

## SHAKESPEARE'S IDEA OF HISTORY

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Our world and Shakespeare's are very different, but we have one thing in common - we all live in time, in history, and it is only historically that his time, like ours, can be understood. To understand either we need not only a knowledge of history in the sense of knowing something of the actual course of events, but an idea of history, some sort of frame within which these events can be related. And it may help us to understand both Shakespeare and his age and our own age and its problems if we try to see what history meant to him. It is clear, at least, that he was deeply concerned with history and gave a great deal of thought to its problems.

Macbeth's famous outburst, for example,

Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (V.vi)

implies a theory of history most movingly and eloquently expressed. It is not unlike some of the theories fashionable today, but is it Shakespeare's? Elsewhere, in Henry IV Part 2 (III.i.) he writes:

There is a history in all men's lives,  
Figuring the nature of the times deceased;  
The which observed, a man may prophesy,  
With a near aim, of the main chance of things  
As yet not come to life, which in their seeds  
And weak beginnings lie intreasured.  
Such things become the hatch and brood of time;

Here he puts into the Earl of Warwick's mouth what is surely his own conviction that history is not meaningless, as Macbeth supposed, but has a pattern and a lesson, and that by the study of its lessons men can hope to avoid errors and begin to control their lives and futures. Macbeth's lament is not an expression of Shakespeare's view of history, but a dramatic statement of the outlook of a defeated and demoralised man, just as its modern counterparts are of the outlook of a defeated and demoralised class.

In the pages which follow I want to try to discover what Shakespeare thought about his time and how he interpreted its history. This should be possible since a very high proportion of his plays deal with themes that may broadly be called political. We shall refer to a number of these, but naturally we shall be first and mainly concerned with the great sequence of plays in which he considers the history of England.

### 1. SHAKESPEARE'S AGE

This is no place for a detailed discussion of the social structure of England at the end of the sixteenth century, but a few very general remarks cannot be avoided. First, England was still feudal, though its feudalism

differed in many ways from that of earlier centuries. The ruling class was still a feudal aristocracy and the state a feudal state. The peasants; a majority of the population, though no longer serfs in the medieval sense, were still being exploited in a feudal way. Yet in the immediately previous generations productive forces and relations had changed greatly, and these changes were going forward at an increasing pace. Within the framework of feudal society bourgeois relations had grown to an extent that was producing a deep crisis, social and political.

Earlier in the century the new forces had won a partial victory in the Reformation. The resulting established church was still feudal, but it was a national church, not a part of a supra-national one, and this, perhaps, reflects one change which for our special point of approach is most important, the development, with the bourgeoisie, of nationalism. No doubt embryonic signs of nationalism can be traced much earlier, but only in the sixteenth century, with the establishment of an efficient centralised government and the ending of the localised territorial power of the great nobles, can one speak in the full sense of an English nation. Towards the end of the century this national feeling was strengthened by the international situation. In the reign of Elizabeth I England stood out as the centre and main bulwark of the protestant and progressive forces in Europe, engaged in a life and death struggle with Spain and the reaction of the Counter Reformation. Much depended on the victory of England and her allies in this struggle, and knowledge of this created a sense of national unity that was all the keener for the presence of what we might today call Quislings and fifth-columnists. England felt itself a nation with a mission, and, after the defeat of the Armada in 1588, felt also a firm assurance of success.

It was at this point that Shakespeare arrived in London and began to work for the theatre, and among his earliest plays are the first group of Histories. In these, and a few years later in the second group, he expressed this new, confident, nationalism and patriotism. The thorns of his Histories, taken as a whole, is the birth of a nation.

We should, however, greatly distort the age if we looked solely at this aspect, which in any case reflects a situation that was of short duration and had ended even before Shakespeare's death. If his was an age of patriotism it was also an age of conflict, hardship and oppression. The prosperity of the new middle classes and many of the gentry was indeed the consequence of the increased exploitation of the bulk of the working people. Here we have a contradiction of which many, including Shakespeare, were clearly aware: classes objectively progressive may be often practically oppressive and predatory. It is this latter feature which is most immediately visible, especially to their social inferiors. The toad under the harrow does not rejoice in the coming harvest.

This, then, is the double aspect of change in the later sixteenth century. On the one hand national pride, the patriotism, the sense of unity and purpose, of new wealth and opportunity. On the other the sweeping away of much that was fine and more that was venerable, new forms of exploitation and new areas of misery, and a growing conflict between the claims of authority and social justice. Both of these strands of development and something of their interaction are comprehended in Shakespeare's view of history, and we can, perhaps, trace, as he matured and the crisis of his time developed towards a new historic stage, some significant changes in his outlook.

## 11. THE HISTORY PLAYS

In his great series of Histories from Richard II to Richard III Shakespeare covered what was for the men of his generation the core of modern history. Earlier times were for them barbarous and obscure, the period since Bosworth was contemporary history - dangerous ground for historian or dramatist. But in the deposition and tragedy of Richard II Shakespeare could see the beginning of that train of events which ended with what for him was the "modern world, the new Tudor monarchy and the new pattern of life. Shakespeare's view of this history was a political one. He interpreted the past in the light of the Tudor political settlement and his view of this was coloured by what he knew, or thought he knew, about the fifteenth century.

His age was one in which, perhaps for the first time, there was a general interest in history and a new, literate public, both aristocratic and bourgeois, ready to read or be told about the past. The sixteenth century Chronicle was the response to that demand and was quite different in kind from the medieval Chronicle, which was largely local in outlook and often no more than a jotting down of events as they happened. And where the more sophisticated Chronicle, such as that of Froissart, was supra-national or cosmopolitan, the sixteenth century Chronicle was an attempt, crude in Holinshed, more philosophical in the case of Hall's The Union of the two noble and illustre Families of Lancaster and York or the work of Polydore Virgil, to record the history of a nation- If Shakespeare went to Holinshed for his facts, his interpretation is closer to that of Hall, and it is worth noting that the period covered by Hall is almost identical with that of his sequence of plays.

These plays put the essence of the new historical view into popular form for the theatre-going public. In this Shakespeare was working in a tradition already well established when he entered the theatre, and his first plays - the three Parts of Henry VI - are cast in a form that had proved its popularity and may have been in part based on older chronicle plays now lost, though it is probable that there is much more of Shakespeare's work in them than critics were at one time disposed to allow. At least one can say that Richard III, the first play in which his full potentialities are disclosed, complements and completes the Henry VI trilogy. All the hints and leads in Henry VI are taken up and followed to a conclusion in Richard III.

The lay, literate public who read the Chronicles and enjoyed plays based on them was new in kind. Previously almost all literate people were clerics, clerks, and the basis of their education was Latin. Now a public existed and demanded books on all subjects in English, even if their early education had been a classical one. It was to serve them that printing developed so rapidly, and its growth in turn stimulated the demand. From the sixteenth century, and especially from Shakespeare's own time, we can date the wide diffusion of translations of the classics and of French and Italian books of all kinds. The Elizabethan age was the first great age of translation and this was certainly a prime factor in the education of Shakespeare and of the middle classes in general. At no previous time would a man with "little Latin and less Greek" have found the resources of world literature thus open to him. And the popular dramatists in turn formed part of a sort of transmission belt bringing this cultural wealth within

reach of an even less literate section of the public.

Earlier, history had been valued as a lesson for princes and rulers - what to do and what to avoid. The Mirror for Magistrates (which Shakespeare must have read) was written with this object. Even later, Raleigh still wrote in this sense and so Cromwell commends his History of the World to his son. But the Elizabethan Chronicle is a tacit acknowledgement that history has lessons also for the people - if only, at the lowest level, to be content and to avoid sedition and tumult. Shakespeare, too, must have sat in church as a boy and heard the doctrine of degree and the official view of the relation of ruler and subject formally expounded in the Homily Of Obedience.

Up to a point both Shakespeare and his audience accepted this doctrine, though we shall try to show later how he understood it and how he went beyond it.

Were the people becoming interested in history because, for the first time they began, however vaguely, to see themselves as a historical force? If so, as I think, they demanded something more than sermons on the duty of obedience. Shakespeare gives them more. He shows graphically how the fortunes of rulers and people are inter-related. He shows how the misfortunes of society follow the sins of its rulers. In Henry V it is the common soldiers before the battle who are thinking for themselves and insisting that kings must be held responsible before God and man for their acts. In Lear, Timon of Athens, and Troilus and Cressida he analyses the power of money, the misery of war and faction (feudal faction within the ruling class) and the consequences of the break-up of the ancient order.

#### 111. LANCASTER AND YORK

The Histories, in which so much of Shakespeare's doctrine is embodied, were not written in the order of the reigns which they cover. Nevertheless they form a coherent and unbroken sequence and Shakespeare seems to have intended them to be taken as a whole, as when, at the end of Henry V he refers back to Henry VI, "which oft our stage hath shown".

His story begins with the tragic reign of Richard III, the last king in the undisputed Plantagenet line, which seemed to him and to his age a decisive turning point. He presents it as the end of the old order, and Richard III is the formal garden of the high middle age, an epoch of imagined chivalry already presenting itself as a past to the Tudor age of novelty and transition. Everything is stylised, ceremonial, and Richard himself "that sweet, lovely rose", a figure for a tapestry. Here Shakespeare is using the symbolic language of his time but in his own way and with his own purpose. In just the same way, comparing Edward IV and Henry V to the sun, he adopts the current belief that the sun is the king of the heavenly bodies, yet in selecting this particular symbol he is stressing the fact that in them the element of power predominates, he is making a judgement about their character.

x Approximate dates: Henry VI, 1590-1, Richard III, 1592, Henry IV, Part 1, 1597, Part 2, 1598, Henry V, 1599.

So with Richard. Certainly the rose was, by tradition, the king among flowers, as the oak was among trees, the lion among beasts, and so on. In selecting this symbol Shakespeare criticises Richard because in him the balance of qualities that should go to make the true king is overweighted towards the ornamental and ceremonial. Richard has merely the show and outward form of kingship. This judgement is to be linked with the garden scene (iii.iv.), which, while on the face of it little more than an interruption of the action of the play, is really its heart, the scene in which Shakespeare draws most clearly his political lesson. The head gardener, king in his little commonwealth, is contrasted with Richard, the negligent and unthrifty husbandman, and we are shown exactly where he falls short of adequacy:

O, what pity is it  
That he has not so trimmed and dress'd his land  
As we this garden. We at time of year  
Do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit trees,  
Lost, being over-proud in sap and blood,  
With too much riches it confound itself....  
Had he done so, himself had borne the crown,  
Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down.

Yet this does not excuse his deposition, still less his murder; the gardener sees his fall as tragic and his deposition as a crime. Nevertheless this is a just consequence of his failure to learn husbandry, seen here as the first duty of an English king.

By presenting his political lesson in this traditional and symbolic way Shakespeare would bring his point home to a sixteenth century audience with the same sort of immediate force that Shaw achieves in that powerful passage in Heartbreak House, when, having described England as a ship being driven on the rocks by a drunken skipper, Captain Shotover answers Hector's question,

"What am I do do?"

Shotover: "Nothing simpler. Learn your business as an Englishman."

Hector: "And what may my business as an Englishman be, pray?"

Shotover: "Navigation. Learn it and live; or leave it and be damned."

The peace of the garden, the whole traditional course and pattern of English life, is first violated by Richard's levity and unfitness for kingship and then shattered by Bolingbroke's usurpation. Bolingbroke (Henry IV) has nothing of Richard's formal grace. He is a man of the new sort, practical, always adapting his means precisely to the end in view. Henceforth, Shakespeare seems to tell us, English life seems to set towards a new pattern, which only takes stable form in the sixteenth century. Between the two patterns is an age of civil war and disorder, an unnatural age,

The plays that follow are a picture of that disorder, which Shakespeare fully accepts as a fact in human affairs. But he sees it against a background in which order is still the norm, and often, as in the scene at the battle of Towton (Henry VI, Part 3, 11.v.) where we meet a father who has killed his son and a son who has killed his father, he projects a formalism in disorder which emphasises this. The scenes of daily life in town and country which bulk so large in Henry IV, are also, I think,

intended to remind of this normality which persists indestructibly despite the disorder at the top.

Shakespeare condemns both Richard and Bolingbroke but not equally. As an individual Bolingbroke may be more admirable than Richard, though this is arguable, as a king he is undeniably more effective, but his crime is greater and produces more tragic and far-reaching consequences. It sets in motion a whole chain of crimes and disasters. One of the strands in the History Sequence is the working out of this legacy of sin and retribution, almost in the manner of a Greek tragedy. Shakespeare, like his audience, saw the destruction of the House of Lancaster as a divine punishment of their sin against natural order. Nor does the chain end there.

York is indeed a divine instrument to punish the sin of Lancaster, but his action is not thereby right nor does Shakespeare justify it. On the contrary, crime succeeds and breeds crime and only after all have been destroyed is the Tudor synthesis possible. Indeed, it may well seem that Shakespeare regards each succeeding crime as worse than its predecessor, till the series culminates in the monstrous tragedy of Richard III, after which things could not grow worse but must improve. In this way, too, the rebellion of Richmond (Henry VII) can be justified, as it had to be by any dramatist writing in the reign of his granddaughter. Richard had to be a monster in order that his deposition could be morally and politically defensible.

How seriously did Shakespeare take the Tudor claim and the conventional view of Richard? A Soviet critic, M. Levidov, argues that he presented the orthodox line tongue in cheek while secretly admiring Richard as a Machiavellian super-man. This seems to go beyond the evidence, nor does Shakespeare elsewhere show any marked liking for such people. It is true that the scene at Bosworth, where the dispute between Lancaster and York is resolved and decided by the dead of both parties seems ridiculous today, but it was probably moving and impressive to an Elizabethan audience. In the same way, Richmond's closing speech, which falls flat to us, was probably a tumultuous success. We have to remember, also, that the Tudor monarchy, whatever its defects, did end a period of prolonged civil war which brought nothing but suffering to the mass of the people.

If Shakespeare accepts the orthodox view, as he seems to, he adds something important to it. Richard III is an unmitigated villain, a tyrant and usurper, but he lived in an evil time which did not breed heroes. All those about him are mean, petty, selfish and contemptible\* All are equally wicked, he alone is wicked on a grand scale. Like Macbeth, whom he resembles in so many ways, he rises to a heroic dignity in defeat. In such an age, Shakespeare seems to say, greatness can only take a negative, a destructive form. It is the times, the age of decadent and dying feudalism that is really to be blamed. In this way, though he does not say that men's actions are determined by their age and circumstances, he shows that he understood that they are related to them and can only truly be judged when these are taken into account.

And we must beware of judging Shakespeare by modern standards and ideas. He really believed in the possibility of an inherited curse and the sins of the fathers being divinely visited upon the children. His audience shared these beliefs.

Finally, there is a dualism, even contradiction, between the divine and superhuman decreeing the curse and retribution for sin and the human

and quite rational qualities and forces through which the tragedy works itself out. Shakespeare seems uncertain at times which is the real moving force, but it may be significant that it is in the first group of plays (Henry VI and Richard III) that the superhuman element seems strongest. As he natured the human and rational ground.

#### IV. AUTHORITY AND DEGREE

One of the clearest statements of the orthodox view of authority as the essential basis of the social fabric is to be found in that part of the play Sir Thomas More which is now generally attributed to Shakespeare. More is dispersing what we might now call a race riot, in which the Londoners are attacking, and demanding the expulsion of, immigrants from Flanders. He argues:

Grant them remov'd and grant that this your noise  
Had chid down all the majesty of England.  
Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,  
Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,  
Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation, (x)  
And that you sit as kings in your desires,  
Authority quite silenced by your brawl  
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed, -  
What have you got? I'll tell you, you have taught  
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,  
How order should be quelled, and by this pattern,  
Not one of you should live an aged man.  
For other ruffians as their fancies wrought,  
With self sane hand, self reasons and self right,  
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes  
Would feed on one another.

It is interesting to find Shakespeare putting his argument into the mouth of More, since they both had to face this problem of authority and both, perhaps, faced it in the same spirit. For this reason such a speech put into More's mouth has greater weight than the superficially similar statements of, for example, the Roman senators in Coriolanus. Even if we accept their arguments as valid, it is still true that Shakespeare meant us to see that they were intended to deceive and were used as an excuse to avoid meeting the perfectly genuine grievances of the plebeians. What L.C.Knights says of Volumnia's speech later in the same play applies equally to that of Menenius Agrippa:

"I think this is one of the few places where without irrelevance we can describe what Shakespeare is doing in the political terminology of a later age: he is revealing the class basis ('my fortunes and my friends') of patrician honour. But he is doing more than that. For what Volumnia advocates - the passing of

(x) These lines are probably a deliberate reference to More's description in Utopia of the driving out of the victims of enclosures. "They must needs depart awaye, poore, silly, wretched soules, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherlesse children, widows, woeful mothers, with their young babes, and their whole whole household small in substance and much in number." If so, we can infer that Shakespeare is taking the opportunity to remind us that he is aware of social injustice as well as the need for authority.

counterfeit coin, the use of words that are but rooted in the tongue - is nothing less than the abrogation of those qualities of mutuality and trust on which any society must be founded. There is a corroding cynicism (and the tone suggests he is half conscious of it) in the words with which Coriolanus accepts his mother's promptings." Party Politics and the English Tradition.  
pp.13-4.

From these and other passages taken together it is reasonable to infer that Shakespeare shared something of More's ambivalent attitude to authority, which, in his time could not be dissociated from monarchy. The Wars of the Roses were still recent history - Shakespeare's father must have known men who had fought at Bosworth, not so many miles from Stratford. Civil strife, under the conditions of dying feudalism, meant the resumption of anarchic and fruitless gang wars between rival factions of the nobility. This was something that no sensible person wanted, certainly not Shakespeare, who had drawn such a vivid picture of its consequences. And a strong central government appeared the only alternative to such chaos.

In this respect he reflects the new outlook which had grown up with the growth of the bourgeoisie- His outlook is here essentially national, like that of all the second generation (post Reformation) English humanists- In the conditions of the time the monarchy, whatever its shortcomings, was the only possible focal point for this nationalism.

It was hardly possible in Shakespeare's time for anyone to envisage any other kind of society than the modified national feudalism of the Tudor despotism, except a regression to the anarchic feudalism of the fifteenth century which could also be seen in many parts of Europe at this time. In this sense Shakespeare must inevitably appear as the defender of despotism, just as More was and perhaps with the same reservations.

And monarchy as he saw and depicted it was always a popular monarchy, When he began to write, about 1590, many of the problems which had disturbed men in the early and middle years of the century appeared for the moment to have been solved or at least on the way to solution. In this short lull between two periods of stress, coloured by the glow of national unity engendered in the struggle with Spain, the History Plays were written. Sir Thomas More belongs to the same period.

In these plays Shakespeare insisted on the sacredness of kingship, the wickedness of rebellion, the overriding need for order and degree. Soon new conflicts and contradictions began to appear, and it was from this later stage that the great Tragedies emerged. Much of the difference between the tone of the Sir Thomas More speech and the aristocratic diatribes in Coriolanus can be attributed simply to the fact that Coriolanus was written some twelve years later.

L.C. Knights (in Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson. p.267) notes the deepening melancholy at the beginning of the seventeenth century. This coincides with the beginning of Shakespeare's tragic period. How far is the correspondence with the new century and dynasty merely a coincidence? We do not know what personal factors may have been involved, but in the plays the disease appears in social more than personal forms. The times arc out of joint. Note, for example, the



sharp, new social criticism in Lear and Timon and the marked contrast in the attitudes to war and politics in Henry V and in Troilus and Cressida.

From about 1600 Shakespeare's conviction of the paramount importance of order and authority seems to have weakened. While disorder is still presented in Lear as opening the road to every kind of evil, the abuse of authority is shown as an evil in itself and one which corrupts the whole fabric of the commonwealth.

Lear. A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears: see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief, Hark, in thine ear: change places, and, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

Gloucester. Ay, sir.

Lear. And the creature run from the cur? There thou mightest behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. Thou rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand! Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back; Thou hotly lust'st to use her in that kind For which thou whip'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener. Through tatter'd clothes small vices do appear; Robes and furr'd gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold, And the strong hand of justice hurtless breaks) Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.

We can see, side by side, a deepening crisis and a deepening of Shakespeare's insight into the nature of society and the contradiction between the need for order and stability and the injustice and ultimate instability arising from what More called, "a certain conspiracy of riche men procuring their owne commodities under the name and title of the commonwealth." This contradiction he was never able to resolve except in a Utopian fashion in his last plays, The Tempest and A Winter's Tale. In them the final unity and reconciliation arc perhaps unconvincing just because they offer a solution to social evils that Shakespeare, like More again, rather wished for than hoped after. But it is through his realisation of these contradictions that his best and maturest work speaks to us across the centuries.

#### V. THE COMMON PEOPLE

Shakespeare has often been accused of an attitude of hostility and contempt for the common people, on what I feel to be insufficient grounds. Certainly he did not approve of popular insurrection. He represents the people often as gullible and easily swayed by demagogues, as the giddy multitude. His most detailed and hostile picture is to be found in the scenes in Henry VI dealing with Cade's rebellion. However, this was his earliest work, and in Coriolanus he presents things very differently. Certainly his plebeians are described as acting unwisely, but their wrongs are real ones and morally they are superior in every way to their patrician opponents. Nor is Shakespeare unsympathetic to their reluctance to provide the pile of corpses on which Coriolanus can pose as the conquering hero.

Shakespeare's disapproval of popular insurrection springs from

causes which we can easily understand even if we do not entirely accept them. In the sixteenth century it was easy to see only the negative, destructive side of such rebellion, and we must remember that neither the peasants nor the urban poor were as yet a revolutionary or even a progressive class. We can now see that they did play an important part in destroying feudalism, but this can hardly have been apparent at the time, nor, even if it had been possible for Shakespeare to see them as a factor in the development of bourgeois revolution, would this necessarily have commended their actions to him.

But while Shakespeare distrusted the people as a political force, his plebeian characters are habitually presented with genuine warmth and affection. In Henry V it is the common soldiers, Williams, Bates and Court, who show the most honesty and clearest thought. They are capable of putting questions which the king is really unable to meet. In Timon it is the servants who show gratitude and disinterested loyalty when all Timon's fine friends desert him. In Lear it is a common man, a 'peasant', who strikes the first effective blow against the apparently omnipotent forces of evil. Even such disreputable figures as Falstaff's raffish 'tail' show good nature and cheerfulness. Mistress Quickly stands by her old friend to the last, and it is Bardolph who pronounces his moving epitaph: "Would I were with him, wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or in hell!"

The plebeian characters may often be presented as comic: we are invited to laugh at them, but we are never allowed to find them detestable or contemptible. Consider the 'mechanicals' in A Midsummer-Night's Dream, in whom, no doubt, Shakespeare is satirising the old, amateur, popular stage of the guilds as it appeared to the new professional players (and, in passing, it may be noted that in Hamlet rival professionals are handled at least as roughly). They are, indeed, figures of fun whose misadventures set off the romantic and fanciful parts of the comedy. Yet it is their honesty and good will which make an otherwise rather mediocre play memorable, and I think that Duke Theseus, that pattern of ancient courtesy, speaks with Shakespeare's voice when he says:

I will hear that play:  
For never anything can be amiss,  
When simpleness and duty tender it.

It is never the plebeians whom Shakespeare despises, it is the Osrics and Oswalds - the hypocrites, the timeservers and the pretentious-

## VI. DEGREE

Closely related to the belief in the importance of order and authority, and providing, indeed, its theoretical basis, was the doctrine of degree, generally accepted throughout the middle ages and in the sixteenth century. It was a feudal theory, reflecting the hierarchical structure of its society, with the rigid specification of the rights and obligations of all orders within that society. Its application was much wider than the strictly political. All human affairs were seen as part of the great chain of life, stretching downwards link by link from God himself to the most lowly forms of life. Everything has its appointed place, related to the links above and below it, and the whole is reinforced by a system of correspondences by which the relationships on any given plane form a counter-part to those on any other. Thus, for

example, the relation of a king to his vassals and subjects corresponds on the heavenly plane to that of God and angels, or to that of the sun and the stars on the astronomical.

That Shakespeare was familiar with these doctrines appears in many of his plays: no doubt he met it in the course of his reading but even earlier he must have had it instilled into him while listening to the Homily Of Obedience, originally published in 1547 and appointed to be read periodically in all churches. It is worth quoting some of this Homily in order to compare it with the speech of Ulysses in Troilus and Cressida, where Shakespeare expounds it most fully, as well as with the speech in Sir Thomas More already quoted.

Almightie God hath created and appoynted all thynges, inheaven, ycarth, and waters, in a most excellent and perfect ordre. In heaven he hath appoynted distincte Orders and states of Archangelles and Angelles. In the yearth he hath assigned Kings, princes, with other gouernors under them, all in good and necessarie ordre. The wather aboue is kepte and raineth doune in dewe time and season. The Sonne, Moone, Sterres, Rainbowe, Thundre, Lightenyng, cloudes and all birdes of the air, do kepe their ordre. The Yearth, Trees, Se&des, Plantes, Herbes, and Corn, Grasse and all maner of beastes kepe theim in their ordre.

Corresponding to this natural and cosmic order is social order.

Some are in high degree, some in lowe, some Kynges and Princes, some inferiors and subjectcs, Priests and Laymen, Masters and Scrvauntcs, Fathers and Children, Husbandes and Wifes, Rice and Poore.... Take awaie Kynges, Princes, Rulers, Magistrates, Judges, and suche states of God's ordre, no man shall ride or go by the high way unrobbed, no man shal slepe in his awne house or bod unkilld, no man shall kepe his wife, children and possessions in quietness, all thynges shall be common, and there muste nedes folowe all mischief and utter destruccion, bothe of soules, bodies, goodes and common wealthes.

Ulysses follows this pattern closely.

The heavens themselves, the planets and this centre,  
Observe degree, priority and place,  
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,  
Office and custom, in all line and order:  
And therefore is the glorious planet Sol  
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered  
Amidst the other.....  
Take but degree away, untune that string,  
And, . harK, wha,t discord follows! each thing meets  
in mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters  
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,  
And make a sop of all this solid globe:  
Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike the father dead:  
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,  
Between whose endless jar justice resides,  
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.  
Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;

And appetite, an universal wolf,  
So doubly seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey,  
And last eat up itself. (Troilus and Cressida, 1.iii)

We can agree, then, with Dr. E.M.W. Tillyard that these ideas were familiar to, and generally accepted by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. We find them not only formally expounded in such set pieces as Ulysses' speech, but, more significantly, that their assumptions are taken for granted in many passages, in which they are only incidentally referred to.

Nevertheless I think that Dr. Tillyard oversimplifies matters by treating them as the unchallenged basis of Shakespeare's political thought. A great deal had happened since they were formulated in the high Middle Ages, and, as we have seen, Shakespeare was thoroughly aware of the changes that had taken place. The doctrine of degree was the theory of a society which, though of course it did change, liked to see itself as static: by the sixteenth century no one could ignore the fact that it was static no longer. All Shakespeare's political plays are concerned with societies in process of transformation, often catastrophic, and in general it was a commonplace of his age that the established order was passing before the advent of new men and new ways of life.

It is true, no doubt, this might give the doctrine of degree added sanctity to classes which felt their position threatened: they would cling all the more to this last defence of stability in a falling world. And it might be acceptable to more than one class, to the bourgeoisie, for example, as well as to the old aristocracy, since both wished to preserve their position against classes below them. It might even have an attraction for a peasantry in an age of change, since if the stress were laid on the rights and corresponding duties of one class to another it could be used to condemn rack-renting, enclosures, expropriation and anything; which threatened the traditional order of things. In a time of transition an idea that was once the property of a single class may begin to cross class boundaries, and, as it is adopted by new classes, or classes in new stages of development, be adapted to suit their special needs and so itself be transformed.

Further, though the idea of degree might be firmly established in Shakespeare's mind, it could not command the same exclusive allegiance over his political thinking as it might have done even a generation earlier. The change in productive relations was producing new and conflicting ideas with which it had to contend: the idea of social evolution and even of progress, for example; or the humanist ideas of the power of human reason, or the ideas which Francis Bacon was then elaborating of the infinite possibilities of man's control over nature through 'the knowledge of the causes and secret motions of things.'

To take a final and more specific example, there was the idea of vocation, growing at this time with the growth of Puritanism. If the idea of vocation is related to that of degree, there is a new emphasis. It is less static and there is a much greater readiness to admit that God may call any man to any way of life. And in the end it is the individual who is the judge, who alone can say, 'I am called'. Thus vocation is a bourgeois conception where degree is

feudal, it is in keeping with the greater social mobility which all contemporaries agreed, whether approving or not, was a leading feature of the age. In Shakespeare's time the two ideas exist side by side and might often be held simultaneously by the same man. In Shakespeare all these ideas seem to have co-existed, but in conflict rather than peacefully, and it was out of the tension and conflict that much of his dramatic force proceeded. In nothing, perhaps, is the conflict of old and new more clearly illustrated than in his treatment of the concept of honour.

Vll. HONOUR AND FALSTAFF

In a series of plays all written within a few years - Henry IV, Part 1 (1597), Henry V (1599), Hamlet (1601) and Troilus and Cressida (1602.) Shakespeare carries on what one may call a debate with himself on the subject of honour, of its role in life and its relation to reason as a source of action.

He opens with two statements of extreme views from Hotspur and Falstaff. In Hotspur we see the concept carried to the point where honour has become destructive because prized for its own sake without regard for social consequences.

Send danger from the east unto the west,  
So honour cross it from the north to south,  
And let them grapple: O, the blood more stirs  
To start a lion than to rouse a hare!  
By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap,  
To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon,  
Or dive into the bottom of the deep,  
Where fathom-line could never touch the ground,  
And pluck up drowned honour by the locks;  
So he that doth redeem her thence might wear  
Without corrival all her dignities.  
(Henry IV, Part 1. I.iii)

Falstaff dismisses it as an empty word.

Can honour set a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away  
the grief of a wound? no. Honour hath no skill in surgery  
then? no. What is honour? a word. What is in that word  
honour? what is that honour? air. A trim reckoning! Who  
hath it? he that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no.  
Doth he hear it? no. 'Tis insensible, then? yea, to the  
dead. But will it not live with the living? no. Why?  
detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it.  
Honour is a mere scutcheon: and so ends my catechism.  
(ibid, V.i)

Having stated the two extreme positions Shakespeare gives in Henry V's eve of battle speech, and, by implication in many of his other utterances, what one may regard as official feudal doctrine, which sees honour combined with reason and the fear of God as the cement of the social fabric.

The fewer men, the greater share of honour.  
God's will! I pray thee, wish not one man more.  
By Jove, I am not covetous for gold,

Nor care I who doth feed upon my cost;  
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;  
Such outward: things dwell not in my desires:  
But if it be a sin to covet honour,  
I am the most offending soul alive.

(Henry V, IV. iii)

Here the debate might be expected to end, but it does not. With Hamlet's

Rightly to be great  
Is not to stir without great argument,  
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
When Honour's at the stake.

(IV. v)

a new note of irony appears. Hamlet is indulging in hyperbolic self-criticism which destroys his judgement. The spectacle of thousands going to their graves 'for a fantasy and a trick of fame' reminds him of his own unfulfilled duties. We should be ignoring everything Shakespeare wrote elsewhere if we supposed that he thought their enterprise justified.

This is made especially clear in his very next play, Troilus and Cressida, in which he passes a final and bitter judgement on war and the motives from which men undertake it. In 1602 England had been at war with Spain for considerably more than the ten years' space of the siege of Troy. It was a war at its opening necessary and progressive, and it had opened gloriously. But by this time it had become clear that no decision could be reached and the war which had started with such high hope had turned sour and pointless. The disintegration of morale and temper in this endless and ill-conducted war had set the English commanders at one another's throats just as it did the Greeks before Troy.

In this sense Troilus and Cressida is perhaps the most topical of all Shakespeare's plays. But there is a deeper irony in linking this tale of the squalor of war with the heroic talc of Troy. Priam to the Elizabethans was a great medieval king, and Troy a rich and glorious feudal kingdom. Hector was the first knight in the world, just as to Caxton he had been one of the 'nine worthy and best that ever there were'. Troy belonged to the world of romance, a universal symbol of magnificence, courage and disaster.

As such it had been long in Shakespeare's mind, as we can see from The Rape of Lucrece (verses 196-218). In the scene with the players in Hamlet there is an indication that he is ready to take up the theme in a new way. His handling of it is foreshadowed in Henry IV in the fate of Hotspur and Glendower. For here, too, the theme is the defeat of the old by the new. To Hotspur and his associates what Dr. Tillyard says of Troy is equally applicable:

"The Trojans are antique, anachronistically chivalrous and rather inefficient; the Greeks are the new men, ruthless, and, though quarrelsome and unpleasant, less inefficient than the Trojans." (Shakespeare's Problem Plays, p.9)

The real similarity is not that both were defeated but that both

have the stamp of defeat set upon them from the outset.

This appears in the debate of the council of the Trojans in Act 11 Sc.i. Troilus argues that honour forbids the handing back of Helen to the Greeks\* Hector's reason leads him to a correct conclusion and policy but is vitiated by his chivalrous determination to act the part of the best knight. Having demolished Troilus' faulty argument he accepts Troilus' conclusion on the ground that honour must over-ride reason and prudence. In this way the fate of Troy is sealed.

So here the argument on honour, begun with Hotspur, Falstaff and Henry V, is concluded\* Shakespeare, I think, loves and admires the men of honour, but in the end has to dismiss them as ridiculous and irrelevant to the times. Hector is as much an anachronism as Don Quixote. The future lies with the new men and the new ways, and there is a precise parallel between the treacherous disposal of the rebels by John of Lancaster in Henry IV, Part 11 and the murder of the disarmed Hector by Achilles.

There remains the somewhat more complex question of Falstaff and Henry V. As we have seen, each is given a set piece on the subject of honour. Henry voices the orthodox view and Shakespeare intends us to accept it, but are we therefore intended to reject Falstaff's? Is he not placing before us rival and complementary views, each of which has its own peculiar wisdom and validity? Henry expresses the official view of aristocratic society. But below the aristocratic superstructure is a peasant world, shrewd and tenacious and persisting by cunning and evasion. It makes use of the language of cowardice to express its defiance of aristocratic values. If it is cowardly, it is the positive, stubborn, life-serving cowardice of Schweik. Shakespeare was by origin near enough to this lower world to understand and appreciate it, and he no more condemns the wisdom of Falstaff than Cervantes condemns the wisdom of Sancho Panza.

Yet Falstaff in his own way is no less an anachronism than Hector and Hotspur. He is not only Sancho Panza but also Don Quixote, with the cunning and coarseness of the first and the self-deception of the second. He is still able to feel that he has a place in society. Shakespeare knows better.

Falstaff and Don Quixote - the fat knight and the thin knight - are two sides of the penny of dying feudalism, opposite but eternally and unbreakably linked. As feudalism decays, knighthood loses its virtue, its relation to the real business of living, and degenerates into banditry, buffoonery, idealistic illusion. In any case it becomes absurd and suffers humiliating and ludicrous defeat.

In Timon (1605) the matter is taken a stage further. Timon is also a victim of honour, which in his case takes the form of a self-destroying pride that forbids him to set any bounds upon his generosity. In Athenian dress he is the great feudal magnate whose honour demands the maintenance of a vast unproductive establishment.

The fate of Falstaff and the fate of Timon illustrate two aspects of the destruction during the sixteenth century of the great households that were often also private armies. The noble who could not adapt himself to the new situation in which money was master went down, so that it is not surprising to find Timon's bitterness so directed against gold. The horde of retainers and dependant gentry had to shift for

themselves, as Falstaff did, and the Elizabethan and Jacobean play is full of such men with no assets but their gentility and their wits.

Shakespeare, who had known such a household from the inside as a client and friend of the Earl of Southampton, but who was also a small-town tradesman's son, saw their passing with sons regret, as we can infer from his sympathetic portraits of Timon's steward and Adam in As You Like It, but he saw also that such establishments had no place in the new world to which of necessity he belonged. So his attitude to the new world was one of love and hate, of contempt and respect. Or can we say that his heart was with the old, his head with the new? That is perhaps why we feel sad at the Rejection of Falstaff, though we do not question either its justice or its inevitability.

Just as Shakespeare set the stamp of failure on Hotspur at his first appearance, so he does with Falstaff (Henry IV, Part 1. ii). He and his gang are the army of the night, 'they go by the moon and the seven stars'. Henry, as future king, is Phoebus, the sun, and Falstaff deceives himself in supposing that Henry can ever be of his party. Shakespeare thus takes the earliest opportunity to make it clear that this would be a reversal of natural order, to which the political order must in the long run correspond. And the point is clinched by the Prince's speech at the end of the Scene:

I know you all, and will a while uphold  
The unyoked humour of your idleness:  
Yet herein will I imitate the sun,  
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds  
To smother up his beauty from the world,  
That, when he please again to be himself,  
Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at,  
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists  
Of vapours that did seem to strangle him.

Yet, if we cannot join the sentimentalists in condemning the rejection of Falstaff, we need not join the hard-boiled adulators of Henry V. If he is Shakespeare's presentation of the ideal king, he shows a realisation that the ideal king may also be a very imperfect man. The rejection of Falstaff, though inevitable, is marked by a disregard for human feeling, a sanctimonious self-approval, which most readers of Shakespeare have found repellent. Not so Dr Tillyard, who comments:

"The prince is aloof and Olympian from the start and never treats Falstaff any better than his dog, with whom he condescends once in a way to have a game."

(Shakespeare's History Plays, p.272)

He simply does not see that it is shocking to treat a man as a thing, to use him.

Certainly, Henry had to reject Falstaff: he need not have humiliated him. Historically, perhaps, Falstaff was doomed to humiliation as well as defeat, and Shakespeare may recognise this. But in making Henry history's instrument he is also making a deep and subtle comment, first on Henry's character, then on the nature of kingship, in the sense that in a king the fox must be developed to a degree that would be condemned in a private man, and finally on the new order, which Henry here represents.



Vlll. CONCLUSION

A historical outlook implies an over-all view of the character and problems of one's age. How, then, in the light of what has been said already, can we sun up Shakespeare's view of his time?

He lived at the point when the feudal, customary and corporate society of the past was being disintegrated by bourgeois relationships. Just because the feudal norms were for the first time radically questioned, men became more fully aware of them. Shakespeare was interested in the feudal past in a way that no writer could have been in any previous generation. What was his attitude? Did he regret the passing of the old? Timon, at least, and I think much in Henry IV, Troilus and Cressida and Antony and Cleopatra, to look no further, seems to suggest that he did. Was he bewildered at a problem to which no answer could as yet be found?

If, like Cervantes, he was a man astride between two worlds, the point is that for the first time there were these two worlds pulling men different ways. Shakespeare brought the sensibility of a great poet to bear on the problems of his age, but a poet is not necessarily a sociologist or a historian, and we have no right to ask the same kind of questions, or to expect the same sort of answers, as we would of these.

Shakespeare's outlook was still essentially feudal, but in an age when feudalism was entering its final crisis and when its thought was already permeated by the ideas of humanism with its new confidence in the power of reason and the ability of man to change himself and his world. Yet the change that was actually visible was of a kind that seemed to have little relation to the hopes and beliefs of the humanists. 'The change beyond the change' was still hidden. Hence the contradiction within the humanist outlook, the conflict of hope in the broadest sense with despair at the failure of its hopes to attain fulfilment. I cannot think that Shakespeare, like other humanists, did not regret many of the changes he saw, however much he may have come to accept them.

The tragic and poetic tension in his work is the tension between two forms of society, two opposed worlds, at the very moment when that tension had reached its height and was about to break in revolutionary conflict. Shakespeare could not resolve that conflict - only history, life, could do that. But he felt and experienced it in the highest degree and he communicates it to us. That is why we, standing at a new and even more absolute dividing-point of time, are perhaps better able to understand and appreciate him than any previous generation.

In the work of Shakespeare, as of all the greatest poets, there is some intimation of the end towards which humanity struggles, of a society of equality and justice, of what we have learned to call a classless society, though he, of course, could never have imagined such a phrase. Here lies the source of his anger, the indignation at corruption, oppression and injustice, at falsehood and treachery, which fills his work. And against this is set a profound sense of human dignity and worth, often wasted and denied but never wholly absent.

In this sense, and not in trying to see Shakespeare as the representative of this or that section of Elizabethan society - aristocracy, bourgeoisie, new nobility becoming bourgeois and the rest we should

interpret his point of view. The very fact that Marxist critics have found plausible arguments for describing him in all these ways should at least make us cautious of accepting such judgements. The way in which they tend to cancel each other out may be a reason for thinking them all mistaken because based on a false estimate of the relationship of a great poet to his age.

The fact that any outlook must have a class basis does not mean that each individual need reflect the outlook of one particular class, though of course he may do so. I believe it truer to say of Shakespeare that he 'represents' rather the conflict of classes in an age that was not yet revolutionary but was fast approaching revolution. What he 'represents' is the best humanity of his time, with all its doubts, confusions, hopes and beliefs. Out of this confusion he sees clearly enough what man is and he tries to imagine what he may be.