

Shakespeare's History Plays

Richard II to Henry V

The Making of a King

C. W. R. D. Moseley

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Foreword

There are too many books on Shakespeare, and too many people spend their time reading them rather than his plays. This book must therefore, in all courtesy, begin by apologizing for its existence.

In many years of teaching, I have been struck by two recurrent problems that face the student just beginning the study of this myriad-minded man. The first is that to get properly to grips with him a good deal of background is necessary, and the long march in through the foothills can exhaust the student before he even glimpses the peaks. For, like it or not, the past is not the same country as the one we live in, and we need maps. I felt there was a need for a book of manageable size which would gather in one place at an accessible level the essential background knowledge about the thought, the values and the theatre of Shakespeare's times. Secondly, the four plays that Shakespeare wrote about the consequences of the deposition of Richard II—which I shall call for convenience the Ricardian plays, to distinguish them from the history plays that cover the later fifteenth century—need looking at, not necessarily together, but at least in the context of Renaissance concepts of history, the history play, and the practical problems of English politics.

I have therefore written this book in two parts. In Part I, I have tried to provide some contexts for what is inevitably our *reading* of the history plays, so that perhaps we may guess at the impact they may have had on their contemporaries. I shall suggest, by implication, a way of approaching Elizabethan drama that may be generally useful. Part II is a consideration of what I think are some major issues in the Ricardian plays. (There are those who will feel they can go straight to it and start reading there.) I hope that it will be seen as an 'enabling' book, whose job is to send students back to the reading of a good annotated edition to face their own problems and responses; it emphatically does not attempt to provide a final view.

It is therefore written to be discarded; when it has, I hope, sent

its readers back to Shakespeare, perhaps with an enhanced enjoyment and understanding of what are beautiful and moving and hugely enjoyable works of art, it can go back to its primeval dust.

Quotations and references are to the New Penguin Shakespeare editions.

1. Introduction

It is doubtful whether there could be a more unsatisfactory way of approaching Shakespeare and his plays than the one suffered by generations of English-speaking people. Almost universally, our first experience of the man's work is in the classroom, where—often under the shadow of impending examinations—the once fair body is dismembered into forty-minute chunks of dreamy afternoons. It is hardly surprising that the vast majority of his compulsory readers never willingly open a text or go to see a play after they escape from the educational system.

The study of the plays as printed texts can be extremely interesting and rewarding, and indeed is utterly necessary, but what has happened to the plays as academic material could not be further from Shakespeare's intentions when he wrote them. He seems, from one or two remarks and characters, to have had no love for school and to have regarded schoolmasters and academics as harmless drudges of comic self-importance. Shakespeare was a working dramatist in a very competitive world; he was writing highly topical plays to catch a particular market, and if he did not pull in an audience, the theatrical company in which he had a substantial financial share did not eat that week. What he and his fellows were selling was not a printed book but a heard and seen experience. As a result, he was far more concerned with the design of a very complex system of communication, as a tool to make the audience respond as he wished, than with a merely verbal text.

The very word 'text' raises problems to begin with. A book containing a poem or a novel may seem to be the same sort of object as a book containing a play, and we use the shorthand word 'text' to cover them all. But there are obvious dissimilarities. The novel presents the solitary reader with a complete armoury of the material the author has designed to convey what he wants to talk about;

it can be read slowly or quickly, it can be put down while one gets a drink or whatever, or one can flip back a few pages to refresh one's memory. The only clues to meaning lie in the words on the page. But the play is a shared experience, taking place in a special building (in Shakespeare's day with very clear and important symbolic overtones) and it goes at the speed the actors and director decide rather than at the individual viewer's. There is no flicking back here. Moreover, our reception of any play is greatly affected by personal animal responses to the appearance, personalities and voices of the actors taking part, and by the control of those elements by the director's choice of pace, emphasis and even scenery. In everyday life much of our communication is in any case non-verbal—by inflection, tone, gesture, facial expression—and these factors obviously operate on the stage as well. In Shakespeare's case, we know that he—though apparently not a great actor himself—was deeply interested in the craft and was clearly on hand in the theatre to tell people how he wanted things played. Take a crucial example: at the end of *Lear* there are two mutually exclusive ways of playing Lear's death. He can be seen as dying in the belief that Cordelia is alive, thus on an ironic upbeat, or he can be seen as dying in utter despair. The words will carry both senses (*King Lear*, 5.3.303–9). But Shakespeare chose only one, and told his company which it was. He is not around, unfortunately, to tell us. So when we speak of a 'text' in drama, we ought to do so with a mental reservation, recognizing that we have a very complex interaction of sign systems to cope with. Especially, we ought to recognize that the printed words are merely one notation of one element in something which works not only by sound but also by vision; indeed, the dramatic spectacle is a speaking picture—a favourite Renaissance catchphrase—and the way pictures work will obviously be relevant to the way plays do. Some of these different languages—of vision, sound, movement and so on—we may be able, by scholarship, common sense and comparison with other works, to recover; some of the most important—what it felt like actually to be a Renaissance man, for instance—are unknowable.

The problem with any great art, especially perhaps the classic drama of the past, is that it works in all periods and can be significant

in many different cultures where its original techniques and assumptions are not shared. One has only to look at the way in which the drama of classical Greece, originally tightly linked to a communal religious festival quite irrelevant to us now and using many techniques of which we can know little or nothing, has fertilized the minds, imaginations and art of Western men over something like two millennia. It can emotionally pulverize a completely unscholarly audience today. Moreover, ideas and concepts that have developed since a work of art was made—sometimes partly as a result of that work of art—can usefully and powerfully affect the way we look at it; and, conversely, the way we see it affecting us. So, for example, if people want to play Hamlet as a comic romp or as a Freudian exploration of sexuality, or Falstaff as the sort of uncle we all think we'd like to have (all approaches that depend on insights into human nature formulated since the plays were written), all well and good; the only proviso is that we recognize that we are bringing to the plays our own preconceptions, which may well not be Shakespeare's. But, on the other hand, many have believed over the centuries that Shakespeare is one of the greatest geniuses the world has ever seen, whose penetration and understanding of the human condition is of extraordinary profundity. I would like to think that in studying Shakespeare, as perhaps not in watching him now, we are making an attempt to open ourselves so as to get to grips with that unparalleled mind for what he has got to tell us rather than for what we can foist on him. But before we can do that, we need to learn his language. We also need to recognize that he was a man who existed in moving time like ourselves, and that his assumptions and conventions are not ours. They too are part of his language. He cannot fairly be read if we pretend he is other than he is: a man of the Renaissance, in the peculiar late form it took in England.

2. The Revolution of the Orbs

A The Model and its Consequences

As I look up from writing this and glance out of the window, I see a world which no Renaissance man could have seen. I have assumptions, of which I am not conscious, about its nature and structure which are the consequence of my education and upbringing at a particular point in the development or decline of Western civilization. Renaissance men certainly contributed to the world view a late twentieth-century middle-aged academic might have, but they could not share my post-Newtonian, post-Einstein views of its physical nature and structure. Nor, despite the fact that our language and speech contain fossils of their way of looking at things, could they have shared my view of man and his society. They inhabited, in fact, a planet that in a real sense was different, circling a different sun. We find their footprints on the sands of time, but must not imagine we have nearly found Man Friday.

Before we go any further, we must examine what model of the world they used. It is worth stressing that it was a model, and that it fitted the facts, and how they were perceived, as they knew them at the time—just as ours does. But all models, ours included, are temporary and provisional, and none can be in any absolute sense ‘true’. And while some things are proved to be false by subsequent thought and discoveries, many ideas, values and systems—and models—fall into disuse not because they are proved ‘wrong’ but because they are victims of the great god fashion. Chronological snobbery, for the serious student, is thus completely out of place. It is entirely possible that in some ways our fathers got the business of making sense of the world right where we are getting it disastrously wrong. We may be able to learn something of real truth and value from the Renaissance model of the universe which no cosmologist would now accept as physically accurate.