

SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

## Disintegration Once More

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MY TITLE ALLUDES to the celebrated Annual Shakespeare Lecture given by E. K. Chambers in 1924. Chambers wanted to show that the work of contemporary disintegrators of Shakespeare was based on shaky evidence and unwarranted assumptions. He questioned the methods currently being developed by Dover Wilson in the early plays of the New Cambridge edition, but his principal target was J. M. Robertson, in those days the leader of the disintegrative fashion.

For without question there was a vogue for the sort of thing Robertson did with such extravagant conviction, assigning this part of a play to Marlowe, that to Chapman, that to Greene; and finding all manner of evidence, internal and external, to support highly conjectural pre-histories of these collaborative or reworked texts. T. S. Eliot's studies in Elizabethan drama, probably in these days more widely read than any other Twenties writing on the subject, treated Robertson with cautious deference, remarking in his essay on Massinger, written in 1920, that 'it is necessary to ponder collaboration to the utmost line';<sup>1</sup> which suggests that disintegration calls for exceptionally expert and concentrated scholarly labour. By no means, said Chambers four years later. He clearly believed that almost anybody could do it, and without much trouble: 'the disintegration of Shakespeare', he said, 'is an open career for talent',<sup>2</sup> — a remark we must read as ironical. By

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<sup>1</sup> *Selected Essays* (2nd ed., 1934), p. 206.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Disintegration of Shakespeare', in *Aspects of Shakespeare: being British Academy Lectures by L. Abercrombie, etc.* (1933), pp. 23–48.

his own confession Chambers was not a patient man, and the lecture contains some aspersions on the civil service, no doubt also open to the talents, and a reminder that his own career was in the Education Department, where, according to the *DNB*, he was regarded as 'unaccommodating'. He was hardly likely to be any more accommodating in respect of what he regarded as an undisciplined Shakespearian free-for-all.

Such was his authority that Chambers reduced, without quite bringing to an end — Dover Wilson, for one, was cheerfully obstinate — the activities and reputations of the disintegrators, who had been treating Shakespeare rather as the colonial powers had treated Africa. Like them, he was doing it for his victims' own good; a stern missionary, he saw that their folly was the consequence of idolatry. Robertson wanted to save Shakespeare from the disgrace of having written anything in the plays that seemed to Robertson unworthy of Shakespeare. Chambers notes the paradox: 'Our heresiarch is . . . himself an idolater'. He himself was prepared to admit that there was some poor stuff in the canon, but saw no reason on this occasion at least, to excuse Shakespeare from its authorship.<sup>3</sup>

And here we should note a great difference between the character of disintegration in his day and in ours. To the new disintegrators the disintegration of the texts is part of a larger effort to disintegrate their author, or at any rate to demolish the idolatrous image that over the last couple of hundred years — so it is claimed — has been erected, by editors and critics alike, in place of a Shakespeare they can see no reason to think worthy of such an apotheosis. These heresiarchs are not idolaters but iconoclasts.

It is reasonable to suspect that in an age when the practice of dramatic collaboration is known to have been common Shakespeare might, at some stage, have handled other people's work or had his own tampered with. Nor is it entirely unreasonable to speculate that he might have made changes in his own plays in the course of their theatrical life (though Chambers comes down rather hard on the theory of 'continuous copy'). Indeed it can be plausibly maintained that no play in the Folio simply reprints an earlier text, for 'no play thought to have been set from quarto copy contains only compositorial variants

<sup>3</sup> However, Professor Honigmann points out that in his *William Shakespeare* (1930) Chambers calls the Fool's Merlin prophecy in *Lear* 'an incongruous theatrical interpolation' (I, 466), and the 'vision' in *Cymbeline*, V, 'a spectacular theatrical interpretation'.

from printed copy'.<sup>4</sup> And given what is known about scribal interference, there is not much reason to doubt that something similar may be said of Folio-only plays; certainly Ralph Crane had his own ideas about the written form of theatrical texts.

So it is not altogether surprising that disintegrators and revisionists, albeit with very different intentions, have reappeared on the scene. They know more than their predecessors (though of course some of those predecessors are part of what they know). Chambers concerned himself only with hypotheses of textual disintegration, but his title is prophetic in suggesting a more general application; what is now under criticism is an assumption he, though not an idolater, did not question, namely the pre-eminence of Shakespeare. This assumption is now quite commonly said to be the vestige of a wicked but happily obsolescent phase of cultural history; it ought to be blown away, and there is in progress a concerted attempt to do so. I shall try in this lecture to say a little about both textual and authorial disintegration as they are now practised. They are clearly related phenomena, for the total disintegrators are always in favour of textual disintegration.

The question being so large and complicated, I shall for the most part confine my remarks to the play which has called forth the most impressive and detailed arguments for revision, namely *King Lear*. The argument about the revision of this play is indeed so central that it has been described as threatening 'the power and the profession of literary critics', and 'creating an economic crisis for publishers'.<sup>5</sup> The critics will need to be taught that 'editing and interpreting . . . bibliography and hermeneutics, are only heuristically separable'.<sup>6</sup> The publishers will need to consider that the kind of thing they now regard as suitable for the large, and largely conscripted, Shakespeare reading public, is being undermined by the new bibliographers. With such important vested interests under threat we had better take the matter seriously.

We that are old must also take care, when we feel in whatever measure sceptical about novelties, not to appear simply and unthinkingly stuck in the past. Nothing about the nature of scholarly institutions is more obvious than the way they accommodate epochal

<sup>4</sup> Paul Werstine, 'Folio Editors, Folio Compositors, and the Folio Text of *King Lear*', in G. Taylor and M. Warren ed., *The Division of the Kingdoms* (1983), p. 252.

<sup>5</sup> Grace Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare* (1991), pp. 15–16, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome McGann, 'The Theory of Texts', *London Review of Books* (18 Feb., 1988), 21, cited by Ioppolo at 185.

novelties, the way in which new generations grow impatient to be rid of what have come to be seen as the transparently fallacious assumptions of their predecessors. We ourselves long ago experienced a comparable impatience to be rid of received ideas and their exponents. The process of our own good riddance has been under way for quite a time, though the assault has of late become more public, more raucous, more indignant; and it has probably got its iconoclastic message into our schools at just the moment when the Government seems to have decided that a play of Shakespeare must be venerated in every classroom. The difference in tone between that message and the messages we were sending forty years ago is roughly the difference between Robertson and his modern successors, between idolatry and iconoclasm. It did not occur to us that Shakespeare himself should be got rid of. And we may still not want this to happen, but what we want does not of itself constitute a sufficient reason for failure to attend to the new arguments.

Not long ago — on 5 December 1992 — Michael Billington, favourably reviewing a new production of *The Tempest* in *The Guardian*, began by saying ‘We tend to play *The Tempest* as a bitter fable about colonialism’, and commended Ninagawa, the director of the new production, for reading it otherwise, and staging it as a ‘metatheatrical event’. When my edition of the play appeared in 1954 it was regarded by some as an instance or harbinger of a new era of editorial irresponsibility, partly because it gave some attention to the colonial aspect. Until recently, I think, I was regarded as having said all too little about that aspect, but it may now be thought that at least since Jonathan Miller’s production twenty-odd years ago we have, as Billington suggests, seen it emphasised to such a degree that we are tired of it. Now a new current is running, and the play can be seen, for instance, as an imitation of the first six books of the *Aeneid*, and simultaneously as a dissident commentary on contemporary domestic politics, notably the struggles of the absolutist but financially embarrassed James I with his grudging Parliament. One powerful motive for such research is the desire to deny that the play is ‘a transcendent, indifferent text, and that Shakespeare was an apologist for monarchy’.<sup>7</sup> The meaning of the

<sup>7</sup> Donna B. Hamilton, *Virgil and The Tempest: The Politics of Imitation* (1990). I have noticed elsewhere the claim that when Lear tells Cordelia that ‘nothing will come of nothing’ he is adverting to the fiscal bargaining here alluded to (Annabel Patteson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (1989), pp. 106ff.

expression 'transcendent, indifferent text' may seem rather obscure, though I hope presently to throw some light on it. The second part of the statement is obvious: we are being told, yet once more, that we must move on from the epoch of Shakespearian scholarship supposedly dominated by the myths of Tillyard's *Elizabethan World Picture* and the integrity of Shakespeare's text.

And to move on we must once again disintegrate. The simpler part of the disintegrative programme is textual in character. I don't mean that the subject isn't difficult, even dangerous; Professor Honigmann has described it, in conversation, as 'a minefield'. But at least we can be sure that all parties to the argument are talking about roughly the same things, namely the texts.

The most important texts at the moment are, as I have remarked, those of *King Lear*. As everybody knows, there is a Quarto of 1608, a second Quarto falsely claiming to be of 1608 but in fact of 1619; and there is the Folio text of 1623. Being based, with some correction, on the 1608 text, the second Quarto would be of little interest were it not that a copy of it seems to have been used by the printers of the Folio text four years later.

This F text differs substantially from the others, having over a hundred lines not found in the Quartos, and lacking nearly three hundred that are, including a whole scene (IV.iii). The omission of that scene upset the F numbering of the subsequent scenes — it calls the fourth the third, and so on, until it gets back on track with *Scaena septima*. Act and scene numbering belongs only to the F text, and perhaps whoever got the Q2 text ready for the printer at first included and then deleted IV.iii. How can one know? At any rate the loss of the scene makes quite a difference to the play. The character of Cordelia is altered, for she is deprived of the rather sanctimonious account of her delivered by 'a Gentleman' to Kent — lines some commentators suppose to have recalled the language of Mariolatry. Accustomed as we are to texts which include the scene, we cannot help seeing that leaving it out makes a difference to the way we feel about Cordelia. The scene also contains lines relating to the return home of the King of France to settle some unspecified problem in his own country ('Something he left imperfect in the state'). His dismissal seems so perfunctorily motivated that one is tempted to suppose that somebody

thought it important to remove him but lacked the time or the interest to invent a good reason why he should go. Along with other oddities in the account of the war, and the ill-defined part of the French in it, this is part of the case, now widely though not universally accepted, for believing that Q and F offer such different versions of action and character that they are properly to be regarded as two distinct plays.

As I said, IV.iii is inserted into all normal editions, which follow F and supplement it from Q. Protest against this practice is not altogether unjustified, for it is true that we are repeatedly presented with a text that is unlikely to correspond to anything played in Shakespeare's time, and probably never existed on seventeenth-century paper in quite this form. Hence the argument for splitting the play into two. The reviser, for whatever reason, altered the narrative of the war, and made other changes that affect the roles not only of Cordelia but also of Albany, Edgar, Kent and the Fool. For these and other reasons the Oxford editors print Q and F as separate versions, F being a large-scale theatrical revision of Q.<sup>8</sup> They would have done likewise for some other plays, *Hamlet* among them, had circumstances allowed. Such confidence is admirable, and one understands the excitement of the revisionists, though it may be going a bit far to describe all previous editors, however ignorant or misguided, as 'fraudulent and presumptuous'.<sup>9</sup>

Despite what seems to be a general agreement that the Folio text represents a theatrical version, probably altered by Shakespeare's own hand, it cannot yet be claimed that the most intimate relationships between Q1, Q2 and F are fully understood, and some decision about them may be required before the disintegrative urge can be fully satisfied and the division of the versions confirmed. The idea of revision is not in itself new, what is new is the decision to treat the Q and F texts as autonomous versions. As early as 1965 Ernst Honigmann was prepared (at that time unconventionally) to allow 'authorial second thoughts' in F;<sup>10</sup> but more recently he has pointed out that much still needs explaining before one accepts any of the considerable variety of 'revision strategies' currently on offer. He finds cogent reasons for doubting the strategy that depends on the notion that the reviser wanted to play down the French part in the war, and remarks that F

<sup>8</sup> *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. S. Wells and G. Taylor; *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, Original Spelling Edition*, ed. Wells and Taylor; *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion*, ed. Wells and Taylor (1986), (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Ioppolo, *Revising Shakespeare*, p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> *The Stability of Shakespeare's Text* (1965), p. 121.

sometimes supplies words and passages only inadvertently omitted from Q — ‘a most damaging point against revision, if it could be proved’.<sup>11</sup> Indeed it would be, and there are indications that it would be worth trying to make it.

Since even the most engaged of the revisionists agree that more work remains to be done, and since many expert and laborious bibliographers are even now engaged on it, I, as a literary critic, risk the charge of presumption in having any opinion on the matter; but I recall the warning that there is no separating bibliography and hermeneutics, so I shall go ahead and venture to suggest that the relations between Q and F may be other than the revision theorists suppose.

Q1 is a poor text, but not, it is now believed, a Bad Quarto in Pollard’s sense; just a poor one. It appears from Peter Blayney’s researches that the printer was short of type, and that his shortage affected the lineation and punctuation.<sup>12</sup> And the copy was evidently hard to read, perhaps because it was autograph ‘foul papers’, which can cause mislineation, wrongly attributed speech prefixes, a failure to insert additions and corrections, and so forth. At any rate there is much nonsense in Q. The Oxford editors dealt with it according to their stated principles, eschewing emendations drawn from F (later and revised) and usually providing what emendation was judged necessary from their own heads.

F derives from this poor Q, via, it is now thought, Q2. The notion that Q and F both derive from a single lost archetype has now, according to the Oxford editors, ‘collapsed’.<sup>13</sup> Q1 is thought to have influenced a manuscript, probably the prompt-book, which Shakespeare used in preparing the later text. The prompt-book may itself have been copied by a scribe who provided a text for reading rather than playing, and this went to the printer.

In reviewing the *Oxford Shakespeare* in 1986, without having ventured very far into the minefield, I claimed to have experienced a difficulty in reconciling with this account of the matter one particular variant between Q and F. I still have this difficulty, now compounded by further meditation, and am wondering whether that collapsed archetype might not after all be shored up.

Briefly, the passage in question is Kent’s description of Oswald

<sup>11</sup> ‘Do-it-yourself *Lear*,’ *New York Review of Books* (25 Oct., 1990), 58–60 (a review of Michael Warren’s *The Complete King Lear, 1608–1623* (1989)).

<sup>12</sup> *The Texts of King Lear and their Origins* (1982), vol. 1.

<sup>13</sup> *A Textual Companion*, p. 529.

(II.ii. 73–5 in most editions, e.g., the Riverside). Q1 (line 961) reads as follows (I quote from Michael Warren's photographic facsimiles<sup>14</sup>):

1

such smiling roges as these,  
Like Rats oft bite those cordes in twaine,  
Which are to intrench, to inloose smooth euery passion

Q2 reads:

such smiling rogues as these,  
Like Rats oft bite those cordes in twaine,  
Which are to intrench, to inloose smooth euery passion

F has:

such smiling rogues as these,  
Like Rats oft bite the holly cords a twaine,  
which are t'intrince, t'vnloose: smooth euery passion

(Some corrected copies have 'holy cords'.)

My difficulty is that I cannot believe the author ever wrote 'intrench' (emended by the Oxford editors in their Old Spelling edition to 'intrencht, which is updated in their modern spelling edition to 'entrenched'). Nor do I believe that 'holly' or 'holy' is the result of revision. The rats bite the knots because they are too complicated, too intricate, to untie; they aren't trying to dig out with their teeth cords that have buried themselves into something — a far vaguer idea, conveying nothing of the notion of stout bonding by a complication of cords. Moreover the cords were surely always 'holy'. The word makes for better meter, though that cannot be decisive in a text prone to metrical irregularities, as *Lear* is. Much more certain is the fact that without 'holy' the simile loses what must have been its original force; rats like Oswald are not the enemies of any old cords, but of those that bind friends, families, societies in sacred obligation. The origin of these cords may well be Ecclesiastes 4:12, 'a threefold cord is not quickly broken', which, incidentally, was cited in a relevant context by Thomas More in one of his letters from the Tower to Margaret Roper.<sup>15</sup>

So it seems to me (a) that Q simply lost the word 'holy', which must have been in the copy; and (b) that 'intrench' cannot be a first

<sup>14</sup> *The Complete King Lear*.

<sup>15</sup> E. F. Rogers, ed. *Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (1947), p. 545.



shot at expressing the original idea. It is a compositor's mistake, a misreading or possibly a mishearing (there are probable aural errors in Q) for the unusual word 'intrince'. The doctrinaire determination of the Oxford editors to ignore F in emending Q means that they feel no need, in their notes, even to consider the relation between 'intrench' and 'intrince', the latter being, in their presumable view, a revision. So they invent 'intrencht' and modernise it as 'entrenched', to take us even further away from the probable original. It may be questioned whether Q should be edited anyway (on the assumption that it is an independent text) but given their determination to do it the editors might have found a reason to prefer to use the sense offered by F to hapless emendation of the nonsense offered by Q.

If I am right and Oxford wrong on this point, it follows that a version of the text containing 'intrince' lies behind both Q, which misunderstood it, and F, which didn't, and which even, at some cost in elision, make a regular pentameter of the line. The F version cannot derive from the Quarto tradition. No doubt it is just possible that the author, revising, spotted the mistake and corrected it, supplying the right reading from memory, but it is surely more likely that it had survived in a manuscript tradition.

In support of the view to which I incline I ask you to consider a few more examples, all drawn from the opening scene of the play. (For the full readings see Appendix.)

2 I.i.43 'tis our first intent' (Q1); 'tis our fast intent' (F). Of course Oxford says nothing about this and will not emend Q if it makes any kind of sense; yet 'first' seems to be an obvious mistake for 'fast', which must have existed in some pre-Q version recorded by F.

3 Q1 omits F I.i.45–50, which is necessary to the sense: the *non sequitur* in Q1 41–2 is clearly an error, though Oxford glosses it over with punctuation changes. Copy for Q1 must have had a passage like the one in F.

4 F I.i.69 'Sir I am made of the selfe same mettall that my sister is' (Q1); 'I am made of that selfe-mettle as my Sister' (F). Q1 is almost certainly a vulgarisation and must therefore post-date the original from which F derives.<sup>16</sup> Oxford finds no need to compare the readings and, in the most principled way, offers no comment on either.

<sup>16</sup> See W. W. Greg, *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare* (2nd ed., 1951), p. 90. Greg regards the Quarto reading as an actor's debasement and the F reading as 'correct and surely original'.

5 I.i.82 'confirm'd' (Q) makes some sense, but is surely likely to be later than 'conferr'd' (F), which makes more sense.

6 It is just conceivable that the two lines in F ('Nothing'. 'Nothing'.) were added in revision, for additional emphasis, but it is much more likely that they were omitted by the Q compositor. This is an instance of what palaeographers, and outdated bibliographers, call extended haplography, eye-skip, or *saut du même en même*.

7 I.i.110 'The mistresse of *Heccat* and the might' (Q1, Q2); 'The miseries of *Heccat* and the night'. Here Oxford accepts 'misteries', the emendation of F2, which corrected what seems a simple misprinting of the true reading. '[M]iseries' is much less likely to have been derived from 'mistresse' than from 'misteries' (or the like) in the original.

8 I.i.116–20  
Q has:

the barbarous *Scythian*  
Or he that makes his generation  
Messes to gorge his appetite  
Shall bee as well neighbour'd, pittied and relieued  
As thou my sometime Daughter.

Where does this leave us? A new bibliography encourages us to abandon the old idea that the editor's job is to offer a text as close as possible to what the author last approved, and think instead of texts as varied by social forces and so virtually indeterminate.<sup>17</sup> The idea is now enthusiastically endorsed by Shakespearians, yet there are arguments against its too easy acceptance. Thomas Tanselle holds that 'socialised' biography does not preclude the older sort; both are legitimate forms of enquiry. If you want to know, however imperfectly, what Shakespeare would have taken to be a text reflecting what he wrote, the existence of a different desire does not make your desire intellectually improper. The argument for socialised bibliography is too often taken to be of itself a refutation of the case for the other kind.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed I believe that reasons for the preference of some Shakespearian scholars for the newer bibliography must be sought outside bibliography proper. The 'socialisation' of his text is part of the wholesale attempt to disintegrate Shakespeare. He is, after all, merely a construct from the texts, and if these can be regarded as a collection of pieces

<sup>17</sup> W. W. Greg, *The Shakespeare First Folio* (1955), p. 381.

<sup>18</sup> G. Thomas Tanselle, 'Books, Canons, and the Nature of Dispute', *Common Knowledge*, I, i (Spring, 1991) 78–91.

by various hands and conditioned by unpredictable social forces Shakespeare will be as indeterminate as they are, and quite lacking the distinction conferred on him by a conspiracy of blundering and superseded Shakespearians. This is the reason why many younger critics, not themselves primarily bibliographers, are so enthusiastic about the split *Lear* and the *Oxford Shakespeare* generally.

Here I should note that the Oxford editors themselves, at any rate when they are being editors, appear not to accept that extreme position. They are keen to get back to the original, the authentic, even if it means changing Falstaff to Oldcastle ('Oldecastle' in ye Olde Spelling Version), printing the plays in an inconvenient order, and honouring biography (which implies a substantial author) by labouring to establish the chronological order of the plays. All this may at first sight appear to have a rather revolutionary air, yet it is in some respects rather old-fashioned. Even the preference for theatrical versions is a little old-fashioned, since it limits interest in social constraints to contemporary theatrical practice, censorship, and so on. Why are the editions of Rowe and his successors, including modern eclectic editors, not interesting as further socialisations, validly indeterminate, of the text?

'Shakespeare' is still referred to as the author of these indeterminate texts. Somehow he persists, even wringing reluctant or inadvertent homage, as when Professor Sinfield argues that some texts, including Shakespeare's, lend themselves better to his sort of ideological analysis than others: 'substantial texts are likely to be written across ideological faultlines because that is the most interesting form of writing', he says, and for that reason produces another long book largely about Shakespeare, in whom he finds all the evidence he needs that Shakespeare, having discovered the faultlines, contested the ideological strategies of power in his own time.<sup>19</sup> Sinfield is not alone in seeking to confer on him the merit of being a rebel against the oppressive forces of his day, and by extension of our day. It is a not unusual modern variant of an old practice, finding new reasons to think Shakespeare good. But not everybody, and not Professor Sinfield all the time, is engaged in that traditional practice.

As I have suggested, there is a wish on the part of a good many modern critics to discredit what they regard as an inveterate, elaborate and hitherto successful establishment plot, its foundations laid in the

<sup>19</sup> *Faultlines: Cultural materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (1992), p. 114.

eighteenth century, to set Shakespeare up as an image of its own authority, a central force for ideological oppression, which is most effective when its stratagems are accepted not as fictions but as simple reflexes of things as they obviously are. So, like the errors of the older bibliography, the cult of Shakespeare and the myth of his intrinsic merits are regarded as products of malign ideological pressure, now for the first time clearly perceived and resistible.

A good example, though but one of many, is a book by Margreta de Grazia, interesting on Malone but claiming that its purpose is to 'define the modern study of Shakespeare as an historical construct rather than a universal given', and so 'to question its viability and desirability in the present'. Professor de Grazia traces the history of this 'construct' from Malone, and declares that only now can we 'interrogate' it, the reason being that 'it has started to lose its former transparency'. This welcome new opacity is attributed in part to the success of the Oxford editors in presenting the 'Shakespearean text as malleable, permeable, and even multiple'.

Not everybody is as aggressive as Professor de Grazia ('interrogate' has a state-police ring, and 'question its viability and desirability' is the language of the doctrinaire eugenicist), but the requirement that Shakespeare be subjected to something called 'historical exigency' is now common, and is indeed the stated policy of Cultural Materialists.<sup>20</sup> Such subjection requires the abandonment of what de Grazia calls 'a universal given' — an expression that may be thought vague, though it apparently means much the same as 'transcendent, indifferent text' — something above the tides of history, a bogus invention intended, by the powerful, to suggest that some forces, including Shakespeare and they themselves, are impervious to the action of time and history.

One way of getting Shakespeare back into history, as I suggested in my earlier remark on Donna Hamilton's book, is to propose that instead of repeating the now conventional notion of Shakespeare as a prop of the establishment hierarchies, we substitute, with Annabel Patterson, a Shakespeare who was actually a quite fierce and consistent critic of them. This is a benign approach to the problem; it saves Shakespeare from denunciation as politically incorrect and therefore ripe for purging.

<sup>20</sup> 'It is a key proposition of cultural materialism that the specific historical conditions in which institutions and formations organize and are organized by textualities must be addressed' (Sinfield, *Faultlines*, p. 49).

Others are less concessive. It is rather striking that Professor Gary Taylor, the Oxford co-editor, who had so much to do with the partition of *King Lear*, and who wrought such havoc upon the standard 'construction' of the Shakespearian text, should subsequently have turned his attention to the disintegration of Shakespeare the author. He is persuaded that few of us have understood certain elementary truths about Shakespeare: for example, that he had 'blind spots' and was 'human'; and that he 'cannot claim any unique command of theatrical resources, longevity or reach of reputation'. It is an instance of the general blindness of critics that they prefer *The Comedy of Errors* to its principal source, the *Menaechmi* of Plautus. Professor Taylor is happy to join Tolstoy and Wittgenstein in resisting powerful cultural pressures; for his own part he finds Joe Orton a more interesting dramatist than Shakespeare, on the investigation of whose canon he has spent so much labour over so many years.<sup>21</sup>

Anybody incautious enough to object that Shakespeare, as a simple matter of fact, has achieved 'reach of reputation' is inviting the response that it was not Shakespeare who claimed or got it, but the bourgeois-Enlightenment conspiracy that used him for its own ends. If we take the controversy over *Lear* as the decisive first action in the battle of the texts, we can call that battle part of a much larger campaign dedicated to the denial of Shakespeare's cultural value; and that campaign is in turn part of the greater war against what is called 'high' culture. The subjection of Shakespeare is necessary, according to Jonathan Dollimore, because he is habitually used to support reactionary politics and false and obsolete notions of human nature ('essentialist humanism'). We need 'to *make* cultural space', as it were by clearing him away with a lot of other rubbish.<sup>22</sup>

Yet even Dr Dollimore, so admirably forceful, so certain that at last we are beginning to get things right, cannot quite bring himself to jettison Shakespeare altogether. He makes a strong plea for the admission of the playwright to his own 'anti-essentialist' programme. Dollimore has of course no time for 'high culture'; whatever is worth keeping of Shakespeare has to be consistent with a quite different set of needs. So, having destroyed the old humanist fallacies about *Lear*, he shows the play to be a strong indictment of the dominant contemporary ideology of property and power (pp. 195–203).

<sup>21</sup> *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1989), Chapter 7.

<sup>22</sup> *Radical Tragedy* (2nd ed., 1989), p. iv.

Edmund 'embodies the process whereby, because of the contradictory conditions of its inception, a revolutionary insight is folded back into a dominant ideology' (p. 210), which means, I think, that Edmund has seen through the conventional opinion that being illegitimate he is by birth an inferior; but that having done so he reveals that he is himself subject to the same dominant ideology of power and property that promoted such a view: 'Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land'.

This is in fact less forced and partial than claims made by other critics, for example that Gloucester has his eyes put out as a punishment for trying to foist his bastard into the aristocracy: by his act Cornwall, we are told, 'purifies the aristocratic body'.<sup>23</sup> Yet forced and partial it still is; as the author would probably quite cheerfully agree, adding that so are all other interpretations. It is a redeeming feature of modern criticism that its more intelligent practitioners understand the necessity of obsolescence, including their own. Dr Dollimore knows that in the course of time his partiality, his peculiar way of forcing the sense, will come to seem as irrelevant, and possibly even as malign, as he finds the books of the scapegoat Tillyard, now ritually condemned as the founder of the modern programme for a fraudulent and presumptuous establishment criticism.

How is Shakespeare bearing up under all this severe interrogation? If you go by the torrent of books and articles about him, which is greater than ever, you might think him to be thriving, unless you take their motive to be not tribute but retribution, stones not flowers. On the whole he seems not yet to have been reduced to a mere text among texts. It is possible, as we have seen, to applaud him for his performance as a critic of contemporary ideology instead of appealing to old assumptions about intrinsic value. It can even be said that he had a part in one of the great upheavals of English history; Franco Moretti, for example, argues that more than any other force of the time tragedy served to discredit 'the values of absolute monarchy, thereby paving the way for the English revolution . . . Only tragedy looks the new prince straight in the face', says Moretti. Tragedy makes of sovereign power 'an insoluble problem', a problem that Shakespeare above all others understood. By so doing he rises 'to the level of Machiavelli, elaborating all the consequences of the separation of political praxis

<sup>23</sup> Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (1986), p. 139.

from moral evaluation' in order to do so.<sup>24</sup> Thus it happens that the 'transcendent' Shakespeare is not only subjected to historical exigency but established as a revolutionary political theorist, and, by this quite new method, rescued from the indeterminacy that besets his texts.

One also notices a tendency for the unreconstructed myth to creep back into critical judgement. Graham Holderness, in his book on the History Plays, agrees that we have been brainwashed into accepting Shakespeare as a 'central symbol of artistic and national culture' and that we have lately been shown 'what social forces have required of it that ideological function', but adds that we have not yet been offered a satisfactory explanation as to 'why in particular *Shakespeare's* drama should have been chosen, except in terms of some well-organized conspiracy arbitrarily selecting one writer for installation at the peak of the cultural hierarchy'. Holderness, like other critics, wants to show that the Histories are not simply 'mirrors of Elizabethan policy', but differs from them in thinking them genuine historical enquiries into the politics of a past age, fully aware of the differences between that age and the time of writing. Since he believes that the plays have this character, and were meant to have it, Holderness cannot accept the now common position that meaning is merely what readers import into texts — that a text under interpretative pressure will comply with any ideological demands made upon it. Of course it is wrong to treat it as 'a self-contained repository of meaning', but it is nevertheless 'a specified arena in which particular struggles for meaning . . . once took place, and can therefore be taken up again. Not any and every meaning but those meanings and values which fall within the text's circumscribed range of significances'.<sup>25</sup>

I myself am comfortable with this notion of circumscription, but it will probably be dismissed impatiently by believers in the total indeterminacy of text and meaning. Views such as Holderness's presuppose an authentic version of the work in question, for without that there would hardly be circumscription, and, as we have seen, many are unhappy with the very possibility of such authenticity. Yet, curiously enough, a good deal of the criticism, textual and literary, to which I have alluded, is, as it seems almost inadvertently, concerned with it.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Great Eclipse: Tragic Form as the Deconsecration of Sovereignty', reprinted from *Signs are Taken for Wonders* (1983), in J. Drakakis, ed., *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1992), pp. 45ff.

<sup>25</sup> *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (1992), p. 39.

Think of the questions that are regularly posed: why should we tolerate an inauthentic, eclectically edited, *King Lear*? Why should we accept falsely humanist or 'essentialist' interpretations of that or any other play? Why should anybody accept Tillyard's 'providentialism' as authentic when evidence abounds that neither the history of the period nor the works of Shakespeare lend it any support, and indeed decisively confute it? So there seems to be some residual nostalgia for authenticity and circumscription.

If so, it persists in the teeth of the new scepticism as to literary value, the conviction that to ascribe such value to Shakespeare, or indeed to anybody else, is to act in bad faith. Editors act in bad faith, and so do critics who connive at the fraud, and have done so more or less since the time of Heminges and Condell, continuing with their empty praises a long and fraudulent or deluded tradition of idolatry. No one will deny that much criticism justly incurs censure of this kind, nor that those who see Shakespeare as an emperor without clothes, or as a grossly misread politician, have scored some points. But they are, I think, victims of a particular misunderstanding or disability.

Just as discussions about the canon more generally are vitiated by its misrepresentation as a sort of 'heritage' site, a park full of dull and officiously or venally venerated monuments, so the attempts on Shakespeare (qualified though they sometimes are by a vestigial deference) seem to be conducted by people who are unaware of any understanding of why others genuinely do find high literary interest in the plays. They suppose, or profess to suppose, that to find inexhaustible interest in the language of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* — that to imagine such language licenses one to take a keener interest in the plays than in the other documents or discourses with which a proper attention to 'historical exigency' would level them — is to be the victim of some ideological state apparatus.

It is not easy to discuss these issues, each side being, in the view of the other, blind and deaf. We can say that there is certainly no harm in forcing Shakespeare to abide a few questions of the kind now being put. Thoughtless adulation, whether of Robertson's kind or its opposite, merely arms the sceptics. The new work on the text has given us a lot to think about, and need not be thought to serve only the interests of some who, in the cause of some special and disintegrative interest — who, like Dollimore's Edmund, have seen through the ideologies of the enemy yet remained acquisitive — have endorsed it. As yet the evidence that Shakespeare is a thing of shreds and patches, or even a



radical critic of King James and a forerunner of Cromwell, is not wholly compelling. Meanwhile there remain those who place a high value on Shakespeare yet refuse to treat the plays with mindless veneration, who understand that they are not timeless, transcendental and so forth, and know very well that they live, as we and all our works must, in the tide of history.

My conclusion is so close to Sir Edmund's that I will end by quoting him, asking you only to remember his habit of irony, and leaving you to change the names.

We ought to be grateful to Mr Robertson and Mr Dover Wilson. We had come to think that all the critical questions about Shakespeare were disposed of; the biographical facts and even a little more than the facts chronicled, the canon and the apocrypha fixed, the chronological order determined, the text established; that there was not much left to be done with Shakespeare, except perhaps to read him. They have shown us that it is not so; that we must now go over the ground again, and turn our notional assents, with whatever modifications may prove justified, into real assents. We have all the spring joy of re-digging a well-tilled garden.<sup>26</sup>

## Appendix: Readings in *King Lear*

### 1 (II.ii.73–5)

Q1                    such smiling roges as these,  
Like Rats oft bite those cordes in twaine,  
Which are to intrench, to inloose smooth euery passion

Q2                    such smiling rogues as these,  
Like Rats oft bite those cordes in twaine,  
Which are to intrench, to inloose smooth euery passion

F                      such smiling rogues as these,  
Like Rats oft bite the holly cords a twaine,  
which are t'intrince, t'vnloose: smooth euery passion

(corrected: 'holy cords')

<sup>26</sup> op. cit., pp. 47–8.

## 2 (I.i.39–40)

Q1                               tis our first intent,  
To shake all cares and busines of our state,

F                               'tis our fast intent,  
To shake all Cares and Businesse from our Age,

## 3 (I.i.45–50)

Q1 (missing)

F                               while we  
Vnburthen'd crawle toward death. Our son of  
*Cornwal*,  
And you our no lesse louing Sonne of *Albany*,  
We haue this houre a constant will to publish  
Our daughters seuerall Dowes, that future strife  
May be preuented now.

## 4 (I.1.69)

Q1           Sir I am made of the selfe same mettall that my sister is,

F           I am made of that selfe-mettle as my Sister,

## 5 (I.i.73/4, 81–2)

Q1           No lesse in space, validity, and pleasure,  
Then that confirm'd on *Gonorall*,

F           No lesse in space, validitie, and pleasure  
Then that conferr'd on *Gonerill*.

## 6 (I.i.94–5)

Q           Nothing my Lord.  
How, nothing can come of nothing, speake againe.

F           Nothing my Lord.  
Nothing?  
Nothing.  
Nothing will come of nothing, speake againe.

## 7 (I.i.110)

Q           The mistresse of *Heccat*, and the might,  
F           The miseries of *Heccat* and the night;

## 8 (I.i.116–20)

Q                           the barbarous *Scythyan*,  
          Or he that makes his generation  
          Messes to gorge his appetite  
          Shall bee as well neighbour'd, pittyed and relieued  
          As thou my sometime daughter.

F                           The barbarous *Scythian*,  
          Or he that makes his generation messes  
          To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosome  
          Be as well neighbour'd, pittied, and releeu'd,  
          As thou my sometime Daughter.