

*Literature Insights*  
General Editor: Charles Moseley

William Shakespeare

*Richard III*

*& Henry IV*

*A Guide to the Plays*

C. W. R. D. MOSELEY

A Guide to  
William Shakespeare  
*Richard III and Henry IV*

C. W. R. D. Moseley

# A Note on the Author

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He is General Editor of the Literature Insights series, to which his contributions will include studies of *The Tempest*, and Shakespeare's treatment of *Henry IV*, together with a companion to all our Renaissance Drama titles: *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare's Time*.

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 *Richard III and Henry IV*

Elizabethans expected plays to amuse and divert them. If they did not, their authors and the companies they worked for did not make a living in a very cut-throat market. In the new permanent commercial theatres of the later Elizabethan period, attitudes to drama and expectations of its [conventions](#) had been formed by centuries of religious and ritual drama – the Mystery and Morality plays. And although by definition what we see on the stage is not ‘the real thing’, but a representation, neither that nor its amusement value prevents theatre being a highly self-conscious and serious intellectual pursuit, recognized as such by audiences and playwrights, actors and critics. The profundity of Shakespeare’s concerns and their analysis in his plays may be unusual in degree, but those concerns are shared by his fellow-dramatists.

This book deals with only three plays, one of them in two parts,<sup>1</sup> but they are part not only of one man’s work with a particular group of actors, but also of a general theatrical culture which was one of the only two mass media of the period, to which everyone, more or less, went and to which nobody could not have an attitude. (The other was sermon.) I therefore RECOMMEND STRONGLY THAT THIS BOOK BE READ IN CONJUNCTION with my *English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare’s Time* (hereafter *Very Brief Intro.*) in this series. What follows is based in some degree on the assumption that it will be.

Those familiar with what we know about Shakespeare the man and the background of Elizabethan culture can skip Chapters 1 and 2 and go straight to the discussion of the play, always bearing in mind the close connection in that society between theatre and politics: theatre provided one of the few spaces where the undiscussable could be discussed through a fable and a large number of people at once could in the ritual space of the theatre face the problems of the real world transmuted into fiction. No wonder the authorities were so nervous of the theatres, and keen at the same time

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<sup>1</sup> There was quite a fashion in the 1590s for two or even three part plays, performed (so it seems) on consecutive afternoons. The commercial advantage was that the audience came twice, paying each time. There were, as we shall see, artistic bonuses too.

to use to their own purposes. The audience's interest in history at all suggests not mere curiosity about the past—which could be much more easily satisfied than by a play—but rather an attempt to understand the nature of the political and moral issues that beset them in their own time by, so to speak, isolating them in the test-tube of history. This was an age, after all, when the relationship between the ruled and the ruler was of passionate and overwhelming interest—to the point where death itself was not too high a stake; when the obligations of the one to the many (and vice versa) were problems not merely of morality but of politics too; when a sense of distinctive nationhood was fostered by insecurity at home and trouble abroad; when, finally, men and women were hesitantly but to at least some extent consciously mapping out the sort of society they felt to be just and to strike the right balance between the things that are of Caesar and those that are God's. The old image of the body politic acquires a new force; it is made up of its many members, but how are those members to agree together in a common purpose? The body politic's distempers in the past may suggest a better understanding for those in the present.

Shakespeare's vision of English history is no unthinking acceptance of any Panglossian myth that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds as long as a Tudor finally gets the throne. He is very aware that Tudors too are fallen beings who judge wrongly and destroy things of value: the dignity he gives Wolsey in his fall and the heroic patience and pathos he gives Queen Catherine in *Henry VIII* make that clear, and his endorsement of Henry Tudor at the end of *Richard III* looks pretty perfunctory. Even his political victors and heroes are flawed. He shows a Bolingbroke who never knows peace, mental or political, after Richard II's death; the opposition to him would literally dismember the body of England to satisfy their own desire for power; his son Hal is aware almost to despair of the huge moral burden the king must bear as a ruler as well as of his inherited burden of guilt and injustice. Shakespeare is exploring, it seems, the very nature of rule and of political relationships in the body politic. One of the greatly interesting aspects of the plays dealing with historical material lies in the way that material opens up the issues of order and harmony in a state, which are all very well when outlined theoretically—as they are by Ulysses, whose speech I quote below. But, alas, the theory rarely accords with the observed practices of men.

As will be clear, I discuss these plays from the perspective of its place in a sequence. It would therefore be wise for readers of this book to know *Richard II* and *Henry V*, as I shall have to refer to them frequently.

## 1.2 William Shakespeare: A Brief Life

We know far less—though not nothing—about Shakespeare than we do about almost any other European writer of stature since the Middle Ages. As a result, far more has been written about him, his life and his deepest thoughts than almost anyone else. The speculative to the bizarre been well represented, and the ‘[authorship question](#)’ has added to the gaiety of nations. He was born in 1564, probably on April 23, at Stratford-on-Avon, to John Shakespeare, a substantial citizen of that religiously conservative town, and his wife Mary Arden. He died there in 1616.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare was a man of the later renaissance in the peculiar form it took in England. We do him a great disservice if we ever ignore that fact. His lifetime coincides with a period of rapid, painful and far-reaching changes and uncertainty in matters of politics and religion, and in ideas of the nature of the world and of man. Old certainties, if not abandoned (as they were *not* entirely), were being radically redrafted; new ideas, new structures, new pressures had to be accommodated. This was not a happy time. Religious divides ran deep, extending to execution and judicial torture, and often coinciding with the fault lines of interest and bad-tempered political allegiance. Shakespeare cannot have not shared the anxieties of his time. His father was certainly a Catholic all his life, and suffered for it; William had relatives (through his mother) who were martyrs; he could well have been a Catholic too, though, even more so than for many folk, his own views are elusive—and one thing you cannot do is read off certainties about the life and beliefs of the writer from the extraordinarily complex co-operations that made plays in this period. Shakespeare was also something of a Johnny-come-lately, an outsider, for unlike nearly all his fellow poets or dramatists, he was neither noble, nor from the universities of Oxford or Cambridge or the law schools of the Inns of Court. His education stopped, so far as we know, with the very good grammar school education of Stratford, which gave him the grounding in the Latin Classics that formed the common bedrock of reference, the templates for understanding, of any person of even moderate education in the Europe of his day. He had no advantage from any connection with any noble house. He made his way simply by his extraordinary facility with words and what they could do. Yet we know

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1 Useful biographies, making as much of the evidence we have of his life and his context as possible, are those by Park Honan, *Shakespeare: A Life* (Oxford, 2000) and Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare* (Arden, 2001). See also the suggestions advanced by Richard Wilson, *Secret Shakespeare* (2005) and Clare Asquith, *Shadow Play* (2006). See also my brief essay, ‘William Shakespeare’, in *The Continuum Encyclopaedia of British Literature*, ed. S. Serafin, (Continuum: New York, 2000) .



almost nothing about even the facts, let alone the inner life, of Shakespeare the Man. We have no letters, no diary, a tiny amount in his handwriting, a problematic will. We have some enigmatical sonnets, which have often been taken, but on very shaky grounds, as a distorted mirror of some of his deep affections. We have two assured and stylish up to the minute poems written for clever-clever young men, of which he was obviously proud; and we have a clutch of plays, none of which he ever bothered to see through the press. He wrote *less* than some other major authors of his time—and most of what he wrote was in the rather down-market form of plays, not regarded as serious writing at all until the very end of his career. He left no body of theoretical or critical writing behind him, as did Lope de Vega or Ben Jonson. He does not even seem to have had a particularly high reputation as a writer of plays during his working life, though his company was certainly regarded as the foremost.

He was, and (and if the evidence of the dedication of *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece* is anything to go by) wanted to be thought of as, a writer, a poet, in the line that stretched back through Chaucer to the great poets of Rome: especially Vergil and Ovid. He clearly read deeply in Vergil and Horace and, especially, Ovid: their influence, even direct borrowings, is apparent not only in those early poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, designed for a cultivated audience—where one might expect such echoes—but also all over plays designed for much more heterogeneous audiences. It is important to recognise how alert Shakespeare was to Classical culture, and expected his audiences to be so too. Not only was knowledge of Vergil and Ovid well diffused even among those with no Latin, but the history and politics of Rome, the memory of its Empire, helped form the models on which Renaissance people articulated their understanding of their politics and their theories of the state. The Christian culture of sixteenth-century Europe relied for its educational materials almost entirely on the pagan Classical inheritance: an intriguing irony. But it is more than that: for the Christian, with the benefit of Revelation, resembles a dwarf sitting on the shoulders of the giants of Antiquity. He could not see at all without their support, but can see further than they can. And so Ovid, Vergil, Cicero, Livy, Seneca, are properly brought into the service of a Christian culture, a Christian world view, that sees all world history as a narrative that will eventually end with Apocalypse. There are many writers, thinkers and rulers in Shakespeare's lifetime—including, perhaps, the man himself—who really thought that Apocalypse might be very soon, and that in it, England, that 'other Eden, demi-Paradise', as John of Gaunt in *Richard II* calls it, would have a special role to play.

There are several years when we have no idea what he was doing, and so much

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