CONTENTS

Introduction

JOHNSON ON SHAKESPEARE

> We hear many speeches and read many books praising the unity of Western civilization. . . . But I am afraid this unity of Western civilization is spurious. Nor would I say this is a bad thing that we do not have unity in our civilization. The West, it seems to me, owes its glory and its dignity to the antagonism of its constituent elements. It owes to this antagonism its vitality.
>
> —LEO STRAUSS[1]

SAMUEL JOHNSON KNEW why Shakespeare's plays were so widely and enduringly popular. To him, the general principle of literary popularity was clear: 'Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature.' For Johnson, Shakespeare's popularity rested on the fact that his writings embodied that principle more richly and more fully than did those of any other author:

> Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply and observation will always find.[2]

1. Laurenz Denker, Hannes Kerber, and David Kretz, 'Leo Strauss's "Jerusalem and Athens" (1950): Three Lectures Delivered at Hillel House, Chicago', *Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 29 (2022): 138.

2. In the preface to his edition of Shakespeare; Johnson, *Shakespeare*, p. 122.

For over two hundred years after Johnson wrote those words in 1765, that view of the foundation of Shakespeare's greatness as a writer more or less prevailed. Of course, Shakespearean criticism did not remain static during those centuries. Romantic critics reacted against Johnson and were reacted against in their turn by the Victorians. The character-based criticism associated with A. C. Bradley was challenged by the rise in the mid-twentieth century of a criticism that put poetic coherence above psychological realism. But these successive critical phases had in common an acceptance of the implications of Johnson's repeated word 'always': namely, the assumption that Shakespeare's plays addressed human questions of perennial importance and the belief that it was the task of the critic to explain how they did so by revealing what the plays seemed to say about those questions. So when Derek Traversi wrote in the conclusion to his once-influential *An Approach to Shakespeare* that 'Shakespeare's "problem" (if we may use so self-conscious a word) is that of imparting order and poetic significance to the keenly felt but separate elements of human experience', it is easy to see how that very twentieth-century formulation nevertheless reached back to Johnson, by way perhaps of the Arnoldian notion of poetry as a 'criticism of life'.[3]

However, the migration of high theory from the social sciences to the literary humanities which occurred in the second half of the twentieth century temporarily drove from the field of literary criticism that well-established way of thinking about how and why great literature holds and rewards our attention. Suddenly all the common-sensical ideas about language and literature which had seemed so unproblematic that one could safely treat them as axioms—for instance, the belief that works of literature had discoverable (albeit often very complex) meanings or the idea that language was a system of signification which referred to things outside itself—were denounced as mere prejudices. In fact, both limbs of Johnson's memorable phrase—'just representations of general nature'—were put under devastating pressure by this new variant of literary theory. Theoretical critiques took pleasure in unmasking the idea of a 'just representation' as a delusion. According to these theorists, literature could do nothing more than point mournfully and repetitiously to its own impotence as representation. Delusional, too, was the concept of a

3. D. A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (London: Sands & Co., 1957), p. 286; Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry' (1880), in *English Literature and Irish Politics*, The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold, vol. 9 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 163.

'general nature'. Politically-minded theorists contended that what we had been offered as the 'natural' tended, when examined more closely and less sympathetically, to reveal itself as a socially-constructed fiction dictated by dominant, oppressive, usually male, western European, and white interests. And since those interests were themselves not timeless, no more timeless were the fictions of the natural that they had been used to create. So a 'just representation' was impossible for two reasons. Literary representation was itself a fallacy, and even if it were not, it could not be 'just' in either sense of that complex word, since it could be neither precise nor fair.

No doubt some of the Shakespearean criticism published before the arrival of theory was bland, conservative paraphrase and deserved a degree of rough handling. But the theoretical challenge to traditional ways of thinking about literature went well beyond simply the spring-cleaning of our critical notions. It raised the more profoundly sceptical prospect of all approaches to literature which sought to relate its content to matters of enduring human importance—what we might call 'ethical criticism'—being ruled out of court on the double grounds that, even if literature were able to engage with such issues (which given its nullity as representation, it was not), there were in the first place no such permanent and naturally human issues for literature to address.

Was there not something hyperbolical about theory's scepticism? Did it not topple over into a modern form of Pyrrhonism? It sometimes seemed as if literature's powers of subtlety of signification were being over-read as evidence of the impossibility of signification. On the subject of human nature, the constructivists who denied that such a thing existed began to be answered by those less *parti-pris* philosophers who remembered that, a few years before the composition of Johnson's preface to his edition of Shakespeare, that truly sceptical philosopher David Hume had found a way to hold in a single thought both his experience of the variably-patterned surface of human behaviour and his faith in constant principles of human nature: 'The internal principles and motives [*of human nature*] may operate in a uniform manner, notwithstanding these seeming irregularities; in the same manner as the winds, rain, clouds, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by steady principles; though not easily discoverable by human sagacity and enquiry.'[4] As

4. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), sect. 8, part 1, para. 68. Cf. also the comparison between the Rhine and the Rhone in 'A Dialogue', appended to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751). For a helpful exploration of Hume's position on the possibility of sympathetic understanding, see Jennifer A. Herdt, 'Artificial Lives,

Marx commented in the *Grundrisse*, hunger is hunger, and the hunger of the savage who tears at raw meat and the hunger of the modern European who eats cooked food with cutlery are merely different expressions of what is nevertheless an enduring appetite.[5]

Although the fortunes of theory as a practice waned, its impact was lasting. In particular, critics who were not committed to theory nevertheless showed little desire to revive the ethical criticism the theoreticians had attacked. As the theoretical tide ebbed, three strong currents moved through Shakespearean criticism. Firstly, there was a turn to history, in the form of the 'New Historicism'. Historically-grounded readings of Shakespeare's plays revived the flavour of the old ethical criticism, without being so vulnerable to the powerful corrosives which theory had deployed to impressive effect.[6] Secondly, there was a revival of interest in theatre history and in locating Shakespeare within the dramatic archive.[7] Thirdly, a measure of critical energy was directed towards authorship studies, particularly towards the early-modern phenomenon of collaborative composition.[8]

These developments all marked at once an advance and a retreat. They showed an impressive gain in various forms of technical power and scholarly accomplishment (historical contextualisation; the study of early modern theatrical institutions; the textual analysis of authorship). At the same time, however, they revealed the academy turning in on itself and retreating further from the possibility of addressing a general educated readership.

Providential History, and the Apparent Limits of Sympathetic Understanding', in *David Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer*, ed. Mark C. Spencer (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), pp. 37–59. For a recent re-statement of the constructivist position on human nature, see Joseph Henrich, Steven J. Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, 'The Weirdest People in the World?', *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 33, nos. 2–3 (2010): 61–83. For a temperate and rational rejoinder, see Galen Strawson, *Selves: An Essay in Revisionary Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 34–36.

5. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, UK: Allen Lane, 1973), p. 92.

6. Classically, Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

7. Most recently and interestingly, Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); and Bart van Es, *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8. For instance, Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

The vividly contrasting social backdrop to these movements in Shakespearean criticism is the extraordinary phenomenon of world-wide attendance at performances of Shakespeare's plays. For theory, hospitable as it was to a constructivist account of human nature and hostile to any idea of essence, the fact of Shakespeare's popularity could be easily explained away as a consequence of the 'Shakespeare Establishment'. No doubt the entrenched position of Shakespeare in the British school curriculum and the existence of so culturally potent an entity as the Royal Shakespeare Company may both have played such a role, at least in Great Britain. But enthusiasm for Shakespeare is confined neither to Great Britain nor even to the West. It flourishes in cultures where no 'Shakespeare Establishment' exists or could possibly take root.[9] The recent critical preoccupations of the academy—historical explication, theatrical antiquarianism, and authorship studies—may of course yield important findings. But they will always be 'second-order' findings. These critical and scholarly modes cannot, even in their own terms, find a way of addressing—let alone of explaining—the vast, primary fact of the enduring human appetite for Shakespeare's drama.[10] Stephen Greenblatt has pleaded that 'it is not necessary to choose between an account of Shakespeare as the scion of a particular culture and an account of him as a universal genius who created works that continually renew themselves across national and generational boundaries'.[11]

9. In this connection is it worth reflecting on the experiences of Paul Stebbings, whose TNT (The New Theatre) company performs Shakespeare (but not just Shakespeare) all over the world, and frequently in China. He observes that 'TNT is not bringing Shakespeare to China. We are finding him there.' And the Chinese appetite for Shakespeare, which of course relies on no state support and indeed is of relatively recent date (the first translation of a Shakespeare play into Mandarin was made less than a century ago), eclipses that of other European authors who might be expected to travel well: 'Having filled the National Centre for Performing Arts in Beijing for "Romeo and Juliet" we were disappointed to see half empty houses at the same theatre one week later for our highly accessible "Gulliver's Travels".' Stebbings recognises that an important element in the success of TNT has been the 'worldwide explosion of interest in Shakespeare' (Paul Stebbings and Phil Smith, *TNT: The New Theatre* [Axminster, UK: Triarchy Press, 2020], pp. 137, 138, and 240).

10. 'Shakespeare . . . quite simply not only is the Western canon; he is also the world canon. That his appeal is equal to audiences of all continents, races, and languages . . . seems to me an absolute refutation of our currently fashionable views, prevalent particularly in Britain and America, that insists upon a Shakespeare culture-bound by history and society' (Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997], p. xv).

11. Stephen Greenblatt, 'Introduction', in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, and Gordon McMullan, 3rd ed. (New

Not necessary, indeed. But in recent decades, that choice has repeatedly been made in the academy, and always to the advantage of a Shakespeare who is the 'scion of a particular culture'. The universal Shakespeare has, of late, gone missing.

This book is an attempt to write once more about Shakespeare as a man whose plays reflect on deep questions of enduring human importance and to resist the modern academic trend of retreating from the central human preoccupations which animate his drama. In part, this is a matter of Shakespeare's comprehensiveness. 'What did not the man see?', Thomas Mann reports Wagner as exclaiming on one of those Venetian evenings in the Vendramin Palace, after the composer had immersed himself once more in Shakespeare's plays at the very end of his life.[12] But Shakespeare's universality was not simply a matter of the accumulation of insight. It was also, and more importantly, a matter of severe selection and concentration, of recurrent penetration to a core of central and perennial human concerns.

However, the contention of this book is emphatically not that Shakespeare possessed any timeless esoteric wisdom that he wished to impart through a theatrical medium. It is rather that, in his hands, drama itself became a forensic instrument whereby such issues might be probed and rival views about them set in motion. So this book is called *Thinking Through Shakespeare*, rather than (for example) *Shakespeare's Thought*, because I wish to place the emphasis on a process rather than on a conclusion.[13] Indeed, I don't believe that Shakespeare (unlike other great dramatists such as Ben Jonson or John Dryden or a great poet such as John Milton) either reached, or was interested in reaching, any *final* conclusions on the enduring questions his plays confront.[14] Coleridge remarked that, in every poem of Milton, it is Milton himself that you see.[15] By

---

York: Norton, 2016), p. 2. All references to Shakespeare that follow are to this deservedly popular edition.

12. 'Was hat der Mann *gesehen*!' (Thomas Mann, 'Richard Wagner and the *Ring*', in Mann, *Essays*, p. 355).

13. That said, this book clearly has certain limited points of contact and co-ordination with Tony Nuttall's *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007).

14. As Coleridge saw: 'He [Shakespeare] is of no age—nor, I may add, of any religion, or party, or profession' (Coleridge, *Table-Talk*, p. 6).

15. 'In the *Paradise Lost*—indeed in every one of his poems—it is Milton himself whom you see; his Satan, his Adam, his Raphael, almost his Eve, are all John Milton; and it is a sense of this intense egotism that gives me the greatest pleasure in reading Milton's works': cf. 'There is a subjectivity of the poet, as of Milton, who is himself before himself in everything he writes'

contrast, in every poem and play of Shakespeare's, Shakespeare himself is, not utterly absent to be sure, but nevertheless elusive and sometimes hard to detect.[16] And Shakespeare's authorial escapology is related to the particular way in which his plays deploy and address ideas.

One of the great comments about literature, ideas, and the artist was made in 1918 by T. S. Eliot in an issue of *The Little Review* devoted to the recently-deceased Henry James.[17] Eliot contributed two pieces to the journal: a brief study of James's relationship to Hawthorne and a more general assessment entitled 'In Memory'. The second piece begins by reflecting on James's limitations as a literary critic, which Eliot then adroitly turns into the basis of admiration for James's skill as a novelist. For, on this account, James was not really a literary critic but rather 'a critic who preyed not upon ideas, but upon living beings.'[18] Eliot then moves on to consider the question of literature and ideas more generally, as exemplified in the special virtue of James's fiction:

> James's critical genius comes out most tellingly in his mastery over, his baffling escape from, Ideas; a mastery and an escape which are perhaps the last test of a superior intelligence. He had a mind so fine that no idea could violate it. Englishmen, with their uncritical admiration (in the present age) for France, like to refer to France as the Home of Ideas; a phrase which, if we could twist it into truth, or at least a compliment, ought to mean that in France ideas are very severely looked after; not allowed to stray, but preserved for the inspection of civic pride in a Jardin des Plantes, and frugally dispatched on occasions of public necessity. England, on the other hand, if it is not the Home of Ideas, has at least become infested with them in about the space of time within which Australia has been overrun by rabbits. In England ideas run wild and pasture on the emotions; instead of thinking with our feelings (a very different thing) we corrupt our feelings with ideas; we produce the political, the emotional idea, evading sensation and thought. George Meredith (the disciple of Carlyle) was fertile in ideas; his

(Coleridge, *Table-Talk*, pp. 17 and 76). Note also: 'Shakespeare's poetry is characterless; that is, it does not reflect the individual Shakespeare; but John Milton himself is in every line of *Paradise Lost*' (ibid., p. 5).

16. Again, Coleridge is acute: 'How well we seem to know Chaucer! How absolutely nothing do we know of Shakespeare!' (Coleridge, *Table-Talk*, p. 2).

17. T. S. Eliot, 'In Memory', *The Little Review* 5, no. 4 (August 1918) (Henry James special number), pp. 44–47.

18. Eliot, 'In Memory', p. 45.

> epigrams are a facile substitute for observation and inference. Mr. Chesterton's brain swarms with ideas; I see no evidence that it thinks. James in his novels is like the best French critics in maintaining a point of view, a viewpoint untouched by the parasite idea. He is the most intelligent man of his generation.[19]

The brilliant and memorable phrase 'a mind so fine that no idea could violate it' is sometimes misconstrued as a feline insult, or even as (in Gore Vidal's deliberately unsympathetic word) a 'wisecrack'.[20] But so to construe Eliot's aphorism reveals a failure of reading and a deafness to the distinction Eliot insists on between genuine thinking and the mere brandishing of ideas. Ideas are certainly the coin of thought. Yet they may turn up in the pockets of those who are unable to do anything more than fumble with them.

Once that phrase, 'a mind so fine that no idea could violate it', is restored to its original setting in the full paragraph where it occurs, it is clear that Eliot intended it as the highest praise. Of course, what Eliot is emphatically not saying is that James's mind was incapable of thought—incapable, that is, of entertaining, revolving, and, eventually, dismissing ideas. The mere temporary presence of an idea in the mind is not a *violation*; for what purpose does the mind have but to entertain and assess ideas? But 'violate' is an appropriate word for the permanent seizure, or rape, of the mind by an idea, which might then enjoy a parasitic and dominant life in this newly-colonised host. As Eliot's tart remark on Chesterton makes clear, the simple presence of an idea was for him no indisputable evidence of thought. Indeed, a chaotic profusion of ideas, those fossilised remnants of the act of thinking, may be *prima facie* evidence of an incapacity for genuine and sustained thought. And still less was Eliot saying that Henry James did no thinking: that would be absurd. Rather, Eliot admires the way in which James's thinking, of which he plainly did a very great deal, nevertheless left him unviolated and therefore free still to go on thinking. For the great writer, Eliot implies, thinking is a permanent activity, not a teleological process which will cease once a conclusion has been arrived at.

Nearly ten years later, Eliot would return to the question of the relation between ideas and great literature in 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca', and once more he would launch a powerful attack on the Siren-notion that,

19. Eliot, 'In Memory', p. 46. Typographical errors have been silently corrected.

20. Gore Vidal, 'Lessons of the Master', *New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1986.

insofar as literature is good, it is the expression of a single coherent and compelling philosophy or system of ideas.[21]

The essay begins by reviewing, with what seems like mild commendation, recent publications claiming to have discovered Shakespeare's philosophy: 'Whether Mr. Strachey, or Mr. Murry, or Mr. Lewis, is any nearer to the truth of Shakespeare than Rymer, or Morgann, or Webster, or Johnson, is uncertain; they are all certainly more sympathetic in this year 1927 than Coleridge, or Swinburne, or Dowden.'[22] These publications, Eliot says with disarming blandness, have provoked him to pursue 'a number of reflections on literary criticism and its limits, on general aesthetics, and on the limitations of the human understanding'.[23]

The glancing mention of Coleridge, however, is of particular interest, because (to lapse for a moment into the idiom of Harold Bloom) Coleridge is the 'strong predecessor' with whom Eliot is wrestling in this essay.[24] Coleridge, himself wrestling with arguably an even stronger predecessor in Milton, had put forward a general view about the relation between poetry and philosophy and had exemplified that view in the case of Shakespeare. In 'L'Allegro', Milton had described Shakespeare as 'fancy's child', warbling 'his native wood-notes wild'.[25] Coleridge, first in his *Lectures on Literature*, then later in a more finished and elaborated form in *Biographia Literaria*, had attacked this position (the phrase 'mere child of nature' serving to key Coleridge's remarks to Milton's poem):

> No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language. . . . What then shall we say? even this; that Shakspeare, no mere child of nature; no automaton of genius; no passive vehicle of inspiration possessed by the spirit, not possessing it; first studied patiently, meditated deeply, understood minutely, till knowledge become habitual and intuitive wedded itself to his habitual feelings, and at length gave birth to that stupendous power, by which he stands alone, with no equal or second in his

21. First published in 1927. Quoted here as reprinted in Eliot, *Essays*, pp. 126–40.

22. Eliot, *Essays*, p. 126.

23. Eliot, *Essays*, p. 127.

24. See, classically, Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

25. John Milton, 'L'Allegro', ll. 133–34.

> own class; to that power, which seated him on one of the two glory-smitten summits of the poetic mountain, with Milton as his compeer not rival. . . . All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of MILTON; while SHAKSPEARE becomes all things, yet for ever remaining himself.[26]

Eliot's purpose in 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca' is to loosen, maybe even to untie, the knot in which Coleridge had attempted to bind together poetry and philosophy. Eliot's tone is, at the outset, whimsical:

> My own frivolous opinion is that Shakespeare may have held in private life very different views from what we extract from his extremely varied published works; that there is no clue in his writings to the way in which he would have voted in the last or would vote in the next election; and that we are completely in the dark as to his attitude about prayer-book revision.[27]

His own essay, ostensibly offered to the reader as a discovery of yet another Shakespearean philosophy, is in fact intended as a stealthy vaccine against all such approaches: 'I propose a Shakespeare under the influence of the stoicism of Seneca. But I do not believe that Shakespeare was under the influence of Seneca. . . . I wish merely to disinfect the Senecan Shakespeare before he appears. My ambitions would be realized if I could prevent him, in so doing, from appearing at all.'[28] However, behind this astringent playfulness lies a serious proposition about how poets or dramatists stand in relation to their ideas. Unlike philosophers, who use their writings to propagate and recommend their ideas, poets and dramatists use their ideas to populate their writings. Shakespeare's intellectual sagacity took the form of an instinctive gift for detecting in an idea or a philosophy 'something of theatrical utility': 'I cannot see in Shakespeare either a deliberate scepticism, as of Montaigne, or a deliberate cynicism, as of Machiavelli, or a deliberate resignation, as of Seneca. I can see that he *used* all of these things, for dramatic ends.'[29] In the essay's final pages, Eliot turns to John Donne and makes a very similar point about the poet's opportunistic relationship to ideas:

26. Coleridge, *Biographia*, 2:25–28. Cf. Coleridge, *Lectures*, 1:68–70.
27. Eliot, *Essays*, p. 127.
28. Eliot, *Essays*, pp. 128–29.
29. Eliot, *Essays*, pp. 129 and 134.

> In making some very commonplace investigations of the 'thought' of Donne, I found it quite impossible to come to the conclusion that Donne believed anything. It seemed as if, at that time, the world was filled with broken fragments of systems, and that a man like Donne merely picked up, like a magpie, various shining fragments of ideas as they struck his eye, and stuck them about here and there in his verse. . . . I could not find either any 'medievalism' or any thinking, but only a vast jumble of incoherent erudition on which he drew for purely poetic effects.[30]

Helen Vendler has suggested that the drama of lyric forms is verbal. That is to say, the 'true "actors" in lyric are words or vocabularies, not "dramatic persons"; and the drama of any lyric is constituted by the successive entrances of new sets of words, or new stylistic arrangements (grammatic, syntactical, phonetic) which are visibly in conflict with previous arrangements used with reference to the "same" situation'.[31] In drama, the same may be said of ideas or philosophies. By ideas and philosophies, Shakespeare could be temporarily attracted without being permanently captured. Ideas and philosophies were part of the raw material upon which his 'universal and all-accepting nature' drew, which he deployed, and which he set in motion for purposes of 'dramatic utility', just as he did his characters, before finally giving them—ideas, philosophies, and characters—permission to depart from the theatre of his mind.[32]

I wish to rehabilitate the idea of Shakespeare as a poet of general nature, but this does not entail a commitment, on either his part or mine, to an idea of human nature that is either immobile or unchanging. Rather, it invites us to reflect on a set of durable preoccupations, which have been raised in different ways in different places and at different times but which nevertheless provide threads of continuity across the centuries of recorded human experience. It is also striking that Shakespeare tended to explore these preoccupations from quite different standpoints, relying in different plays on very different presuppositions, pursuing very different angles of vision, and thus generating very different outcomes. A repeated feature of Shakespeare's drama is that we often see him (to borrow a phrase from Emilia in *Othello*) turning his wit 'the seamy-side without' and doing so, moreover, often in plays composed either

30. Eliot, *Essays*, pp. 138–39.

31. Vendler, *Sonnets*, p. 3.

32. The first quoted phrase was applied to Shakespeare by Thomas Mann: 'die universale und allbejahende Natur' ('Goethe and Tolstoy', in Mann, *Essays*, p. 115).

concurrently or successively.[33] Examples of this include *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*, or *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, or *Timon of Athens* and *The Tempest*. It is impossible to imagine even so great a playwright as Ben Jonson doing something similar to this—for instance, writing a wholeheartedly festive comedy immediately after writing the brilliant satiric demolition of festive comedy which is *Bartholomew Fair*. Jonson, like most writers—indeed, like almost all human beings—was imprisoned within his opinions. Shakespeare, on the other hand, seems to have had no settled opinions, despite overflowing with ideas. 'Others abide our question. Thou art free', as Arnold put it, with detectable feelings of envy, admiration, and bafflement (and with the silent and affronted ghost of Old Hamlet in the opening scene of that play powerfully in mind).[34]

This book is divided into four chapters, each of which takes for its theme a fundamental aspect of human life: the question of personal identity, the distinction between civilisation and barbarism, the purpose and character of political institutions, and the tangle of ethical questions surrounding the stubborn difficulty we encounter in deciding between the good and the right, and between means and ends. Too often invocations of Shakespeare and general human nature have been airy and vacuous, as if the content of the idea of general human nature did not need to be spelled out, even in the incomplete and cursory way I do here. No doubt other people would have selected different issues upon which to focus—for instance, gender or the wavy and permeable line that separates humans from other animals or race. Nevertheless, what is offered in the following pages at least makes a start on colouring in some of the larger provinces of Shakespeare's—and our—general nature.

Despite that diffidence, I would make one strong claim for the four great problems around which I have organised this book. They all raise issues on which it is impossible honestly to be of only one mind, and hence they are

33. *Othello*, IV.ii.145. Cf. two apposite remarks, the first by Tony Nuttall: 'His [Shakespeare's] thought is never still. No sooner has one identified a philosophical "position" than one is forced, by the succeeding play, to modify or extend one's account' (*Shakespeare the Thinker*, p. 24); and the second by Helen Vendler (of which the wording may contain a glance at Emilia's phrase): 'He [Shakespeare] was a master subverter of the languages he borrowed, and the point of *literary* interest is not the fact of his borrowings but how he turned them inside out' (Vendler, *Sonnets*, p. 2).

34. Matthew Arnold, 'Shakespeare', l. 1. Cf. *Hamlet*, I.i.44–51.

intrinsically dramatic.[35] It is true that Christ warns us that no man can serve two masters.[36] But it is also true that Christ rarely warns us against things to which we are not drawn. Do we not from day to day constantly experience the tug of contending intellectual loyalties and commitments? Are we not perpetually drawn by the allure of rival goods, neither of which we are willing entirely to relinquish? In our mundane dealings we rely on the solidity of the concept of personal identity, but when we reflect upon that concept, we can see a myriad of powerful arguments against it. We both benefit from the affordances of civilisation and yet also chafe against the constraints civilisation imposes upon us in order to deliver those benefits. We both see our political institutions as utilitarian, man-made contrivances assembled to deliver practical benefits to the governed and recognise that those institutions need also to be hedged about with an artificial aura of, if not necessarily supernatural, then certainly of a more than natural potency and authority if they are to function effectively. We readily denounce the immorality of treating other people as instruments, while at the same time availing ourselves of other people in countless ways every day. However vehemently we may renounce one or other of them, in practice (as the writings of even the greatest philosophers demonstrate) we remain snared by the rival considerations of expediency (or the *utile*) and right (or the *honestum*).

Henry Sidgwick asserted that the 'common sense of men cannot acquiesce in conflicting principles'.[37] Nevertheless, it is our daily experience that, though we may struggle, we are indeed at every turn enmeshed by conflicting principles. Moreover, there is a wide interval between not acquiescing in a situation and being in fact able to escape from it. Indeed, it is precisely the tension between our refusal to acquiesce and our inability to discover some means of escape that keeps these conflicts of principle active and makes them enduringly constitutive of our human nature.

Edmund Burke, in his great speech *American Taxation*, memorably censured the political character of Charles Townshend as 'a candidate for contradictory honours', whose 'great aim was to make those agree in admiration of

35. 'An allegory is never quite consistent except when it is written by someone without dramatic faculty, in which case it is unreadable' (Shaw, *Wagnerite*, p. 30).

36. Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13.

37. Sidgwick, *Ethics*, p. 6. Cf. ibid., p. 10: 'two conflicting rules of action cannot both be reasonable'.

him who never agreed in any thing else.'[38] But is it not the case that, to the extent that we are fully human, we will tend always to be candidates for contradictory honours? And might this not be especially true of the very greatest writers? As one of them has observed, 'Authorship itself has always seemed to me to be a witness to and an expression of ambivalence, of here and there, of yes and no, of two souls in one breast, of an annoying richness in inner conflicts, antitheses, and contradictions.'[39] That is why people with normal moral constitutions so often recoil from successful politicians. In order to succeed in their cartoon-like world, politicians seem often to have willingly amputated some part of their humanity, and in so doing have implicitly disparaged a valuable, and finally indelible, inward dividedness which they ought to have acknowledged and respected.[40]

Let me acknowledge at the very outset that my intellectual contexts are drawn from only the Western tradition and my examples (particularly in, for instance, chapter 3) are very frequently British or even more narrowly English, while the human appetite for, and understanding of, Shakespeare is, as I have suggested, much broader than that. But this limitation in my own intellectual equipment should not be taken as necessarily indicating a weakness in my general argument. For one could argue that the philosophical, historical, ethical, and political themes around which I have organised this book are simply particular instantiations of deeper and more widespread human instincts and impulses which make themselves felt in other cultures too, albeit under altered appearances. It seems hard to believe, for example, that any human group, at any time or in any place, has been perfectly uninterested in questions of the

38. Burke, *Writings*, 2:455.

39. 'Schriftstellertum selbst erschien mir vielmehr von jeher als ein Erzeugnis und Ausdruck der Problematik, des Da und Dort, des Ja und Nein, der zwei Seelen in einer Brust, des schlimmen Reichtums an inneren Konflikten, Gegensätzen und Widersprüchen' (Mann, *Reflections*, p. 14).

40. This humane receptiveness to contradiction is not, by the way, anything like its evil twin, Orwell's 'doublethink', which in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Emmanuel Goldstein defines as 'the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them'. The difference is that, while doublethink is brazenly confessed to be 'a vast system of mental cheating', the contradictions to which I refer are not a way of letting yourself off an ethical or political or historical hook but rather of remaining on the hook (however painful it may be) in order precisely to avoid being cheated or short-changed with something inadequately simple-minded (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. Peter Davison [London: Secker and Warburg, 1987], pp. 223 and 224).

distinction between self and other, of the concept of personal identity, of the principle that confers or withholds legitimacy and authority within a group and of the proper purposes of such authority, and of the discrimination of a good action from a bad or selfish one. Of course, the various *responses* to these perennial and ubiquitous problems that arise in different human communities have varied, sometimes dramatically, and will no doubt continue to do so in the future. The areas of concern, however, seem to be as universal as anything human ever can be.[41]

Each of the book's four chapters begins with an examination of the large issue at its heart, before proceeding, in the first place, to explore how that issue is taken up in one of the four great Shakespearean tragedies and, after that, to show how those plays, like whirlpools, drew into themselves material from earlier plays, before spinning this material outwards, often in markedly altered forms, into the plays which followed. Thinkers and artists born after Shakespeare (such as Hume, Freud, Nietzsche, Wagner, Verdi, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Conrad, Kant, Thomas Mann, G. E. Moore, Goethe, or John Rawls) figure in the discussion, as do writers and thinkers born before Shakespeare whom there is no reason to believe he had ever read (such as Orosius or St. Ambrose). Such undisguised ahistoricism is intended, in part, to serve as a standing reminder that this book is no historical study of Shakespeare in an early-modern setting, much as I recognise the value of such scholarship.[42]

In this book I am trying to do something different. I am trying to reconnect Shakespeare's plays to the abiding concerns of thoughtful people—concerns which, in a variety of shapes, seem to have formed part of our 'general nature' since the earliest antiquity. I am trying to renew, to refresh, and to re-introduce

41. Let me underline that I am emphatically not trying to resuscitate the fatally-wounded concept of 'perennial and unchanging "unit ideas" which it [is] the task of the intellectual historian to uncover and trace' (Skinner, *Visions*, 1:176). Rather, my assertion is that our general humanity comprises, at one level, some fundamental and large-scale preoccupations (nothing so definite as ideas) which change, if at all, at only a glacial speed. These preoccupations are part of 'what we bring to the world in our efforts to make sense of it' (ibid.); and it seems to me not to endanger my position if I readily concede that the menu of second-order questions (let alone answers) that these recurrent areas of preoccupation precipitate in different societies or groups may vary greatly. That said, I nevertheless do take the force of Hume's exclamation towards the end of his essay 'Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth': '*Man and for ever!*' (Hume, *Essays*, p. 528). Hume alludes to Pope, *Second Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated*, l. 252.

42. And, indeed, I have written some of it: e.g., *Divinity and State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

what Thomas Carlyle said narrowly and possessively about Shakespeare and the English, and in so doing to broaden his remarks into a claim about both the central place of Shakespeare in the human and the central place of the human in Shakespeare: 'Yes, this Shakespeare is ours; we produced him, we speak and think by him; we are of one blood and kind with him.'[43]

As far as I can tell, these words seem, extraordinarily and quite exceptionally, to apply to all of us, in all places, and at all times.

43. Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as Poet', in Carlyle, *Chartism*, p. 270.

INDEX