme, genre, image, or staging; the drama's central literary features must be apposite to or cognate with some significant cultural fact or presence and so create a representational resonance with history. Selective narrowing of contexts offers the best chance to recover the intercourse between text and time. I have tried, then, to slow down the frames of historical reference that blur past in Shakespeare's plays; or to put it another way, I have placed the jar of the text within and about its known historical conditions.

The trick word in that last sentence is "known." This book attempts to deploy but also to extend and reconfigure the historically known. No small presumption for a nonhistorian, this effort can nonetheless be justified by the nature of historical knowledge, which I take to be largely documentary—that is, textual, and thus always legitimately subject to

rereading. An interpretive instability must be acknowledged at once: the past that I read through Shakespeare's texts has already been read by those texts and finessed, over time, by generations of historians and critics; and the idea of the theater that I attempt to nourish through cooked (i.e., selected and processed) data cannot provide any certain access to the lived past of the plays. This dilemma of mediated histories can be eased if we see the text itself as an historical repository, with a direct, participatory relation to its time. In this regard, we may follow Foucault's early work in attempting to establish "archaeologies" of knowledge resident in cultural productions.

Perhaps an analogy in more traditional archaeological terms is in order. One interesting formation common in the Middle East is the tell, a hill-shaped site on which several generations or even civilizations have successively built. An artificial construct—"the accumulated remains of one or more ancient settlements"⁹—the tell stands to a modern age as comprehension's rough draft, a version of historical fact anticipating the refinements of taxonomists, curators, and theoreticians. Compressing the past, the site presents a convenient if deformed epitome of cultural activity. Because the tell displays without making definitive disclosures, it is, befitting its homonym, a kind of narrative. Like any story, the tell is an occasion for analysis, the groundwork for topical understanding.

To read literature by way of the past, one may usefully regard the text as a tell-like structure: a repository of tiered and culled histories compressed into shapes that forerun meaning. The archaeological site resembles the literary artifact in that both comprise superposed layers of significance.¹⁰ The more deeply submerged the level, the more difficult it is to retrieve and reconstruct without altering it—but the better preserved that level may be because of its chthonic embeddedness. In texts as in tells, crucial referentiality tends not to be disposed too close to the surface. The archaeological model offers the hope that some trace essence of the real can be reclaimed—certainly not without losing some data, but perhaps without scattering entirely the forms of the distant past. The literary artifact differs in important ways, of course, from the tell, particularly in its constitutive materials: the verbal work assembles subliminal, cognitive, and tonal elements from its culture, the "prior historical or ideological *subtext*," in Jameson's words, of the society (*Political Unconscious*, 81). But the analogy of text to tell *can* illuminate the theoretical pitfalls of interpretive excavations. In hoping to find the thing in itself, the past-as-it-was, archaeological work may accidentally erase periodic or epochal divisions; later historical intrusion often disturbs the