Shakespeare's Political Realism

The English History Plays

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accept the first half of this statement, but reject the second: Shakespeare may be "political," but he has nothing to teach us; and he has nothing to teach us because he lived in different, and politically infantile, times. We may be able to locate Shakespeare's political views on the historical map, but we cannot learn from him.

One of the most powerful and influential schools of contemporary Shakespeare criticism, the new historicist school, attempts to place Shakespeare in historical context and identify his political views. Since the purpose of this book is to uncover Shakespeare's political teaching, and since part of that project involves dealing with Shakespeare's use of history, I want to distinguish my own approach from other political approaches to Shakespeare that look to history to help explain his plays. While new historicism is a complicated and diverse movement, one might begin by noting its apparently Marxist genealogy. Like Marxists, new historicists are preoccupied with history, give a deterministic account of human production (in this case, literary production), and have egalitarian political commitments. The relation between their historicism and their political commitments is not, to me anyway, altogether clear, but one almost always finds both orientations present in a new historicist reading of a Shakespearean play.

According to a friendly critic, "the fundamental move of new-historicist critics" is "trying to see the text as essentially generated from, and directed toward the politics of a historically remote period."[22] For new historicists, literary texts are intimately related to a specific historical context—they arise out of and validate that context—and the relation is a subordinate and deterministic one: "their whole endeavor is to situate the literary text in social history and thus to see it in a determined and secondary position."[23] In treating literary texts as *determined* by their environment, these critics take a decisive step beyond the common practice of referring to extra-textual influences (biography and history) to shed light on the meaning of a literary work. For the new historicists, a literary text is a historical document, a reliable reflection of the social and political views that dominated at the time. It must, in fact, be a reliable reflection of its environment, for that is all that historicism allows for: human beings are products of their environment; autonomy and creativity are illusions. This

means that Shakespeare wrote for and about only his own time, for he could not do otherwise.

To the obvious objection that few if any historical contexts are simply one-dimensional, and that it is therefore difficult to identify the single context an author supposedly reflects, new historicists have an interesting answer: all literary productions serve the interests of the *dominant* ideology.[24] Apparently heterodox or subversive activity is just that—apparently, but not really, subversive. As Cantor explains, "any move against a system is reconstructed as a move within that system, and hence acts of outright rebellion become the surest evidence of orthodoxy."[25] This Foucauldian principle (Greenblatt calls it "subversion and containment") may be a necessary consequence of the historicist critique of human autonomy, but as Cantor's humorous restatement below implies, it cannot possibly persuade those who do not already accept the historicist critique:

> According to Freudianism, if you say you hate your father, you hate your father; if you say you love your father, you also hate your father. According to the New Historicism, if you say you support orthodoxy, you support orthodoxy; if you say you attack orthodoxy, you also support orthodoxy.[26]

On this view, one can be certain not only that Shakespeare is a mouthpiece for Tudor political orthodoxy, but that anything he says which seems to oppose this view in fact serves to validate it.

If new historicists approach Shakespeare's plays as historical documents that reflect the reigning political ideas and commitments of his time, they do so not in a detached, scientific manner, but as vigorous partisans of their own political convictions. What is new about the new historicism is political commitment:

> Traditional Shakespeare critics seemed to have a simple scholarly interest in how the ideas of Shakespeare and his contemporaries differed from those of our own day. . . . The Elizabethans believed that monarchy was the best form of government; we believe democracy is. For the old historicists that is just the way things are—different ages think in different ways. Traditional Shakespeare scholars did not appear to be pushing any kind of agenda and, in particular, they did not seem obsessed with asserting their superiority as people of the twentieth century over Shakespeare, the Elizabethan. . . . In short, the old historicism tried to uncover the distinctively Elizabethan ideas in Shakespeare, but it did not subject them to an inquisition. . . . The New Historicists inject a new passion into discussions of the historical limitations of Shakespeare's thought by examining them in

> the context of today's political issues. They are interested in the ways that Shakespeare's plays reflect the race, class, and gender prejudices of his day.[27]

By exposing Shakespeare as a supporter of aristocratic privilege, or colonialism, or slavery, the new historicists seek not merely to situate his work in its historical context, but to take him to task for holding oppressive political views.[28] The unstated premise is that while we can learn nothing from Shakespeare, he could certainly learn much from us.

Pechter objects to the identification of new historicism with political partisanship: "[d]espite the political advocacy of many new-historicist critics, it would be wrong, I think, to regard the new historicism itself as necessarily or essentially associated with political action, if for no other reason than that such a view would exclude the most powerful of its practitioners, Stephen Greenblatt."[29] But consider the following comments by Greenblatt about the insomnia of Shakespeare's Henry IV:

> Who knows? perhaps it is even true; perhaps in a society in which the overwhelming majority of men and women had next to nothing, the few who were rich and powerful did lie awake at night. . . . We are invited to take measure of his suffering, to understand . . . the costs of power. And we are invited to understand these costs in order to ratify the power, to accept the grotesque and cruelly unequal distribution of possessions: everything for the few, nothing to the many. The rulers earn, or at least pay for, their exalted positions through suffering, and this suffering ennobles, if it does not exactly cleanse, the lies and betrayals upon which this position depends.[30]

This passage is useful because it makes clear Greenblatt's partisanship as well as his view that Shakespeare is complicit in what can only be seen as a political crime—perpetuating "the grotesque and cruelly unequal distribution of possessions." More often than not, the new historicist project of placing Shakespeare in historical context means exposing and condemning his unfortunate inegalitarianism.

In contrast, Annabel Patterson argues that Shakespeare was a democrat.[31] While her work shares the new historicist preoccupation with historical context,[32] her Shakespeare is an autonomous thinker capable of "as much perspicaciousness . . . as is now assumed by his most sophisticated readers."[33] Shakespeare had an intention,[34] and that intention was to (carefully) align himself with an emerging popu-

list political movement. But like the new historicists, Patterson's own political commitments are featured prominently in her criticism. She wants to demonstrate not only that Shakespeare was committed to "ordinary working people,"[35] but that she is too. She describes her book thus:

> Deliberately written in the most accessible style I can muster; lightly annotated so as not to suggest one must come to such arguments through a long negotiation with the academic authorities on the subject; and priced, by negotiation with the publisher, within the reach of almost anyone who buys paperback books, it aspires, simply, to the largest and most popular audience that can be reached.[36]

Like Greenblatt, Patterson is an overtly political critic; unlike Greenblatt, she finds in Shakespeare a comrade. Both, however, share in common the conviction that what is important about Shakespeare's political views is whether he agrees or disagrees with a settled (egalitarian) political agenda. In trying to demonstrate that Shakespeare was either a friend or an enemy of the people, contemporary political critics presuppose that he cannot teach us anything about politics.

The alternative I am proposing, and will in the course of this book argue for, is that Shakespeare can indeed teach us something about politics. This presupposes an openness to the proposition that politics in Shakespeare's time was not insuperably different from politics now, that Lincoln was not simply deluded in identifying with *Macbeth*. Like Patterson, I too rely upon "certain categories of thought that some have declared obsolete," namely authorship, self-determination, and intention.[37] That Shakespeare was incapable of rising above and reflecting upon his own time seems to me unproven and probably unprovable. I am not ready to abandon the old-fashioned but still prominent view that "we turn to Shakespeare" not because he is simply typical of his time, but "because he seems to tower over his contemporaries."[38]

This study also presupposes a more expansive view of politics than one is likely to find among most contemporary political critics. I am interested not only in whether Shakespeare was an elitist or a democrat, but whether his observations about political practice in medieval England reveal something fundamental about politics as such. In fact, I do not find much evidence to support the view that