

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

PERSON AND OFFICE IN SHAKESPEARE'S
PLAYS

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WE accept as an important part of Shakespeare's strength that he was not prepared to show man isolated in a conflict with himself or his family or with God, nor on the other hand to show him as exclusively a public or political being. He showed all the circles of man's life, communion with self, domestic life, and public career, and he showed them interlocking and interacting, each influencing and being influenced by the other. This is true not only of a play like *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Antony's love-life and his political power are interdependent, but also of *Romeo and Juliet*; not only of *Troilus and Cressida* but also of *Measure for Measure*. Some comedies, like *The Tempest* and *As You Like It*, are strongly political, but even in those which aren't, it is not often one feels that the omnipresent Duke might just as well have been a horse-dealer, or a sculptor with independent means.

We imagine that Shakespeare thought of men in the same deep focus he presented them in, and not many people would agree with John Palmer's introduction to his *Political Characters of Shakespeare* (1945), where he argued that Shakespeare found himself 'willy-nilly' writing political plays because the audience insisted on princes and generals, that he had 'small interest' in politics, and that it is 'a strange paradox that Shakespeare who, above all other dramatists, was preoccupied with the private mind and heart of the individual, should have written a group of plays unmatched in any literature for their political content' (pp. vi, viii).

Shakespeare belonged to the great tradition of Elizabethan and Jacobean political drama, a drama which, possibly more than any other drama, gives us a conviction of the unity of the world as it weaves all levels of experience into a single fabric. He and his fellow dramatists could perhaps not have created a drama which so beautifully balanced the political and the personal if they had not had the perfect instrument of their unlocalized stage, which hospitably provided for all locations a man lives his life in without giving any that apparent priority

which Ibsen's parlour or Racine's palace-chamber gives. The freedom to move rapidly from a council-room to a battlefield or a bedroom, and then to the cave of a man's own mind, like the freedom to move rapidly from soliloquy to intimate conversation and to public rhetoric, seems essential for that characteristic texture of the Elizabethan personal-political play, of which Shakespeare is the greatest exponent.

It is easy enough to see the chains of cause and effect by which Shakespeare binds together the personal, the private, and the public.¹ But we enter a difficult and debatable ground when we ask questions about the continuity of the person as he moves through his various habitations, about the comparative value of the life lived in the different circles, and whether such terms as 'inner self' and 'public role' are appropriate in discussing Shakespeare's plays. There has been a marked tendency in Shakespeare criticism in recent years to see political or public life in the plays as involving some kind of falsification, to see it as a region of posturing, of assuming masks, playing roles; or as a region where a man's better nature is, simply, corrupted. It seems to be taken for granted that there is a distinction between a Shakespearian person and the public or political position he chooses or is forced into. I give just a few examples.

In 1961, John Holloway wrote that Hamlet, as a revenger, was 'a man engaged in a known career'.

In this play as in many other tragedies, the experience of the protagonist is not the deployment of a determinate character, but the assumption, and then the enactment, of a determinate rôle. Rôle predominates over character, because once it is assumed by an actor, it will be much the same whatever his nature may be. It overrides that nature: the play is its acting out.²

In an important essay of 1963, 'Character and Role from Richard III to Hamlet',³ Peter Ure countered John Holloway's notion of character disappearing into determinate role with the suggestion that the plays show what I suppose Erving Goffman

¹ An argument against Shakespeare's authorship of *Edward III* is that there is no connection, causal or moral, between the king's adulterous pursuit of the Countess of Salisbury in the first part of the play, and his martial and kingly prowess in France in the second part.

² *The Story of the Night*, p. 26. Compare Erving Goffman: 'A self . . . virtually awaits the individual entering a position'; 'To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation' (*Where the Action is: Three Essays*, 1969, pp. 41, 60).

³ *Hamlet*. Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 5. Edited by J. R. Brown and B. Harris, 1963, pp. 9-28.

would call 'role distance': that they show an 'inward self' adjusting to a role, reshaping it or being shaped by it. Characterization, said Peter Ure, is in 'the interplay between character and role'. Richard III, the great actor, paradoxically cannot live out the majestic role of king, 'the inward self [is] unable to find any way of adjusting itself to the role'. Richard II on the contrary so pours himself into his role that 'he exhausts the self': there is nothing left when the role is abandoned. 'In both characters', the argument goes on, 'it is plain that the inward man has miscalculated his relation to his assignment.'¹

In connection with Richard II, it is worth noting that the conception of the King as actor is, according to the New Variorum edition,² a twentieth-century growth. Since the relation between the person of Richard and his office as king is a main topic of this lecture, I cite a recent phrasing of this conception from James Winny: 'He cannot realise that the splendid role with which he identifies himself has no more substance than an actor's part, and is not the basis of his individuality.'³

In 1965 Matthew Proser published a book called *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies*, in which he argued that the hero strove to enact 'a certain public role', which was in fact a simplification of 'the entire human reality', and he sacrificed his life to an illusion. 'Conduct becomes in part a series of symbolic acts, poses, stances, and gestures which seek to define the heroic image in action' (p. 4).

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing statement on the estrangement of Shakespearian man from his public activities is Terence Eagleton's *Shakespeare and Society*, 1967, which approaches the plays from the concepts not of role-theory but of existentialism. 'One major crisis' in Shakespeare's work, the author holds, is 'the tension between spontaneous life and society . . . a crisis

¹ Peter Ure made a striking extension of his theory of self and role, and the dreamlike quality of public office, in his edition of Ford's *Perkin Warbeck*, published in 1968, the year before his early death. The pretender, he argued, treated his life before its end as a work of art, ignoring the delusion it was built on. He performed excellently his chosen role of Richard IV, and 'it really does not matter' that 'the hero strutting it out before us' is 'really' the son of John Osbek. 'We have known that all along, in much the same sense that we have known that Henry VII is not "really" Henry VII but a member of the Phoenix company' (my italics). The omission of the middle person in the trio of the public figure of the king, the private person, and the actor comes as a surprise.

² *Richard the Second*, ed. M. W. Black, New Variorum, 1955, p. 545.

³ *The Player King*, 1968, p. 54.

which . . . we are especially well-placed to appreciate and understand' (p. 177). Time and again we are shown (it is argued), in such characters as Hamlet, Troilus, Coriolanus, men whose authentic selves can have no fulfilment in a false society, who therefore, since men cannot live except in society, destroy themselves. Of Hamlet, Terence Eagleton writes, 'A self which can know itself only in constant opposition to its context finally destroys itself. This is the savage irony of the authentic man in a false society' (p. 62).

It seems to me that the problem of Shakespeare's view of the relation between the self or the person and public or official life is one of the important problems which Shakespeare criticism has to face. I am going to suggest, as a possible way forward, that Shakespeare proposes two antithetical modes in which a person and his public office are related, and that the opposition of these ways is a major subject of his drama. I shall try to establish the first way by moving from the Roman plays to *Richard II* and *King Lear*; the second will be illustrated by Henry V as prince and king.

Julius Caesar, one of the least problematic of Shakespeare's plays, presents a fairly simple view of the relations between private and public selves as one of painful antagonism. The stuff of humanity is malleable: between his home and the place where power is exercised a man's nature is easily disguised or changed. Casca is a man of quick mettle, but he 'puts on' a 'tardy form'. Brutus worries that the crowning of Caesar will 'change his nature'. In his own house, Caesar transforms himself quickly from the husband who promises his wife that 'Mark Antony shall say I am not well', to the ruler who intones 'Shall Caesar send a lie?' Cassius believes he can politicize Brutus into a shape of his own devising, and so (disastrously) he does, becoming a Frankenstein at the mercy of his own monster. Brutus, in his maladroit handling of affairs in the political and military scenes, is not just a fish out of water; we witness a noble and gentle nature growing coarser as it continues to mistake its way in the public world which it cannot escape from.¹

If we were tempted from the evidence of *Julius Caesar* to see the worsening of the self as it is exposed to the storms of political commitment as a general position of Shakespeare, we might think that our best spokesman was Coriolanus, who makes much of the corruption which he risks by joining in the political life

¹ See the beautiful rendering of the two Brutuses in Roy Fuller's poem 'The Ides of March'.

of the city which he serves so ably and willingly as a soldier. But I shall argue that the evidence of *Coriolanus* points us in quite another direction.

When asked to go back to the angry crowd and win their votes by eating his words and showing a humble front, Coriolanus shouts:

Must I
With my base tongue give to my noble heart
A lie that it must bear?

I will not do't,
Lest I surcease to honour mine own truth,
And by my body's action teach my mind
A most inherent baseness.

(III. ii. 99-101; 120-3)

In spite of a subtle and persuasive gloss on this passage by D. J. Gordon,¹ the picture of an inner sincerity endangered by the demands of political expediency will not do, for Shakespeare takes pains in this same scene to make it clear that this 'self' which Coriolanus is reluctant to tarnish is not as spontaneous as it might seem. Coriolanus is unable to understand why his mother has not applauded his denunciation of the common people, and when Volumnia enters, he turns to her:

Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me
False to my nature? Rather say I play
The man I am.

The paradox of 'play the man I am' is so extraordinary that one might disregard it as a confusion if Volumnia did not reinforce it.

You might have been enough the man you are
With striving less to be so.

(III. ii. 14-16; 19-20)

Coriolanus's 'nature', which seemed to his friends a matter of instinct,² is (shall we say) a second nature: something willed, something fashioned. It is impossible to think of the play *Coriolanus* as showing us the native honesty of the self trapped in the snares of the political world; it is more a question of a being fashioned for one kind of life looking with disdain on

¹ 'Name and Fame: Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', *Papers Mainly Shakespearian*, ed. G. I. Duthie, 1964, pp. 50-1.

² Cf. Menenius, III. i. 255-8. 'His heart's his mouth; What his breast forges, that his tongue must vent.'

another. At the end of Act IV, Aufidius wonders what it was that brought Coriolanus down in Rome:

whether nature,
Not to be other than one thing, not moving
From th' casque to th' cushion . . .

We consent. We cannot separate Coriolanus's self or his nature from his profession as a soldier. What he is is what he does. His identity is only visible when we take his soldiering into account. The fusion of the man in his profession is wonderfully drawn by Shakespeare; if ever a man was declared by his activities, it is Coriolanus. His nature, conditioned by a mother who thought the breasts of Hecuba not lovelier than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood, has its home on the battlefield, and he takes his name from a battle.¹ The alarming cracks which show up in him in the forum are not seen in war. His tragedy is that the range of activities he is capable of is too small and his being cannot meet the new demands made on it. He recognizes his own dissolution: Cominius reports of him:

Coriolanus
He would not answer to, forbade all names;
He was a kind of nothing, titleless,
Till he had forged himself a name i' th' fire
Of burning Rome.

(v. i. 11-15)

The play of *Coriolanus* suggests to us that it may be better to think not of an inner or private self in antagonism to its life in society, but the identification of a person and a particular office in a unity so complete that a challenge to alter the office may destroy the person. It is worth remembering that when Othello, whose being is also surely defined by his profession as soldier, fears that his marriage has broken down, he makes a long apostrophe to his martial life, which ends, 'Farewell, Othello's occupation's gone!' It seems a curious note at such a moment, but it illustrates his feeling of the unity of the inner, the private, and the public lives. He is not what he was; and what was he if not a soldier?

However trite or commonplace the idea that man is a unity of being and doing, that he is defined by his activities, I believe that Shakespeare's conception of it is foreign to modern ways of

¹ Cf. N. Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*, 1967, pp. 130, 132.

thinking and I believe that awareness of it greatly helps one's understanding of many plays. The play which most fully demonstrates the conception is *Richard II*, which must be read in the light of the important study of 'medieval political theology' which E. H. Kantorowicz published in 1957, *The King's Two Bodies*.

Kantorowicz opened his work with the strange christological definitions which Tudor jurists were using concerning the dual nature of a king. For example:

He has not a Body natural distinct and divided by itself from the Office and Dignity royal, but a Body natural and a Body politic together indivisible; and these two Bodies are incorporated in one Person, and make one Body and not divers. (p. 9)

Sixteenth-century England had, amazingly, revived a mystical concept of the personality of the king which had existed in the early Middle Ages, but which later times had made more common-sensical and matter-of-fact. Kantorowicz amply demonstrates that *Richard II* is steeped in the remarkable Athanasian theorizing about kingship which was preoccupying the English, but, because at bottom he seems to take the plain man's view that the 'monistic formula' of the fusion of an eternal and a temporal nature in one person is 'an ultra-fanciful maxim' (pp. 438-9), I don't think he realizes how deeply both Richard and his creator are immersed in the doctrine. *Richard II* is a tragedy only if both protagonist and audience share the view that the king is a mystical being, a man of flesh and blood whose humanity is transfigured and exalted by his office. The sacramental notion of the king's person is so strongly and movingly presented that it is perverse to see it as a peculiar infatuation of Richard's. The king is the figure of God's majesty, the sceptre is the outward mark of kingship, and even the handle of the sceptre is 'sacred' (III. iii. 80). The word 'sacred' appears more often in *Richard II* than in any other play of Shakespeare's; on each occasion, it refers to the king and each time it is used not metaphorically but in a strict liturgical sense, applied to that which has been consecrated.

At his anointing, the nature of the king is transformed; the change is final and cannot be reversed; the only way down is destruction. It is Richard himself who unsettles his own position by his carelessness and wilfulness, denying his own state by acts bordering on illegality, for only he who remained servant of the law could be master of the law.¹ Only as the rebellion against

¹ Cf. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, p. 157.

him gathers strength, and authority is slipping away from him, does he begin to learn the true nature of his person and his office, that true nature being the identity of those two things.

From the ridiculous position that, because the balm cannot be washed off from an anointed king and worldly men cannot depose the deputy elected by the Lord, he as a military commander is bound to defeat all his physical enemies, Richard flies to the other extreme. From a belief in a kind of angelic inviolability, he descends too rapidly to see himself as mere vulnerable man, fooled into accepting a role that is all illusion.

Cover your heads, and mock not flesh and blood
 With solemn reverence; throw away respect,
 Tradition, form, and ceremonious duty;
 For you have but mistook me all this while.
 I live with bread like you, feel want,
 Taste grief, need friends; subjected thus,
 How can you say to me I am a king?

(III. ii. 171-7)

It is necessary for Richard to assert his divine inviolability, and know it false in a physical sense; it is necessary for him, in reaction, to assert that he is merely human, and know that false also, if he is to understand, as more than an effort of reason or scholastic logic, that point of balance where the being of the two-natured king precariously exists. 'How *can* you say to me I am a king?' is a question that is in time answered.

But, still mistaken about himself, he initiates that impossibility, his deposition, and he pictures to himself the hermit or pilgrim he would be in his new life. Then he begins to understand that he is not mere man, forced out of office and bound to seek in poverty and humiliation some other life, but that his very being is his kingship; once he is not king, there is no being. It is this concept, which seems to me so central to so much in Shakespeare's writing, which is so hard to grasp.

Single nature's double name
 Neither two nor one was called.

Impatience comes too easily to us in the world of jobs, where we believe either that a man has his own selfhood whatever he does to earn his bread and butter, or alternatively that a man receives a new self every time he changes his occupation. Richard's problem is not an identity-crisis, nor the strain of role-conflict, nor the loss of status.

While he sees himself betrayed like Christ (who is the archetype of that which is at the same time inviolable and easily wounded), he also insists, as a man knowing his own guilt, on taking on himself the final treason of unkinging himself, with his own human tongue denying his sacred state (iv. i. 209), and so reducing himself to nothing.

—Are you contented to resigne the Crowne?

—I, no; no, I; for I must nothing bee.

(iv. i. 200-1)¹

That which has no being has no name:

I have no name, no title,
No, not that name was given me at the font,
But 'tis usurped. Alack the heavy day,
That I have worn so many winters out,
And know not now what name to call myself.

(iv. i. 255-9)²

Richard is a physical being who can be thrown out of office, but his deposition is sacrilege, the defilement of what is holy. 'Dust was thrown upon his sacred head' (v. ii. 30). It is also the annihilation of the king-man, and as the fragments that were Richard lie in prison, thoughts of possible modes of being chase themselves endlessly and fruitlessly, and the first part of his great soliloquy ends with a repetition of the word 'nothing' (v. v. 38-41).

As he hears a mysterious music, which begins to falter, he talks of men's lives as music, and is bitter that he did not detect the false sounds in his own life.

And here have I the daintiness of ear
To check time broke in a disordered string,
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
I wasted time, and now doth time waste me.

(v. v. 45-49)

It is at moments like this, when the imagery beautifully suggests the necessary unity of one's nature, one's position, and one's actions—the concord of one's state and time, that it is tempting to think of true kingship as a metaphor for a harmony of the

¹ The old spelling is given for the sake of the Ay/I pun.

² The great importance of this passage in the play has been at times obscured by the view which Dover Wilson supported that it contained an allusion to an imputation of Richard's illegitimacy.

personality, the unity of being and doing when private person and public office are one. Richard never achieves this, because the events which give him his knowledge are those which prevent him from putting his knowledge into action. But he has the understanding, and with it, a new dignity. Of course, in his greatest scene he is theatrical, he improvises a great ceremony for his humiliation; but kingship is for him no actor's part, put on and put off at will.

The play of *King Lear* reinforces the idea of kingship which *Richard II* suggests. In abdicating the 'power, Pre-eminence, and all the large effects That troop with majesty' while retaining 'the name, and all the additions to a king',¹ Lear tries to split his being where it cannot be divided.² The political inexpediency of the division of the kingdom is an outward reflection of the major crime, which is sacrilege. The name and the additions to a king are the outward and visible signs of the power of the king and the God-given grace to wield it. Detached from power, they are absurd. Lear tries to wear a crown without a head to put it on. As in *Richard II*, the hero becomes aware of the true balance of his being as that being suffers the destruction which his own act of denial invites. As with *Richard II*, it is I think a mistake to assume that Lear becomes a new person, rejecting kingship in favour of humanity. He learns of the vanity of his old values, the ironies of authority, and sees the whole world anew, but I wonder how far, in this or in the other tragedies, it may be said that a second self supervenes upon the wrecking of the old. Tragedy forces the hero to find out—again or for the first time—who he is. But though what he recognizes as the self is torn apart, though knowledge floods in and he sees for the first time the possibility of a different dimension in life, the only new resting-place is death. In tragicomedy it is different; Angelo in *Measure for Measure* and Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* survive disintegration and live on as changed men. Lear, who has helped to reduce himself to nothing, lives to recognize his mistakes and

¹ *Lear*, I. i. 129–31, 134, following the Quarto's 'additions' instead of the Folio's 'addition'.

² Cf. lines from *1 Henry VI*, v. iv. 133–7, quoted by Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, p. 117, where it is suggested that the French king should be viceroy to the English king, 'and still enjoy thy regal dignity'.

Must he be then as shadow of himself,
Adorn his temples with a coronet
And yet, in substance and authority,
Retain but privilege of a private man?
This proffer is absurd and reasonless.

to recognize himself—'I am the king himself . . . Ay, every inch a king.' His old power is returned to him by Albany, but he is at the point of death.

Both *Richard II* and *King Lear* present the idea of unity of being, in which the person and his office, the private and the public being, are coextensive and inseparable. Within this conception, phrases like role-playing are irrelevant. But Shakespeare also presents an antithetical idea, a view of man as an amorphous self adapting to the social world, but never totally identified with his activities, never to be defined and limited as, say, king or soldier. Richard, as we saw, is often spoken of as playing a role—rather, playing *with* a role. But it is the man who supplants him, 'this king of smiles, this Bolingbroke' who is the actor, the man who makes a divorce between the tongue and the heart.¹ He 'stole courtesy from heaven' and 'dressed himself in humility'; he created an image to win the 'opinion' of the multitude and to maintain his authority. 'Thus did I keep my person fresh and new.'² *Persona*, perhaps, but the *person* of Bolingbroke is indeed uninteresting; at times he seems to be, as Osbert Lancaster once described someone, veneer all through. The true antithesis to Richard is Bolingbroke's complex and enigmatic son.

After Henry IV's death, Prince Hal speaks as follows:

My father is gone wild into his grave,
For in his tomb lie my affections;
And with his spirits sadly I survive
To mock the expectation of the world . . .

The tide of blood in me
Hath proudly flowed in vanity till now.
Now doth it turn and ebb back to the sea,
Where it shall mingle with the state of floods
And flow henceforth in formal majesty.

(2 *Henry IV*, v. ii. 123-6, 129-33)

Hal says that he has doffed his nature and exchanged it for that of his father. To Falstaff he says, 'Presume not that I am the thing I was . . . I have turned away my former self.' These images which denote reformation in terms of change of the self are perhaps not in themselves important, but they become so as part of a consistent thread of references to the relation

¹ Cf. Anne Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, pp. 126-7.

² 1 *Henry IV*, iii. i. 42, 50-1, 55.

between the person of Hal and his public activities. On his accession, Hal says,

This new and gorgeous garment, majesty,
Sits not so easy on me as you think.

(2 *Henry IV*, v. ii. 44-5)

It is a natural remark for the young new king; but it is also a part of a series of images which Shakespeare gives to Hal as prince and king, referring to kingship as integument, a covering to be worn. He has already called majesty 'a rich armour, worn in heat of day, That scalds with safety' (2 *Henry IV*, iv. v. 31-2). In the great soliloquy before Agincourt, Henry argues that kings are distinguished from private men only by the 'idol Ceremony', a god whom men foolishly worship.

Art thou aught else but place, degree and form,
Creating awe and fear in other men?

'Thrice-gorgeous ceremony' is featured by

the balm, the sceptre, and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
The intertissued robe of gold and pearl.

(*Henry V*, iv. i. 242-3, 256-8)

The royal robe is for Henry an appropriate image of kingship itself, an outward appurtenance adopted by the extraordinary ordinary man charged with governing his fellow men; though it has certain useful purposes, it is known by him for what it is and despised. The contrast here between Hal and Richard could hardly be more sharp. The balm and the sceptre were for Richard sacred; not externals, but outward expressions of the being who was to try to express God on earth; worship of them was not idolatry.

Having seen the stress on the exchange of natures, and on kingship as integument, we are perhaps in a better position to appreciate the notorious first soliloquy of Prince Hal in the First Part of *Henry IV*. We may be less disposed to take it at its face-value, which is that Hal proposes to obscure his true self and indulge in what he considers offensive behaviour in order to surprise people into admiration when his real self is allowed to break through. Rather we shall see it as a triumphant (though very Lancastrian) jest,¹ a mischievous rationalization of self-indulgence: 'Why, the worse I behave, the better they'll think

¹ Cf. Morris Arnold's view of 1911 as cited in the New Variorum edition.

of me!' The speech relies not on the idea of a 'true self', but on the idea of an adjustable and compliant self, which can change when it is necessary from companion to king, and keep a certain detachment from either activity. Hal can always rise, magnificently, to the being which the occasion demands, in Eastcheap, at Shrewsbury, at Agincourt, or in the French court. Flexibly and successfully he deploys himself in a dozen roles. It is hard to say where he is most truly himself, because the self seems endlessly pliable. There could be no wedding of person and office where there is such versatility.

I argue, then, that Shakespeare presents two views of man; one, in which there is a continuum of the person and his public activities, an amalgam so complete that it is impossible to distinguish what a man is from what he is accustomed to do; the second, in which there is an autonomous and plastic self, urging itself forward and adapting to the various moulds available to it, in such a way that we are always aware of the separateness of the person and his office.

It is strange that the condition of unified being is usually shown as something unattainable, or discarded, or destroyed. Lear and Richard throw a pearl away, richer than all their tribe. Hamlet is denied that office which alone could define him and make him a whole man: there is never the 'doing' which can complete his 'being', so during the whole play he is a soul without a body, like a ghost. Macbeth, seeing a new unnatural office before him, shows us in a vivid sentence the concord of his life shattering. His 'single state of man' is so shaken:

That function is smother'd in surmise
And nothing is but what is not.

(1. iii. 140-1)

Like Richard III, the arch-impostor dedicated to separateness of being, Macbeth in looking for a crown becomes the restless, unappeased and unappeasable self:

—like one lost in a thorny wood
That rents the thorns and is rent with the thorns,
Seeking a way and straying from the way,
Not knowing how to find the open air,
But toiling desperately to find it out.

(3 *Henry VI*, iii. ii. 174-7)

On the one hand we see unity of being as unattainable; on the other we see separateness of being as incipiently evil. Not that

Prince Hal is a villain; but he is ominous even in his great abilities, as Yeats described him, with perception and charity, in those brilliant pages of *Ideas of Good and Evil* to which all the better criticism of the English history plays in this century is only an appendix.¹ But others are just bad men, who will, like Richard of Gloucester:

Change shapes with Proteus for advantages
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.

(3 *Henry VI*, III. ii. 192-3)

They prey on those in the other camp, Iago on Othello, Edmund on Edgar, as Bolingbroke preys on Richard II.

How far do these two views of man represent Shakespeare's recognition of an historical change in the nature of the relation between the individual and society?

In a recent important study,² Alvin Kernan wrote,

In historical terms the movement from the world of Richard II to that of Henry V is the passage from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the modern world. In practical and social terms it is a movement from feudalism and hierarchy to the national state and individualism. In psychological terms it is a passage from a situation in which man knows with certainty who he is to an existential condition in which any identity is only a temporary role.

It is certainly tempting to say that since Richard is so thoroughly medieval, his antithesis must be modern; it is tempting to see the play *Richard II* as a great elegiac lament for the old undivided cosmos as it is replaced by a world of brisk serviceability and opportunism. We may feel that in Richard II and his fellows, in *Lear*, Antony, Othello, Coriolanus, for example, there is a certain rigidity, an inability to respond to change, accompanying the appeal of their colourful if faulty characters, and that Shakespeare is playing a defunctive music for a creature which has had its time however much he regrets its passing. And on the other side, among those who demonstrate the discontinuity of self, the adventurers, there are some who characterize themselves as free from old-fashioned ways of thought, particularly Edmund, whose defeat at the end of *King Lear* by a knight in armour in formal medieval combat seems an interesting inversion of history. Shakespeare's plays do deal largely with

¹ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 1961, pp. 102-109.

² 'The Henriad: Shakespeare's Major History Plays', *The Yale Review*, lix (Oct. 1969), pp. 3-32. Cf. M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962, pp. 11-17.

supersession and replacement,¹ and the warfare between ineffective innocence and worldly-wise success seems inescapably not so much a timeless one as belonging to the particular period of transition which in their different ways Marlowe and Jonson also imaged.

If we accept that Shakespeare's bifold concept of the person shows his awareness of the 'true man' bewildered in the world of the 'new man', we must be very cautious indeed about going forward to accept related positions, which, I believe, impose a false modernity of outlook on an Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatist.

The helplessness of the Shakespearian hero in a world he cannot comprehend may possibly prefigure but it does not describe the necessary alienation of man from society, the illness of modern man. Certainly, as I have argued, it seems as though the principle of the unity of being is condemned to defeat. It seems practically impossible to live out a life in recognition of it. Shakespearian society is cruel and treacherous to many of its distinctive men, Henry VI, Richard II, Brutus, Hamlet, Troilus, for example. But defeat is not the same thing as alienation. Perhaps there is only a narrow divide between the difficulty which a number of Shakespeare's heroes have in reconciling themselves to an evil world and that total disaffection from organized society which most people mean when they talk of alienation and which perhaps received its classic fictional rendering years ago in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Yet the divide is there. Shakespeare does not show man lusting to escape and bury himself; the call of the contemplative life is almost nil in his plays. Kings, as a matter of course, envy those who have positions of less responsibility, shepherds, labourers, and wet sea-boys, but not even Henry VI thinks of the evasion of the hermit's cave. The world was inescapably there, to be lived in and fought with. Shakespeare could hardly foresee the sense of impersonality which many people feel themselves to be labouring under and which has led to the personification of the abstraction, 'society'. His concept of evil needed people. When we recognize in the bafflement or betrayal of a sensitive hero like Hamlet the crisis of estrangement of the modern world, we are not observing the play; we are once again paying tribute to the extraordinary fecundity of the myth.

Man's alienation from society is essentially an alienation from the work and the social roles forced on him by the highly

¹ Cf. Philip Edwards, *Shakespeare and the Confines of Art*, 1968, p. 5.

developed division of labour of the modern industrial state, which gives little hope that what one takes up for a livelihood will engage one's whole being. The great majority of people, rich and poor, live shadow-lives in arbitrary and unfulfilling occupations. Hence the development of those major modern oppositions, inner and outer, private and public, the man and the mask. Writing of Dickens, W. J. Harvey spoke of 'the predicament of man in modern industrial society . . . the sharp division between public and private, the official and the person; one recalls Bucket the person and Bucket the detective, Vholes the lawyer and Vholes as parent and child'.¹ The word 'job', which until this century meant a brief casual task, became in twentieth-century America a word for one's career or profession. Shakespeare's fictional societies are not placed in this kind of world. We have to protest that the language won't serve when a critic (writing in 1949) says, 'If Lear had been more suited to his job or his job to him, he would have died peacefully.'² Even McLuhan's inspired suggestion that Lear in dividing his kingdom is moving from the world of roles to the world of jobs³ is an uncertain trope. It is very hard indeed to translate Shakespeare's kings and generals into employers or employees, management or personnel, even when they are seemingly 'new men' in a new society. But this is not the only problem. Whether we speak of roles or of jobs we are liable to be importing into Shakespeare's world an assessment of the individual and society which belongs firmly to *our* world. The role-theory of modern sociology is born of a cynicism about one's involvement in the world which has pushed the personality of man to vanishing point. Some of this cynicism has brushed off on Shakespearian criticism. However strongly Shakespeare believed the stock idea that all the world's a stage, however much he recognized that there was something theatrical about every public speech or occasion, he did not accept a necessary disjunction between the inner self and the public self, nor did he show the self as the obedient creature of the adventitious social role. The self is a union of a man's nature with his profession, and this union is most forcefully shown in the imagery of the king as a single being compounded of two natures, one belonging to his mortal being and one to his superhuman office. The recognition of his true identity and of his responsibilities is forced on a man in a

¹ *Dickens and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Gross and Pearson, 1962, p. 156.

² Albert Cook, *The Dark Voyage and the Golden Mean*, p. 11.

³ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, London, 1962, p. 14.

losing fight with a world which he cannot accommodate himself to. His true activity, which Richard defined as a concord of music, is impossible because his defeat or supersession accompanies his recognition of himself. But there are others, better adapted to survive, though the play's ending may demolish them, who believe in their freedom to create their own lives, who move from one incarnation to another, men whose worldly success is moral failure, just as the worldly failure of the first group is moral success. It is in connection with this second group only that it seems to me proper to talk of their public lives as the assumption of roles and the acting out of parts. At all costs we must avoid attributing to Shakespeare *as a whole* our indwelling scepticism about social and political activity. It is difficult work, especially when Shakespeare seems sometimes to invite us to do so with the polarities of private and public in *Julius Caesar*, and with his constant subversion of 'the great image of authority'. But we run the risk of blurring the sharpness of his tragic vision if we are too affected by terminologies belonging to social conditions developing long after his time. It seems to us, from a distance of three and a half centuries, that in his political tragedies Shakespeare is recording something like a change in the very nature of man.¹ He may not have seen things so himself; he may have thought of the two kinds of personality as a sort of timeless opposition repeated in every generation rather than as a matter of historical development; he may have seen them as complementary types necessary in society—certainly he neither sentimentalizes the one nor entirely vilifies the other. But we see things in a different and rather melancholy perspective, and it is essential if we are to make the correct historical interpretation of the oppositions in his plays that we grasp firmly the quality of those oppositions as they relate to the nature of the individual and his relation with society.²

¹ See Alvin Kernan's study of the English history plays referred to on p. 106 above.

² I am grateful to Williams College, Massachusetts, for a visiting professorship in the autumn of 1969 which gave me time to think about the foregoing lecture. The interpretation of *Richard II* is developed from a lecture given to Birmingham University's Summer School at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1968; I saw the need to relate my ideas to the more general problems treated in the present lecture when discussing with Miss Rosamond Lomax her excellent proposals for a doctoral thesis on the theme of 'private and public' in Shakespeare.