



Shakespeare's Politics

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I. SHAKESPEARE'S POLITICS¹

By CHRISTOPHER MORRIS

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IN the year 1582 William Camden the antiquary was about to venture into a remote country beyond the mountains, called Lancashire, 'which', he wrote, 'I go unto (God speed me well) after a sort somewhat against my will . . . but I will proceed, in hope that God's assistance, which hitherto hath been favourable unto me, will not now fail me'.² Such qualms might well assail any professional historian who plans an expedition into Shakespeare country; for the trail is marked by his predecessors' whitening bones and, in one case, by bones which the vultures have not finished picking clean.

Nevertheless, no historian of Elizabethan thought should be content to camp permanently in the flat, well-surveyed land staked out for 'history'. He must feel that there is 'something lost behind the ranges'. For he should know that literature is, among other things, only the name given to the more readable of historical documents. He should know, too, that cross-fertilization between subjects, the breaking down of faculty walls, is now, or ought to be, the top priority in educational reform—as some of our newer universities have realized. In any case, the historian of Elizabethan thought can hardly afford to neglect the greatest of all Elizabethan thinkers—unless he is willing to be like a medievalist who has not read a page of Dante or a classical archaeologist whose excavations have left him with no time for Homer.

I have called Shakespeare a great thinker advisedly, because it is no longer possible to think of him in terms of 'native wood-notes wild', or to suppose that even so great a poet could throw off a little thing like *King Lear* as it were in his sleep, without taking conscious thought. He has been moved, long since, far along the spectrum—much nearer to Solomon and much further from the lilies of the field.

It is with his conscious thought that I am here almost exclusively concerned; for I have no intention of trespassing on psychoanalytic territory. That is to say, I do not propose to discuss what may have been in Shakespeare's unconscious mind when he was writing, nor what may be in our own unconscious minds when we are reading or seeing one of Shakespeare's plays—although I am aware that it is partly the unconscious elements both

¹ This paper is substantially the same as a lecture given by the author to the Anglo-American Historical Conference at the Institute of Historical Research, London, in July 1964.

² *Britannia*, trans. Philemon Holland (1637), p. 745.

in him and in ourselves which make us find him moving. Moreover, I am not attempting literary criticism. I shall treat Shakespeare, on this occasion, simply as a historical document—knowing of course that he is a very great deal more.

Shakespeare had conscious thoughts and, of necessity, he had thoughts which must be called political. To say that he had no politics is to say that he had no views on what is good or bad in a society and no interest in the effects of men's power over other men. Does he not say, in the first line of *Measure for Measure*, that he is setting out 'Of government the properties to unfold'?

But at once certain very real problems arise. Did he think only 'what oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed'? Does he merely reflect the accepted commonplaces and assumptions of his day, the official propaganda line which, as a royal employee, he was paid to reproduce? Or does he in some way add to and transcend all this? Alternatively, was Dr Johnson right in saying that Shakespeare 'is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally; but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him'?³

There is yet another possibility, since almost all the greatest poets have a way of accepting what is orthodox and yet of writing as it were in tension with it. The resultant counterpoint is largely what constitutes their greatness. The true poet may have to be, as Blake said of Milton, at least half 'of the devil's party without knowing it'. The author of the Book of Job fears but scarcely admires and still less loves Jehovah, and the same might be said of Aeschylus in relation to Zeus. Dante accepts Hell but resents his friend Ser Brunetto Latini having to be there. Nor can he conceal his admiration for Farinata 'lifting his head as if he held Inferno in great disdain'.⁴ Marlowe knows that Faustus must be damned, but is half angry as well as wholly pitiful about the necessity. Shakespeare, at any rate in his maturity, had sympathies at least as wide and was troubled by questionings that ran just as deep.

But the claim to know what Shakespeare thought may be impertinent. After all, Shakespeare did not write treatises or sermons, still less autobiographies. He wrote plays. And this in itself constitutes a problem. It is true that a series of distinguished critics, from William Hazlitt down to T. S. Eliot, have endeavoured to persuade us that the play is *not* the thing, that one should not bother to *see* a Shakespeare play since the text should be good enough for us. But, with due respect, is not this equivalent to saying, 'I never watch a cricket match; Wisden is good enough for me', or 'I never take a railway journey; all I need is the time-table'?

³ *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. Raleigh (Oxford, 1925), pp. 20-1.

⁴ *Inferno*, xv, 121-4, and x, 35-6.

My point is threefold. First, the effect of a play is the effect of a whole, not that of parts. It does not depend upon isolated speeches or even upon isolated scenes. And, if we wish to discover the author's thought, we must consider the tenor or moral of the play taken as a whole. Secondly, a play seen is different from a play read. We all know that in 1601 the Essex faction bribed the players to revive *Richard II*. We are, at first, puzzled because to us the king has all the best poetry and seems a romantic, moving, martyred figure. This comes partly from living in a more romantically minded age but perhaps more still from *reading*. A play to the Elizabethans was something to be seen, not read. What the audience *saw* was a weak, neurotic, self-dramatizing king showing his unfitness for his job and getting publicly dethroned. Significantly, the deposition scene was left out of the earlier printed versions and may not, even now, be shown in Ethiopia. Again, it is well known that many of the plays only seem 'problem plays' when they are read. Would *Hamlet* seem so full of problems if one did not know the story, if one had never read the text and if one were seeing it acted for the first time?

Thirdly, Shakespeare was not only a playwright but a great one. Therefore he does not always show his hand. He can and does get inside and sympathize with all, or almost all, his characters—even the villains. He can present every point of view with such conviction that we have to be careful before saying 'This one is Shakespeare's own'. It is never quite true that 'Shakespeare says' something. It is one of the characters who says it; although admittedly there are, chiefly in his earlier plays, choric characters, like Mercutio or like the Bastard in *King John* or like John of Gaunt, whose point of view is in some sense the author's own. The same might perhaps be said of Enobarbus, of Menenius and of the Fool in *Lear*. But, broadly speaking, Keats was right in saying that 'the chameleon poet . . . has no Identity—he is continually infor[ming] and filling some other body'.⁵ As a *reductio ad absurdum* let me recall C. E. Montague's story in which two young men set up an advertising agency to provide 'Shakespearean' recommendations for any commodity or for any cause—such as 'Tell me where is fancy bred' for the Viennese Baker in Bond Street, or 'I am a great eater of beef and I believe that does harm to my wits' for the vegetarians, or 'there is no fellow in the firmament' for the atheists.⁶

We know as a rule what side Marlowe is on, but this is not invariably so with Shakespeare. He can be all things to all men; and no party can claim him with much certainty. When he is inside Ulysses he is all for law and order, but, inside Falstaff, Shakespeare can play the anarchist and it is 'old father antic the law'. When he is inside Coriolanus Shakespeare is an oligarch and, inside Brutus, an academic liberal. He can scarcely be said to approve

⁵ Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 Oct. 1818.

⁶ 'My Friend the Swan', in *Fiery Particles* (Phoenix Library, 1928), pp. 77–8.

of Richard Crookback but at least Shakespeare reveals that he knows what it feels like to be a 'Machiavel'; and, like Marlowe, Shakespeare cannot quite resist the dramatic or aesthetic fascinations of a man who can be (to use Machiavelli's own phrases) 'splendidly wicked' or 'magnificent in a mischief'.⁷ In any case, Shakespeare was too great a dramatist not to have made even his villains and his butts into intelligible human beings—and to understand is half-way to forgiving. Jack Cade is both a villain and a butt yet, because he is also slightly comic, wanting the pint pot to hold a quart, there is something in him towards which both we and Shakespeare warm. Cade's later successors, the Tribunes in *Coriolanus*, are not comic but they are much more formidably human and Shakespeare has found it hard work to stop them running away with our sympathies.

Without any doubt, Shakespeare shared fully in the Elizabethan passion for order; nevertheless, in his maturity, when he is inside Timon or Thersites or Lear in his madness, Shakespeare can be a nihilist and can see the hollowness of order. He knows as well as anyone that there can be insolence in office, that a dog can be obeyed in office and that there can be very real difficulty in knowing 'which is the justice, which is the thief?' And before we accept too readily the textbook view of Shakespeare as the ardent royalist, it may be worth noting that the most royalist sentiments in *Hamlet* are put into the mouths of Claudius and of Rosencrantz. The sentiments may not, at that time, have been Shakespeare's own.

Nor are we necessarily on surer ground if we try to consider the moral or tenor of a play taken as a whole. At first sight *Henry V* may well be taken for a militarist play—until we notice that, without exception, every outburst of patriotic highfalutin is followed immediately by an episode showing the seamy or the grim side of war. Perhaps in the play's total orchestration the louder notes are militarist and patriotic, but this is hardly so in *Troilus and Cressida*, a piece of anti-militarist propaganda if ever there was one.

But there is no need to despair of any solution. For, without being unduly subjective, we can quite often tell whose side Shakespeare is on and, perhaps more often still, whose side he is against. He is against Iago, Aaron, Claudius, Angelo, Goneril and Regan, Lady Macbeth, Malvolio. He meant to be, but did not wholly succeed in being, against Shylock, Caliban, and Falstaff.

Besides, we know Shakespeare's view on at least one important matter. For, although he has been claimed by the Catholics and also by the atheists, Shakespeare was in fact an Anglican. How devout an Anglican we do not know. But devout enough to pass muster with the Church authorities when in 1608 he became godfather to Master William Walker. Godparents, we must remember, were carefully scrutinized in those days. It ought not to

⁷ *Discorsi*, Book I, ch. xxvii.

have needed the pile-driver of American scholarship to punch home this point; but at any rate the nail has now been squarely hit.⁸

Furthermore, we know that Shakespeare preferred good to evil. In depicting evil he does not 'plate sin with gold'. Indeed his view of sin closely resembles that of President Coolidge's preacher. He is against it. So much so that, in comparison with other Elizabethan dramatists, Shakespeare is almost priggish. Being a full man, he was not averse from bawdiness. Nevertheless, he often bowdlerized the plots he took from classical or from Italian sources. To give just one example, Plautus who provided the story for *The Comedy of Errors* has incest in his plot; but Shakespeare cuts it out. Nor, unlike his contemporary playwrights, does he ever give approval to adultery—except possibly that of Antony and Cleopatra. In *The Merry Wives* it is the lover, not the husband, who gets tricked. How unlike Boccaccio or Brantôme!⁹ Coleridge was surely right in alleging that 'Shakespeare may sometimes be gross, but I boldly say that he is always moral'.¹⁰ One might indeed go further and suggest that Shakespeare stands almost alone, with a tiny handful of great writers, with Dante, Bunyan, Dostoevsky and less than half a dozen more, that exceedingly select band who have known how to make moral goodness aesthetically attractive.

It is of course obvious that among the things Shakespeare thought good were something he called 'Nature' and something he called 'Order'. And in Shakespeare the two things often get combined. There is, or there should be, a 'Natural Order' and it should not be upset. It is upset in a crudely political way throughout the *Henry VI* trilogy. It is upset in ways infinitely more complicated and more profoundly psychological, though in ways that do not exclude the political, in *King Lear*.¹¹

We all know that Shakespeare and his contemporaries had what would now be called a 'thing' about order. But some historians, and more especially some literary critics, have got over-excited about this. And some have oversimplified it. In Shakespeare the idea of order is a complex and sophisticated idea which needs some looking into. I would argue that it does not justify our calling Shakespeare either an extreme royalist nor yet a snob.

Here I am confronted with strong opposition. Both Coleridge and Hazlitt and also some scholarly but less perceptive modern critics have differed from me. Coleridge speaks of Shakespeare's

profound veneration for all the established institutions of Society, and for those classes which form the permanent elements of the State... If he must have any

⁸ T. W. Baldwin, 'William Shakespere, Anglican', in *William Shakespere's Petty School* (Urbana, 1943), pp. 216–24.

⁹ Cf. Helen Morris, *Elizabethan Literature* (Oxford, 1958), p. 214, and A. Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York, 1952), pp. 192–200 and 351–8.

¹⁰ *Notes on The Tempest*.

¹¹ Cf. J. F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London, 1949), pp. 20–31 and 168–95, and Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (Cambridge, 1945), pp. 1–50 and 135–52.

name, he should be styled a philosophical aristocrat. . . . You will observe the good nature with which he seems always to make sport with the passions and follies of a mob, as with an irrational animal. He is never angry with it, but hugely content with holding up its absurdities to its face.¹²

Hazlitt goes further in the same direction.

Shakespeare himself seems to have had a leaning to the arbitrary side of the question . . . and to have spared no occasion of baiting the rabble. . . . The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power. . . . The principle of poetry is a very anti-levelling principle. . . . Poetry is right royal. It puts the individual for the species, the one above the infinite many, might before right. A lion hunting a flock of sheep or a herd of wild asses is a more poetical object than they; and we ever take part with the lordly beast, because our vanity or some other feeling makes us disposed to place ourselves in the situation of the strongest party. . . . We had rather be the oppressor than the oppressed.¹³

Some modern pundits have gone further still. Professor A. B. Hart thinks that Shakespeare was more of a royalist, more of a believer in divine right, than any other Elizabethan.¹⁴ And Professor Hardin Craig is clearly pained at finding Shakespeare positively undemocratic, positively unsympathetic to the American way of life. The professor regrets that he can find in Shakespeare 'no encouragement for a man to rise above the station he is born into'.¹⁵

Let us admit at once that there is in Shakespeare much talk of the divinity that hedges kings, much about rank or 'degree', much sardonic comment on the many-headed multitude. This is only to be expected in any Elizabethan writer, especially from one who was a Groom of the King's Chamber. The Elizabethans, for understandable reasons, fussed and sometimes fussed hysterically about authority and order. Shakespeare's Henry IV is infected with just such hysteria when he wakes up to find the Prince wearing his crown and immediately sees fit to prophesy with quite unwarranted foreboding.

For the Fifth Harry from curb'd license plucks
The muzzle of restraint, and the wild dog
Shall flesh his tooth in every innocent.
O my poor kingdom sick with civil blows!
When that *my* care could not withhold thy riots,
What wilt thou do when riot is thy care?
O! Thou wilt be a wilderness again,
People'd with wolves, thy old inhabitants.

But all this does not necessarily add up to a full-dress, full-blooded, fully fledged doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, a doctrine such as James I's or Filmer's. Nor does it mean that the Shakespearean or Elizabethan view

¹² Coleridge, loc. cit.

¹³ *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays: Coriolanus*.

¹⁴ *Shakespeare and the Homilies* (Melbourne, 1934), pp. 9-76.

¹⁵ Cited in H. Morris, op. cit. p. 213.

was in any way novel, special or unique, although some critics would have us think so.

In the first place, contempt for the multitude had long since become a commonplace taken over from classical writers and running back to Plato and beyond. Menenius' fable of the belly comes of course from Livy and from Plutarch. Again, the idea that kings are magical or sacred goes back to primeval folklore. It was more a matter of popular sentiment than of developed political or constitutional theory. It hovered in the background of men's minds and was often contradicted by their more conscious views and practices. Besides, although the king might be a magical personage, this by no means exempted him from having to keep rules, by no means made him absolute. The vestal virgins were exceedingly sacred but, for that very reason, had to remain exceedingly virginal. Just because he is something so primeval, a magic king is rigidly circumscribed by custom and tabu, and a *roi thaumaturge* is very apt to become a *roi fainéant*.

Again, the doctrine of divine right was still largely a theory of the succession. It said who ought to be king—not what a king could do when he *was* king, and certainly not that a king could do anything he liked. This, incidentally, was one reason why the Tudors, with their doubtful title, could not pull out all the stops when playing the divine right tune. When Edward III was challenging Philip of Valois' title to the throne of France, he suggested that each should expose himself to hungry lions and see which of them got eaten, since it was well known that lions will not assail a rightful king.¹⁶ Falstaff echoes this belief when he explains his flight at Gadshill. 'Was it for me to kill the heir apparent? Should I turn upon the true prince? Why, thou knowest I am as valiant as Hercules; but beware instinct; the lion will not touch the true prince. I was a coward on instinct.' But the point is that Edward III, though he might believe that his blood gave him immunity from lions, was a perfectly constitutional king who ruled in established and not in arbitrary ways.

The mystical view of kingship, both in Edward's and in Shakespeare's time, was only one of several views which were equally and simultaneously tenable. Divine right could be and was entangled with other concepts, especially the feudal concept, of a king. And a feudal king had duties just as much as rights; he was a party to a contract; he was as strictly bound as were his vassals to observe the laws of the land. The constitution, as is well known, was highly ambiguous, not to say, positively muddled. The Elizabethans may seem at times to be talking the language of sheer power, may seem to be adulating authority in what to us are extravagant terms. But to an Elizabethan it went without saying that power and authority had well-known, traditional limitations—limitations which would astonish a citizen of any

¹⁶ See A. M. Hocart, *Kingship*, Thinker's Library (1941), p. 16.

modern state. A moment's thought on how little actual force was at Queen Elizabeth's disposal or on how little of her subjects' money Elizabeth could touch should make the point abundantly clear.

It is true that, by Shakespeare's time, the Protestant divines (not to mention the Homilies) were preaching from every pulpit upon the sin of resistance to God's vice-gerent. But they were far more concerned with the queen's rights in ecclesiastical government than in civil. What they looked for was a godly prince who would carry out godly reformation and 'command for truth'. What they held, in fact, was far more a monarchical theory of church government than a theory of monarchy. Moreover, when pressed, they would admit that it was better to obey God than men. Therefore, if the ruler commanded something contrary to God's law, the ruler must be disobeyed—although it remained sin to resist any punishment which the ruler chose to inflict. This had to be patiently endured. So-called 'passive obedience' should be known as 'passive disobedience'.¹⁷

Above all, we must remember that it was not the king alone who was ordained of God. It was all the powers that be. Divine right attached to the whole social order, since all right had to be divine if it was to be right at all. It was 'the magistrate' who must not be resisted; and 'the magistrate' could mean any constituted officer, right down to the local justice of the peace. Tudor society was hierarchical quite as much as it was monarchical.¹⁸ The famous *Mirror for Magistrates* of 1559, upon which Shakespeare often drew, was dedicated to the nobility of the realm and says, in addressing them, 'Ye be all gods, as many as have in your charge any ministration of justice. . . . In the meantime, my Lords and Gods (for so I may call you) I most humbly beseech you favourably to accept this rude mirror.'¹⁹

We forget sometimes that in Shakespeare's England the feudal nobility still mattered. We are apt to exaggerate the extent and rapidity of their decline. Burghley thought it worth while to write memoranda on means to keep them educated up to their task, and Spenser avowedly wrote *The Faerie Queene* for precisely the same purpose. Elizabeth herself could be almost snobbishly respectful to them. Did she not rebuke the mere knight Sir Philip Sidney for challenging the Earl of Oxford to a duel?²⁰

Shakespeare accepts this. Ulysses' speech on 'degree, priority and place' is not a sermon on the divine right of kings. It is a sermon on the divine right of aristocracy. A modern audience might well be tempted to applaud when it sees King Richard sending Bolingbroke and Norfolk into exile. We might wish to exclaim 'Good riddance!' But this does not seem to have

¹⁷ Cf. Christopher Morris, *Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 32-44.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 12, 58-9, 69-77, 116-17, 148.

¹⁹ Ed. Lily B. Campbell (Cambridge, England, 1938), pp. 65-7.

²⁰ See Christopher Morris, *The Tudors* (London, 1955), p. 182.

been Shakespeare's view. Not only is the manner of it plainly meant to show us that the king is throwing his weight about too ostentatiously. There is also the implication that it is not really good for the morale of the school if the headmaster publicly expels his two senior prefects. It is an offence, too, against 'degree' and, as Ulysses says, 'Degree being vizarded, the unworthiest shows as fairly in the mask'.

No one could call Shakespeare uncritical of kings. He was as well aware as any of his contemporaries that there is a distinction between good kings and tyrants. Everyone knew this but everyone knew that there was not much to be done about a tyrant. There were no legitimate sanctions to be invoked against him. The tyrant had perforce to be left to God, who quite possibly had sent the tyrant as a punishment for national shortcomings. But God did in fact see to it that quite often tyrants came to bad ends. This is the moral of *The Mirror for Magistrates*. It indulges in the plainest speaking about such tyrants as are safely dead, hoping no doubt that the lesson would be well and truly noted by potential tyrants who were still alive.²¹

The *Mirror*, again foreshadowing Shakespeare, freely admits that God does sometimes use rebellion as His instrument—although the rebel too will come to a bad end. Rebellion is never justified (even against the tyrant King John or the usurper Henry IV) but it may become inevitable—a result or symptom of the general corruption of a kingdom. Only once, for very obvious reasons, does Shakespeare break this rule—over the rebellion of his own queen's grandfather against Richard III.²² There are muddles in this position but they are at least understandable.

The king then is responsible to God alone. But this very fact makes his responsibility the more grave. This theme—the responsibility of rulers—is a theme Shakespeare never lets alone. It is, for instance, the keynote of that dialogue on kingship between the disguised king and the soldiers on the night before Agincourt. 'The King is but a man as I am.' Yes, but 'his affections *are* higher-mounted than ours'. For subjects it suffices that 'we know enough if we know we are the King's subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the King wipes the crime of it out of us.' But, 'if the cause be *not* good the King hath a heavy reckoning to make. . . . If these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the King that led them to it, whom to disobey were against all proportion of subjection.' And again, kings and subjects alike 'have no wings to fly from God'. 'Every subject's duty is the King's' but 'every subject's soul is his own'. The argument is fully and fairly stated—though also inconclusively. But it was an argument which, historically speaking, was not in fact concluded until 1649.

²¹ Cf. Christopher Morris, *Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 68–73.

²² Cf. M. M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty* (London, 1961), pp. 181–4. Mr Reese's book is almost certainly the best existing study of Shakespeare's politics.

Kings and subjects cannot 'fly from God'. Nor can they fly from one another. In the Shakespearean cosmos they are or should be indissolubly, organically, joined together. They are links in the Great Chain of Being. Majesty, authority, divinity are properties not of the king alone but of the whole social organism. The 'cease of majesty' means much more than the fall of princes; it means the dissolution or corruption of a body politic.²³ All men are responsible for the right ordering of society but of course rulers and commanders most of all. They must in no way contract out. They must accept responsibility even if it means abandoning Falstaff or Cleopatra. They must not be cruel like King John or power-crazy like Macbeth or Richard III; must not use their power to serve their lusts like Angelo; must not be hot-tempered, vain or lacking in self-knowledge like King Lear; must not be jealous or suspicious like Leontes; must not be deceived by evil counsellors or wanting in emotional maturity like Othello; must not put personal pride before love of country like Coriolanus; must not be exhibitionists like Richard II; must not be doctrinaires like Brutus; nor superstitious, obstinate and pompous like Caesar; must not even be book-worms like Prospero, nor carry even holiness to the point of ineptitude like Henry VI.²⁴ In other words, a ruler must be 'every inch a king', and no ruler can dispense with any one of what young Malcolm calls

the king-becoming graces
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
Bounty, perséverence, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude.

Shakespeare rams his point home by constantly doing two things. First, by bringing on First and Second Citizen in various guises to remind us that good or bad management on the part of a ruler does very much affect *them*. Shakespeare likes to deal with princes and captains partly because their fate involves a whole community.

The cease of majesty
Dies not alone; but like a gulf doth draw
What's near it with it: it is a massy wheel,
Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
Are mortis'd and adjoin'd; which, when it falls,
Each small annexment, petty consequence,
Attends the boisterous ruin. Never alone
Did the king sigh but with a general groan.

Secondly, Shakespeare is always reminding us at the end of the play that, though the prince may have fallen, ordinary communal life has to go on, that First and Second Citizen have to be looked after, that the king's government

²³ Cf. Reese, *op. cit.* pp. vii-viii, 91-2, 105, 109-15.

²⁴ Cf. C. Morris, *op. cit.* pp. 103-4.

must be carried on. That is what Fortinbras is brought in to do at the end of *Hamlet*. *Macbeth* ends with the new king arranging for the return of the political exiles, *King Lear* with Albany telling Kent and Edgar to 'rule in his realm and the good state sustain'. *Othello* ends with a civil servant observing that he will have to send in his report.

Shakespeare knew how much political ability is needed if communities are ever to be properly ordered; but he knew what the human cost is liable to be. He knew in fact that the politician has to be in some sense inhuman or 'unnatural', has not only to practise a morality different from that of private life but has to be cut off from many of the warmer human qualities, possibly even from the things that save his soul.

The politician has to be at least in part a 'Machiavel'; and to be a 'Machiavel' is to falsify and vulgarize much of human life. For it is pseudo-realism to suppose that only unpleasant facts are real; and power corrupts largely because it forces those who wield it to treat men as more gullible and more wicked than they are. At the deepest level Mr Worldly Wiseman may not be wholly wise. By holding others cheap he may be cheapening himself. He cannot, certainly, be altogether genuine or altogether generous.

The Bastard Faulconbridge has to learn painfully and slowly that to be patriotic one must also be political and must therefore be reconciled to the service of

That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity,
Commodity, the bias of the world.²⁵

The politician may have to be a *faux bonhomme* and, like Bolingbroke, 'doff his bonnet to an oyster wench', or like Coriolanus abandon self-respect and display his wounds to the populace; may have to practice shameless demagoguery like Mark Antony; may like Prince John of Lancaster have to break the spirit, while keeping the letter, of his word to his prisoners. Henry V knows very well

what infinite heart's ease
Must kings neglect that private men enjoy.

He knows, too, that he must hold all men, even old companions, at arms' length, that he has to miss something that might nowadays be called 'life-enhancing'—which Falstaff, for all his faults, undoubtedly is. He knows also that a ruler must be circumspect and judicious, that he must play a waiting game, that he cannot go tilting at windmills 'to pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon', as Hotspur does, without a thought for political consequences. Politics, as Shakespeare perceived, is a matter of second-bests, of compromise and makeshift; and political values may well be positively false. As the Bastard exclaims, 'Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!' Or, as the servant says in *Timon*, 'The devil knew not what he did when he

²⁵ Cf. Reese, *op. cit.* pp. 282-5.

made man politic'. Besides, it is possible to be, as it were, too political by half and to overreach oneself by being so. A good case in point is that of Polonius who ends, appropriately, by becoming food for 'a certain congregation of politic worms'.

Shakespeare seems in two minds about it all. Much of the time he is of the same mind as Dr Johnson when he observed 'It is our first duty to serve society; and, after we have done that, we may attend wholly to the salvation of our own souls'.²⁶ But at moments Shakespeare is more on the side of Blake when he wrote, 'I am really sorry to see my countrymen trouble themselves about politics. . . . They seem to me to be something else besides human life.'²⁷ At least one might guess that Shakespeare would have understood what Marx had in mind in saying that if and when men solved their political and economic problems, mankind could at last proceed from the pathetic to the tragic. In any case, Shakespeare as a Christian did know that justice and mercy are not quite compatible, and that in politics one can only treat man as someone whose external conditions may possibly be improved, not as someone whose soul may be redeemed by some internal process.²⁸

All of Shakespeare's sermonizing about responsibility, though he does it supremely well, is in one sense commonplace. Nor, though he does it in his own inimitable way, is it altogether distinctive. Others before his time and since have done it too. But let us remember that with Shakespeare the commonplace, though always present, is (at least in his maturity) always subordinated to and integrated with the drama. In his greater plays the political or social theme, though still present, is only the ground bass to a more profoundly moral theme, to some much grander issue about one man's soul or about all men's predicament.²⁹ Politically speaking, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare is on Rome's side and not Egypt's, but that is hardly the total import of the play, for in it purely political values have given place to values more generally and more deeply human; and great Caesar, as Cleopatra says, becomes 'an ass unpolicied'.

We have to remember that a really major dramatist is, in one sense, forced to use the commonplace. As Somerset Maugham once put it,

How can you write a play of which the ideas are so significant that they will make the critic of *The Times* sit up in his stall and at the same time induce the shop-girl in the gallery to forget the young man who is holding her hand? The only ideas that can affect them, when they are welded together in that unity which is an audience, are those fundamental ideas that are almost feelings. These, the root ideas of poetry, are love, death, and the destiny of man. It is not *any* sort of dramat-

²⁶ Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (February 1766).

²⁷ *A Descriptive Catalogue, Etc.* in *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. G. Keynes (Nonesuch, 1927), p. 819.

²⁸ Cf. Edwin Muir, 'The Natural Man and the Political Man', *Essays on Literature and Society* (London, 1949), pp. 151-65, and Reese, *op. cit.* pp. 205 and 233-9.

²⁹ Cf. L. C. Knights, 'Shakespeare's Politics', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, XLIII (1957), 117-24, and *Some Shakespearean Themes* (London, 1959), pp. 26-44.

ist who can find anything to say about them that has not been said a thousand times already; the great truths are too important to be new.³⁰

Dr Johnson made the same point more succinctly when he wrote that Shakespeare's 'persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which *all* minds are agitated'.³¹

This, however, does not mean that Shakespeare has nothing new to say, that he deviates in no way from the Elizabethan commonplace. It could indeed be argued that he is, on balance, actually less snobbish and less royalist than most of his contemporaries, certainly less so than Heywood or than Beaumont and Fletcher.³² We must not forget the importance of noting who speaks what in any given play. With this in mind, we cannot help wondering whether the doctrine of degree is advertised whole-heartedly by being given to the 'dog-fox' Ulysses.³³ Again, we may want to ask whether the doctrine of divine right altogether benefits from being mouthed so extensively by the hysteric Richard II. There may well be ambivalences here.

It is well known that *King John* is very closely related to the earlier anonymous *Troublesome Raigne of King John*. In this older play the Bastard is much more of a conventional royalist than is Shakespeare's Bastard. The earlier Bastard makes a long stock royalist tirade which Shakespeare has sunk without trace.³⁴ Nor can *Julius Caesar* be thought of as a very royalist play. The influence of Plutarch could well account for this. But, whatever the reason, Brutus is clearly presented as a traitor not to Caesar his sovereign but to Caesar his friend.

Again, there is ambivalence in Shakespeare's attitude to First and Second Citizen. He did not wholly despise them. Timon's servants are the only decent persons in the play. Many of Shakespeare's common soldiers have their fundamental decencies. Even Jack Cade is not unappealing, at least when he gives priority to killing all the lawyers. Shakespeare's mobs are brutal, ignorant, silly and fickle but they are never unprovoked or without excuses. Mob-psychology, both in *Julius Caesar* and in *Coriolanus*, is depicted in no kindly fashion. But in neither play is senatorial psychology shown in a more favourable light.³⁵ As Lear himself observes, when he is becoming enlightened,

Through tattered clothes small vices do appear;
Robes and furr'd gowns hide all.³⁶

³⁰ In *The Summing-up*, cited in Ivor Brown, *Shakespeare* (London, 1949), p. 327.

³¹ *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765), in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. Raleigh (Oxford, 1925), p. 12.

³² See, for example, Heywood, *Royal King and Loyal Subject*, or Beaumont and Fletcher, *Philaster*.

³³ Cf. L. C. Knights, 'Shakespeare's Politics', p. 119.

³⁴ *Troublesome Raigne*, III, 114-31; see also Virgil K. Whitaker, *Shakespeare's Use of Learning* (San Marino, 1953), pp. 138-9, and C. Morris, *op. cit.* pp. 99-100.

³⁵ Cf. John Palmer, *The Political Characters of Shakespeare* (London, 1945), pp. 30-1, 289, 292 and 308-9, and Brents Stirling, *The Populace in Shakespeare* (Columbia, 1949), pp. 54-61.

³⁶ I follow the Quarto reading which seems to have more force and point than the Folio's 'great vices'.

Nor, significantly, does Lear's salvation begin until he has exclaimed

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
 ...O! I have ta'en
 Too little care of this. Take physic pomp;
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel.

With his immensely wide sympathies and his immeasurably open eyes, Shakespeare had too large a mind to accept uncritically either conventional king-worship or conventional disdain of common people. But his real originality as a commentator on political human nature lies elsewhere. He adds little, if anything, to political theory—except his ability to see it in its widest conceivable context and ramifications and in relation to things that matter even more. In any case the number of possible political ideas is strictly limited.

Nevertheless, in all seriousness, Shakespeare must be called the first great English sociologist. Nothing but his readability has concealed this from us. But to be a sociologist it is not essential to write in the deathless prose sometimes associated with modern social science. Shakespeare is a sociologist because of his obvious interest in groups of men as such. Chaucer may almost have approached him in observation of the quirks of individual character. But Chaucer's pilgrims can scarcely be said to form a society. Shakespeare's characters, however, are invariably grouped. They are never seen in isolation. Each play has its own special aura because the characters make it by their interaction, because Shakespeare has antennae for the invisible, atmospheric cobweb which men spin between them. And this is pointed especially by his passionate and penetrating interest in morale, the morale of armies, factions, courts, states and whole societies. 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.' Lear's whole kingdom is infected by the corruption of its rulers. Morale is higher within Troy than in the Grecian camp outside, higher among Macduff's men than inside Dunsinane, higher in the English camp than in the Dauphin's on the eve of Agincourt. Antony's soldiers become aware that the God Hercules has left him and the knowledge does them little good. The scene in Glendower's castle tells us that the rebels have little unity of purpose. In the second act of *Othello* enter a messenger who says, 'News, lads, our wars are done!'; and the rest of the play shows how morale goes to pieces after the armistice. Who but a born sociologist would have an eye for all this?³⁷

Nowhere, perhaps, was Shakespeare more of a sociologist than when he wrote *King Lear*. Is not the play, at one level, a play about two halves of a society in tension? It was the same tension which, in Shakespeare's eyes, was markedly present in the society around him. At this sociological level, *King Lear* is concerned with conflict between an old-fashioned order or outlook

³⁷ Cf. C. Morris, op. cit. pp. 102-3.

and a new one. Do not Lear, Kent, Cordelia, Edgar and Gloucester represent a traditional society and traditional values threatened by upstart parvenus, rootless, shallow *novi homines* who believe only in power politics? We all know how much harping there is in *King Lear* on the word 'Nature'. Do not Regan, Goneril and Edmund represent a Hobbesian state of nature, in which the weakest take the wall, a nature red in tooth and claw? 'I pray you, Father,' cries Regan, 'being weak, seem so.' The same message was once carried by Athenian envoys to the citizens of Melos.³⁸ These are all 'Machiavellian' people.³⁹ They are 'naked, unaccommodated men', whereas the old-fashioned people represent another conception of 'Nature'—a 'Nature' improved, mellowed and regenerated by nurture, by social custom, by tradition, by the conventions of ordered, harmonious, humane society, by properly 'natural' bonds, ties and affections, by deference, gratitude and obligation, above all, by love. In the new 'Machiavellian' order, as Gloucester points out, 'Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father.... The king falls from the bias of nature; there's father against child. We have seen the best of our time: machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders follow us disquietly to our graves.'⁴⁰

The same contrasts appear elsewhere in Shakespeare—in that between old-world Trojan chivalry and slick Grecian cunning, or in that between Hotspur's and Falstaff's views of honour. It appears even in the nastiness of the bad Duke's court in *As You Like It* as compared with the 'golden world' of the Forest. And it becomes explicit, though in a minor key, when Orlando eulogizes Adam.

O good old man, how well in thee appears
The constant service of the antique world,
When service sweat for duty, not for meed!
Thou art not for the fashion of these times,
Where none will sweat but for promotion.

At a much higher level and in a much more subtle way, Hector touches on a related dichotomy, and finds it agonizing. He knows that, under the true laws of uncorrupted nature, Helen belongs with her husband and should be given back. But he knows also that, in the harsh world as it is, the world of power, Trojan prestige and honour demand Helen's retention.

The same themes come again in what is Shakespeare's parting word on politics, indeed on everything. For it may not be entirely fanciful to suppose

³⁸ Thucydides, Book v, xviii, 89–106.

³⁹ So is Falstaff, when he says (of Shallow), 'If the young dace be a bait for the old pike, I see no reason in the law of nature but I may snap at him'.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Timon of Athens*, iv, i, 1–21; see also Edwin Muir, 'The Politics of King Lear', *Essays in Literature and Society* (London, 1949), pp. 31–48; Danby, op. cit. pp. 31–53; Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespearean Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York, 1957), pp. 4–16, 44–8, 161–88; Hiram Haydn, *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York, 1950), pp. 638–51.

that, among all the layers and levels of his last play *The Tempest*, there lies concealed Shakespeare's political testament. It touches on two themes that are recurrent in the history of political thought. One is the theme of an imagined 'state of nature' which once existed, a state from which, for good or ill, political society has taken us away. The other is the theme of a Utopia, an imagined society remoulded nearer to the heart's desire. Sometimes the two are intertwined, for the regeneration of society can be seen as the return to a state of nature conceived of as a lost golden age.

The Tempest is a play about a desert island, about a state of nature: and it contains, in Caliban, a study of the 'natural' man. Yet Caliban is not a noble savage. He is, says Prospero, 'a devil, a born devil, on whose nature Nurture can never stick'. Prospero appears to accept the doctrine of original sin; and it is notable that Prospero himself gives up his 'natural magic' and drowns his book. Caliban, because he is pathetic and poetical, may seem at first half noble; but eventually his bestiality is exposed and he himself says, 'I'll be wise hereafter and seek for grace'—a very orthodox theological sentiment.

In the same way Gonzalo's anarchist Utopia, the commonwealth in which nature produces everything without anyone's having to do any work, is at first attractive. But neither Shakespeare nor Montaigne (from whom Gonzalo is quoting without acknowledgement) can really have desired a realm where not only was there no trade, no manufacture; no government, no social rank, no marriage, but where also there was no wine and 'letters should not be known'. Gonzalo's kingdom was 'natural' but not wholly satisfactory, because Nature is not complete without Nurture. Like Plato's *Republic*, *The Tempest* is, among other things, a treatise upon education. Everyone in it from Caliban to Prospero needs to be re-educated, regenerated and reformed—except Miranda whose original virtue makes her a counterpoise to Caliban. The State of Nature, Shakespeare seems to say, is not normally golden, and most men are naturally sinners who should 'seek for grace'. Sinners have to be kept in order and therefore need law and government. After all, the Church had taught for many centuries that government is God's remedy for human sin. It would seem that Shakespeare accepted this without much question. Only, being so supreme a dramatist, he knew more still of human nature. And, knowing it, he knew that magistrates and politicians also sin, that no man is really good enough to govern; and, therefore, that governors and governments, though always necessary, can always be reformed.⁴¹

⁴¹ Cf. C. Morris, *op. cit.* pp. 107-9.