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SHAKESPEARE'S CONSCIOUS HISTORIES

THE HISTORIES IN MANY WAYS form a kind of reduced canon of Shakespeare's evolution. Their development is marked by an increasing range of self-awareness in the protagonists. If we centre on the theme of the family, a theme much exploited in Shakespeare, we can see how conventional ideas of the relationship between individual and whole are used *en masse* in the early plays. Fathers and sons live within a scheme of moral expectancies which are the products of centuries of ethical tradition. To young John Talbot his famous father says,

. . . Talbot's name might be in thee revived
When sapless age and weak unable limbs
Should bring thy father to his drooping chair.¹
(1 *Henry VI*, IV:v)

The son repeatedly raises the question of his spiritual relationship to his father, and he does so by persistent use of the image of bastardy. This way he shows that there is more than one meaning in legitimacy: the son, in whom the name is "revived," must also have the spirit of the father live again in him. They live "side by side" and "soul with soul;" they die "Coupled in bonds of perpetuity," to become emblems of the willing identity of the individual and the line of blood.

When Talbot pleads with his son to maintain "our household's name" he is depending, like Marvell writing on Nun-Appleton House, or Jonson on Penshurst, on the often-elaborated Renaissance conviction that the great household is the symbol of ordered existence. As part of a household dynasty the individual can both separate himself from and find a place in his environment. The Talbots' sense of being is ordered by this concept. It leaves little room for "extraneous" consciousness of self.

In the rest of the *Henry VI* trilogy, the protagonists believe that what they are is defined by the inheritance of which they are part. Certain dominant ideas (inheritance itself, revenge) order their sense of being. Clifford and the sons of York dispose of their identities totally, and take on the roles of heirs in a war of dynasties.

There is no individual reflection (except in the impotent Henry) beyond some rather obvious pragmatic conclusions, and the setting surges continuously with mindless, selfless avengers who are responsive only to the blood feud. The flatness of the trilogy is due to the absence of ratiocination; the protagonists do not take it upon themselves to query the ethic which orders their aspirations and fears. The individual consciousness never engages in an *agon* with its milieu, and never asks the great questions.

If this play centres on the limited sensibilities of stock figures who merely exemplify ethical reactions, it may go some way toward explaining *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Valentine's spectacularly selfless renunciation of Silvia, like his bombastic threats to Thurio, is motivated by the conception that the individual gentleman is but a branch of the institution of gentility, which determines his responses. His is a dormant consciousness, unable to distinguish its own responses from those prescribed for its role. His *volte-face*, like Bertrand's reform in *All's Well That Ends Well*, is meant to represent the unimportance of individual will in the face of cultural expectancies. Mercutio is one of the few early figures in whom we see the disruptive and even destructive power of the individual intellect when it attacks the basis of a vision, the ethical platitudes of a milieu. Mercutio, like Richard III, is very much outside of his setting, and ironically conscious of his situation.

One of the reasons for the appeal of Richard III to modern readers and audiences is that he exemplifies individualism against the world. The very terms of his villainy are *anarchic*, and are intended to outrage conventional expectations. Under Shakespeare's intelligent exaggeration he is involved in acts of almost farcical dastardy (compare the murder of Clarence with that of Duncan, the murder of the princes with that of the children of Macduff). All that is traditionally important in the linkage of individual and world—household, kindred, realm—is purged by his will. He creates a chaos out of order, in which his highly individual mind is at home. This is of course exactly the opposite of what Henry V does; the later King's whole life is concerned with making order of chaos, and with becoming "ordered" himself. There is another figure very like Richard, who we know was conceived in the same period. This is Faulconbridge, the bastard of *King John*. He rejects the ethical vision of his world explicitly: once by his "Commodity" speech, and again by his symbolic rejection of conventional social existence and glad acceptance of the implied moral emancipation of bastardy. We might note that he recognizes that his "inward motion" and the expectations of his age are inimical (*King John*, I: i, 210 ff.)

Richard's introductory speech is fair warning that the chronicle tradition is about to be recast and in a sense subjugated. He is not merely following the traditional practice of the stage Machiavelli in announcing the course of his villainy.

What is important here, and in other speeches by Richard, is his intelligent (and probably neurotic) awareness of his isolation from the world of men. He is "unfinished" in a more than physical sense (really *uncommitted*, unlike other men) in "this breathing world." The witty soliloquy which follows his wooing of the Lady Anne makes it plain that this is hardly the deformed and malignant hunchback of tradition. Richard is much concerned with his own identity: as Gloucester in the preceding plays he was simply part of the ideological allegory. When he says, "I do mistake my person all this while" and "I am crept in favour with myself", he again reveals his capacity to stand, not only outside his world, but ironically outside himself. That he is more introspective and complicated than appears may be seen in his awakening speech:

What do I fear? myself? there's none else by:
 Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
 Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:
 Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? for any good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 O, no! alas, I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself!
 I am a villain: yet I lie, I am not.
 Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter.
 My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
 And every tongue brings in a several tale,
 And every tale condemns me for a villain.

 I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;
 And if I die, no soul shall pity me.

(*Richard III*, V: iii)

Here Richard puts his own consciousness to a catechism. The profusion of pronouns ("I am I," "myself upon myself", etc.) indicates at least one fact: Richard is both subject and object of his consciousness. The battle of conscience, and the sense of duality, are completely unlike that farcical episode in the mind of Gobbo (*Merchant of Venice*, II: i).

While it seems unlikely, what Richard is saying is that he is caught in a psychic dilemma. Since his mind is emancipated from ethical constraints (perhaps a reflection of the brilliant self-consciousness of Montaigne), he recognizes in himself an irreducible core of self-concern: "Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I." This actually is how he knows himself, by being conscious of his self-love: *me amo, ergo*

sum. When he sees himself as the world sees him ("There is no creature loves me"), he is caught in the familiar trap of the Shakespearean villain. Like Claudius or Macbeth, he comes to see that the essence of his being is, if unwillingly, related to his world. Conscience or self-awareness (as Hamlet saw it) is the trap for the mind that attempts to transcend morality.

One of the reasons why the play is immature is that Richard's *agon* occurs so late, and has so little precedent in the play. One has to go to the great tragedies to see a consistent exposition of duality in the self *vis à vis* an intolerable political situation. *Richard III* then should not be wholly revalued. Obviously the idea of conscience *versus* consciousness, and the exposition of the tortured psychology of uncertainty which are the core of *Hamlet* and *Othello* are not central to this play. We must put up with a good measure of melodrama and skulduggery; we must be conscious of the demands of the chronicle form (a good deal of movement, ideological conflict, etc.) which really gives structure to the play. Yet the play does begin to come to grips with the idea of the anarchic self and the ordered world. Mark Van Doren noted that Richard "is the first character in Shakespeare to achieve his own form, to have sinuous and purposeful movement controlled from within."² Olivier's filmed Richard made us aware of his egocentric awareness of himself, his acting to his own audience. He is one of the first Shakespearean *dramatic personae* to ask for comprehension in the unreasonable yet enlightening terms of "what I will be, not what I have been."³

The history plays of the second period are deeply self-conscious. They move away from the chronicle form, in which all motivations are explicit, and in which there is no ambiguous relation between individuals and beliefs.

The idea that Shakespeare "has not made a great man of him. He has made a poet"⁴, can mislead judgment of Richard II. Insofar as he is looked on merely as a "performer on the lyre" we lose him; he has that full sense of consciousness with which the Renaissance was so eager to endow the poet in its theoretic formulations from Sidney on. We are prone, however, to attack him as a *poseur*, and as a political failure. The solid, pragmatic virtues of his adversary Bolingbroke, the ineptness of his reign, the effeminacy of his person are all charged against him. Yet we should feel as deeply for Richard's internal disharmony as we should for the order which is consistently defended by his milieu.

In a sense the audience is morally overcome by the recognition that Richard is incapable of meeting the necessary, logical demands of his world. One can point to the garden scene, and find there a summation of the political meaning of the play expressed in normative—and decidedly Elizabethan—terms:

O, what pity is it

That he had not so trimm'd and dress'd his land
 As we this garden! We at time of year
 Do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit-trees,
 Lest, being over-proud in sap and blood,
 With too much riches it confound itself:
 Had he done so to great and growing men,
 They might have lived to bear and he to taste
 Their fruits of duty: superfluous branches
 We lop away, that bearing boughs may live:
 Had he done so, himself had borne the crown,
 Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down.

Yet this, and even Gaunt's famous speech are somehow irrelevant. Richard's failure to fulfill the ideal of the "patriot king" envisioned by his adversaries of Lancaster is like Hamlet's failure to fulfill that of the "Renaissance prince" as it was held from Elyot to Machiavelli.

Both Hamlet and Richard are political figures who have to cope with enigmas which become extra-political, for both have the dangerous capability of internalizing their sense of universal disparities. Like Lear and Macbeth they have first to surrender their pretensions; second, to enter a new state of consciousness, which varies from Richard's neurosis, to Hamlet's "feigned" madness, to Lear's spiritual *sturm*.

We have seen the first such figure hesitantly outlined in Henry VI. He too fails to cope with "reality." In a sense, however, we approve of his failure, for it is transcendent in a way of which we approve. He thinks and acts as a Christian and resigns himself to providence, rather than attempting to force his own conditions on his world. His otherworldliness is one of the traditional ways of expressing the battle between the mind and its culture. But Richard II, also a deposed king, prefers not to abandon his state. He finds it psychologically impossible to relinquish kingship, which has furnished him with all of the symbols and rituals, the power and glory, which he imagines is central to his existence. Moreover, his sense of self differentiates him completely from his world. If he cannot explain it, it cannot understand him. This is what complicates judgment of Richard, as it does of Hamlet. We are intended never fully to make sense of them, because they are intellectually atomistic, cut off from the shared ideas of their setting. Hamlet's reactions to the commonplaces of life are a satire of what, in the later Renaissance, was to take refuge in Cartesian certainty. Marriage, love, death are refracted excessively because they are passed through an anti-Cartesian mind, with idiosyncratic standards of response. Richard's words to Bolingbroke

my grief lies all within;
 And these external manners of laments
 Are merely shadows . . .

could pass for Hamlet's. In sum, they have the kind of *a priori* mind of which Santayana speaks in his famous essay on Shelley. Within them there is something which "external manners" cannot explain. In the words of Faulconbridge it is his "inward motion." Richard III understands it as self-love; Henry V will see it as "the tide of blood" within.

Richard's mind is like Hamlet's in its mixture of confusion and directness. The rhetoric of both princes is labyrinthine. They perpetually answer questions with other questions. They actively resist explication of their motives (like Hamlet's rejection of the "good offices" of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and Richard's refusal ever to give a straightforward explanation of his life in purely political terms). They elude attempts to fix on them particular responsibility. They elaborate what seem to be peripheral ideas on being and suffering, ideas which seem to constitute digressions in terms of normative logic. What they do succeed in doing is to force their setting to encounter ideas and sensibilities that mystify ordinary modes of experience. They in fact make normative ideas look foolish: Richard's Polonius is Bolingbroke. How does one accuse a poet? One cannot, for the poet that is Richard, like the actor who is Hamlet, refuses to jump the gap between the reasonableness of the world and the unreason of the self.

Richard enters Westminster Hall to a scene of furious political argument—and he enters it like Barrymore. Bolingbroke and Northumberland call him to account for political lapses, and he replies, with ironical submissiveness, in the voice of the betrayed Christ. The point is not only that he is indulging in poetic bad taste, but that he is throwing in the faces of his adversaries his own kind of answer to their charges: in a mad time we speak in the accents of madness. There is no reason to doubt that he can tell a hawk from a handsaw. His paranoid responses, replete with fulsome allusions to the sacrificed god, Pilate, and so on, are like those of Hamlet. He intends to create the "woeful pageant" recognized by the Abbot of Westminster, and re-created in the later play. His words are not admissions, but accusations. When he makes such statements as "I must nothing be," "I resign to thee," "I wash away my balm," "I have no name", when he re-enacts the crucifixion, he transfers the entire affair from the world of political reality to that of primal consciousness. He converts the ritual of abdication to a kind of ritual of self-destruction. Bolingbroke intimates that he judges Richard by the laws of common sense: all of Richard's paranoid poetry says no, that he is being destroyed psychically. This will not be lost on Bolingbroke, who, as king himself, will live and die full of

the unseen grief
That swells with silence in the tortured soul.
(*Richard II*, IV: i)

The spirit of Richard permeates the Henry IV plays and *Henry V* because the kings of these are constantly forced to assess themselves over the "original sin" of deposition. Under the shade of Richard we see a new concept of political righteousness developing, which is to be framed in terms of self-reproach.

The trilogy on Henry V is Shakespeare's *Pilgrim's Progress*—or perhaps his earliest telling of that theme. In it there is an articulated picture of spiritual growth and reconciliation. There is much to think of in terms of the struggle of the self to adopt a new and rigorously moral order of being.

I Henry IV raises in the spirit of comedy many of the serious questions of its sequels. Against our knowledge of *Henry V*, which has been recognized as one of the most sombrely self-conscious Shakespearean plays,⁵ it seems farcical. Yet it is the first step of a dialectic, in a new phase of Shakespeare's thought, between the will to experience and the will to order. As it leads to the later plays, it can be seen as a statement which must perpetually be modified.

The first statement the king makes about his son opens the question of identity. It is a statement which commits two wrongs; it makes a facile rhetorical renunciation of the "changeling" Henry, and it accepts as fully constituted the character of Hotspur:

Yea, there thou makest me sad and makest me sin
In envy that my Lord Northumberland
Should be the father to so blest a son,
A son who is the theme of honour's tongue;
Amongst a grove, the very straightest plant;
Who is sweet Fortune's minion and her pride:
Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him,
See riot and dishonour stain the brow
Of my young Harry. O that it could be proved
That some night-tripping fairy had exchanged
In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,
And call'd mine Percy, his Plantagenet!
Then would I have his Harry, and he mine.

Almost until the end—and possibly even then—Bolingbroke fails to recognize the true nature of his son. His intellectual power escapes the king, who can see in him only another self-preoccupied Richard:

For all the world
As thou art to this hour was Richard then
When I from France set foot at Ravenspurgh.
(*1 Henry IV*, III:ii)

He is taken in also by his esteem for the military qualities of Hotspur, whose inarticulate loudness covers a multitude of intellectual deficiencies. Hotspur seems able to feel only, not to think, while even in the middle of his riots Henry can think with appalling acuteness. He generally has a dual conception of himself, perhaps in the manner of the famous Jacobean emblem which portrays the secret soul peering out of the manifested cage of the body.

Henry's concern is himself. So early as I:ii he reflects on his "reformation," beginning a long train of mimetic motifs in the play:

I know you all, and will awhile 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. . . .

One thinks of Richard III, also an actor to the world and to himself: "Plead what I will be, not what I have been." The great scene in the Boar's-Head at Eastcheap also centres on mimetic falsification. First Falstaff and then Henry play the king. (It is worth noting that the acting metaphor has been kept up. Richard III played to his own audience, Richard II played the anointed of God to an extremely hostile political audience, and Hamlet is so much an actor as to defy our telling where his "reality" begins. Morgann saw Falstaff as one of the most accomplished of actors, with "a distinct and separate subsistence," and he is here "one of these harlotry players.") He raises in parody the very question that Bolingbroke raises in his initial complaint about his "changeling" son:

That thou art my son, I have partly thy mother's
word, partly my own opinion, but chiefly a vil-
lanous trick of thine eye and a foolish hanging
of thy nether lip, that doth warrant me. If then
thou be son to me

Henry, when he imitates the king whom he will succeed, raises in grotesque comic rhetoric the argument behind the later rejection: "Thou art violently carried away from grace. . . ." Also, the two of them enact in mockery the scenes which are to

come, in which Bolingbroke and Henry assert a far more serious identity between them. There is to be a final re-enactment of this scene when Henry and the Chief Justice resolve their personal identities in terms of moral law.

The marvellous dissimulation of which the king speaks in his first *rapprochement* with Henry is also put in terms of mimetic falsification of identity. A disguise (very much like Henry's own) covers the egocentric truth within:

By being seldom seen, I could not stir
 But like a comet I was wonder'd at;
 That men would tell their children 'This is he;'
 Others would say 'Where, which is Bolingbroke?'
 And then I stole all courtesy from heaven,
 And dress'd myself in such humility
 That I did pluck allegiance from men's hearts. . . .

Richard showed his nakedness too often, and, "swallow'd by men's eyes" they began to "loathe the taste of sweetness." The fundamental irony lies of course in the fact that even this is not the final statement on delusion. Much of *2 Henry IV* will be concerned with showing that even a king cannot act out righteousness to himself.

In answer to the combination of Machiavellian advice and moral exhortation, Henry once more summons up a mimetic rhetorical manner. He speaks of Hotspur now in the familiar terms of the "changeling:"

for the time will come,
 That I shall make this northern youth exchange
 His glorious deeds for my indignities.
 Percy is but my factor, good my lord. . . .

Hotspur is not so much an enemy as a state of being which must be exorcised and assimilated, so that the rightful heir may say with full self-consciousness,

I will redeem all this on Percy's head
 And in the closing of some glorious day
 Be bold to tell you *that I am your son.*

The second play is much concerned with the renunciation of one kind of fatherhood, and the adoption of another. It has long been evident that Falstaff, whether as the Vice or as some other allegory of domination, was a kind of father to Henry. *1 Henry IV* took this in the spirit of parody. But *2 Henry IV* is a serious search for spiritual fatherhood. Henry is obsessed with his own image, and in a way unlike the obsession of *Richard II*. For Richard, it was enough to take refuge in art; to think in abstract terms of majesty; to speak in plaintive tones of poetry; to imagine

himself, in his mirror, as a transcendent Christ-like figure of suffering. But Henry has a mirror in which to examine himself also, and it is a mirror of fatherhood.

The question of blood and inheritance working in the self is raised most ironically, if unknowingly, by Falstaff:

Hereof comes it that Prince Henry is valiant; for the cold blood he did naturally inherit of his father, he hath, like lean, sterile and bare land, manured, husbanded and tilled with excellent endeavour of drinking good and good store of fertile sherris, that he is become very hot and valiant. If I had a thousand sons, the first humane principle I would teach them should be, to forswear thin potations and to addict themselves to sack.

(2 *Henry IV*, IV:iii)

This is still at the point of intellectual development of *1 Henry IV*. It is a point which Henry has passed, although Falstaff is not aware of it. His conscience drives him to assert a new identity for himself, to find in the idea of fatherhood metaphorical as well as direct expression of the change in himself. In *1 Henry IV* the prince challenges Hotspur as if "a brother should a brother dare," and they fight with magnanimity. In the later play Lancaster, who deals in his contracts as Shylock does in his bonds, the "sober-blooded boy," becomes Henry's spiritual as well as physical brother. Henry, like Lancaster and like their father, will be concerned decidedly with "cold blood," for this is what makes possible the "royal image."

The great scene which caps the search for a new identity comes with the stage direction, "Enter King Henry the Fifth, attended." To his brothers, who have displaced Bardolph and Poins, he says,

I'll be your father and your brother too;
Let me but bear your love, I'll bear your cares.

And, to himself as well,

Not Amurath an Amurath succeeds,
But Harry Harry.

The intellectual centre of the play comes in a final reworking of the original mimetic question raised in the Boar's-Head Tavern in Eastcheap. Then Henry said to Falstaff, "Do thou stand for my father, and examine me upon the particulars of my life." Here it is done:

Ch. Just. Whiles I was busy for the commonwealth,
Your highness pleased to forget my place,

The majesty and power of law and justice,
 The image of the king whom I presented,
 And struck me in my very seat of judgment;
 Whereon, as an offender to your father,
 I gave bold way to my authority
 And did commit you. If the deed were ill,
 Be you contented, wearing now the garland,
 To have a son set your decrees at nought,
 To pluck down justice from your awful bench,
 To trip the course of law and blunt the sword
 That guards the peace and safety of your person;
 Nay, more, to spurn at your most royal image
 And mock your workings in a second body.
 Question your royal thoughts, make the case yours;
 Be now the father and propose a son

The language is full of the "image" ideas that run through the two plays. But the "royal image" with its "royal thoughts" is Henry's final state of being. Henry is now no longer self-sustaining. The *agapé* of law and justice has claimed him; he has no more of Richard II's strangely erotic conceptions of himself. In a new ordering of his being, he says with finality to the Chief Justice, "You shall be as a father to my youth," and the transformation is effected. The "tide of blood in me" which he correctly recognizes as the innerness of his being, is newly ordered, and will "flow henceforth in formal majesty." It is perhaps anticlimatic when, in the final scene, he says to an old man,

Presume not that I am the thing I was;
 For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
 That I have turn'd away my former self.

The study of Henry's growing preoccupation with himself as a Renaissance prince has been so well effected⁶ that it is not necessary to speak more of it here. But one might say that, if the great tragedies flow out of an alienated state of consciousness, they are far from final. The last plays have also their precedent in the reconciliation of the conscious individual self with its world.

NOTES

1. This and succeeding quotations are from the Hardin Craig edition (1951).
2. Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare* (New York, 1957), p. 18.
3. *Richard III*, IV:iv, l. 414 (Craig, p. 332).
4. Van Doren, p. 68.
5. D. A. Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare* (New York, 1956), pp. 35-49 *passim*.
6. Traversi, *ibid*.