

# Conjecture of a Time

## *Interrogating Shakespeare—By VIVIAN THOMAS*



STUDENTS OF literature, theatre-goers, and even academics must occasionally wonder when confronted by a new batch of Shakespeare studies whether they are being offered old wine in new bottles. Close scrutiny of recent critical works ought to reassure them, for these are not confined to textual exegesis but range widely over the intellectual and social context of the plays, including an exploration of sources, stage images and traditions—and, more recently, a serious evaluation of the plays in performance.

Analysis of Shakespeare's plays has long since ceased to be primarily a matter of study in the study. As the mesh of the net through which they are sifted becomes ever finer, awareness of their complexities and ambiguities grows. Each play seems to have within it several variants, and their multidimensional nature gives rise to a seeming freshness and a capacity to provoke contrary opinions. It is this quality which creates a sense of Shakespeare as our contemporary.

Not only do the plays appear to reflect—and reflect on—each age in a different way, but a play which has been relatively neglected, such as *Troilus and Cressida*, can suddenly seem to be Shakespeare's most modern drama. As the plays reflect and interrogate each age, so each generation of critics, directors, and actors interrogates the dramas. Far from squeezing Shakespeare dry, this diversity of approach yields new harvests of understanding—and exposes previously unseen dilemmas, both of critical evaluation and of the nature of the human condition.

One of the best recent examples of a searching exploration to this multidimensional nature is Graham Bradshaw's *Shakespeare's Scepticism*.<sup>1</sup> His main thrust is to demonstrate the fundamental scepticism embodied in the plays. Their vitality resides not in a capacity to provide comforting answers but in the disconcerting propensity to expose us to unsettling questions.

Bradshaw embraces what Dr Johnson found distasteful in Shakespeare's work. Johnson complained:

“. . . he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to shew in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them

without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent of time or place.”

Shakespeare's plays, Bradshaw affirms, reveal the dramatist as someone who is “both more sceptical than his idealistic characters and more tentatively-sceptically-affirmative than his nihilists and dogmatic sceptics”, so that the probing and dissection of values may give rise to the view that “There are, or may be, no objective values, but the need to endow life with value and significance is an objective fact about human nature.” Consequently an important distinction is to be made between “*dogmatic* scepticism, as represented by the terminal, materialistic nihilism of a Thersites, Iago or Edmund, and *radical* scepticism, which turns on itself—weighing the human need to affirm values against the inherently problematic nature of all acts of valuing”.

Before engaging in studies of *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth* (and he has something challenging and invigorating to say about each of these plays), Bradshaw points to the need to be constantly aware of Shakespeare's multiple perspectives:

“Shakespeare's extraordinary imaginative empathy constantly allows us to see and feel how a character—Macbeth, Shylock, Othello—apprehends his own situation; at the same time the plays frame dual or multiple perspectives both on the characters and on issues like ‘love’ and ‘honour’.”

Likewise, he draws attention to a vital feature of the dramatist's language.

“A stylistic register may provide a remarkably comprehensive index to moral, social and political attitudes. We see this when the stoic, republican Brutus addresses the Romans in prose while Antony inflames them with verse: the one man does not know or want to know how to manipulate others, and is—like Hotspur—manipulated; the other is, like Hal, a virtuoso who manipulates others and even his own deepest genuine emotions.”

But the issue is rather more problematical than Bradshaw allows. For instance, the loveliest speech in *Measure for Measure* is delivered by the disreputable, scurrilous, and licentious Lucio (I. iv. 40-44). The best that Bradshaw can do with this is to claim that these lines are “delivered sardonically”, and are “all the more disconcerting” for that. This is one of the few occasions when he appears a little flatfooted.

Given that Bradshaw's central preoccupation is with the question of values, it is appropriate that the lynchpin of his

<sup>1</sup> *Shakespeare's Scepticism*. By GRAHAM BRADSHAW. Harvester Press, £29.50.

book (and its starting-point) is *Troilus and Cressida*. This is surely the most sceptical and interrogative play in the canon, besides being the most modern. Bradshaw seizes on the debate between Hector and Troilus in which the former initially argues in favour of ending the Trojan war, insisting that Helen is “not worth what she doth cost the keeping”. Troilus’s riposte is: “What’s aught but as ’tis valued?”

Shakespeare’s interrogation of values begins with the Prologue, and pervades the play. Bradshaw’s first chapter is incisive and stimulating, but the richness of the play is such that his analysis, though telling, is limited. Moreover, his comments here appear cramped and gnomic. For instance, when he says, “We might wonder how any attentive critic could resist the conclusion that the Hector-problem is properly resolved by seeing through him—as a hollow man who needs to be admired as Cressida needs to be desired”, there is a sense in which he is right, but there is far more to the question than he allows. Despite the occasional over-compression of argument, a key paragraph highlights Bradshaw’s sharp cutting edge:

“The play nowhere shows what a *true* hero or lover is like; where its exuberantly mordant, unpacking energies seem to correspond with those of terminal scepticism, it implies that there is no such thing. But the play also makes us register the life-denying, humanly impoverishing consequences of such a view. . . . And the play’s paradoxicality corresponds with what I suggested, in Chapter One, would be the radically sceptical Shakespearean formulation of J. L. Mackie’s observation that there are no objective values: there are, or may be, no objective values, but the need to endow life with value and significance is an objective fact about human nature.”

While Bradshaw believes that there is more to be gained by consideration of the plays in terms of chronology rather than by means of any generic classification, he makes an interesting observation in contrasting two of the problem plays. Of *Measure for Measure* he says: “This play’s scepticism differs from that of *Troilus and Cressida* in that the earlier play explores the *non-objectivity* of values while the later play explores the incompatibility of different *absolute* values.”

In his exploration of the multitudinous enigmas of *Hamlet*, Bradshaw begins with two questions: “What kind of play could so enthrall the western imagination?” and “How could any work have seemed to submit to so many divergent and incompatible readings, without being in itself flawed and obscure?” His answer to the second question, following a fascinating discussion of the play, is somewhat disappointing. He accepts the conclusion advanced by J. M. Robertson in *The Problem of Hamlet* (1919) though not the means of arriving at it: namely, that Shakespeare failed to effect a perfect grafting between the structure and action of an earlier and since lost *Hamlet* and his modern sceptical and questioning hero.

<sup>2</sup> *Five and Eighty Hamlets*. By J. C. TREWIN. Hutchinson, £14.95.

<sup>3</sup> *The Elizabethan Hamlet*. By ARTHUR MCGEE. Yale University Press, \$20.00, £14.95.

J. C. Trewin’s *Five and Eighty Hamlets*<sup>2</sup> is a personal response to productions he has seen over six decades. A book to be savoured by the fireside on a winter’s evening, this is no encyclopaedia to be plundered by research students but a very individual response to diverse productions, delivered in an engagingly chatty style which will have particular appeal to those who have enjoyed reading Trewin’s theatre criticism over the years. He conveys a sense of significant changes in the theatrical landscape, ranging from the primacy of the Birmingham Rep in its heyday to the evolution of the Shakespeare Theatre at Stratford, almost casually charting the shifts in fashions and structures.

The great pleasure of the book lies in Trewin’s ability to convey a sense of a style or approach with an incisive phrase, and in his capacity to generate a kaleidoscopic vision of a performance. In the former category is his reference to Mark Dignam’s “smiling villain of a Claudius, metallic fox rather than ‘bloat King’”; and his commentary on a performance at Stratford’s intimate Other Place in 1976: “There had seldom been a better Ghost than Griffith Jones, who could be an unearthly figure even when brushing past my left shoulder.”

Trewin’s feeling of excitement about the play, which was ignited, he says, when he first read it at the age of eight, is manifest. Here is his description of Richard Pasco’s performance at the Bristol Theatre Royal:

“Like many people’s my Hamlet had been (and is) composite, and on his Bristol showing Pasco would be prominent in any final mosaic: possibly for the prose scene, so gently phrased in its grace and honesty, with Horatio before the Play; the verbal sparring with the King after Polonius’s death; and the courtly salute to Laertes, ‘Give me your pardon, sir’, before the duel that must end all. When this Hamlet died the man of Ophelia’s panegyric had died with him.”

Trewin describes with equal fervour Derek Jacobi’s Hamlet, performed in 1977:

“At thirty-eight he was neither an aspiring undergraduate nor a peevish youth fitted better to a street corner than the Danish throne. Logical, graceful, possibly the most touching Hamlet since John Neville, but fortified always by his fiery spirit, he re-charged my faith in the courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword. To listen to him was like reading the play in a fresh format: no emphases were follow-my-leader.”

ARTHUR MCGEE’S *The Elizabethan Hamlet*<sup>3</sup> aims to represent the play as it would have been perceived by the Elizabethan audience. His view is that modern perceptions of *Hamlet* are far removed from the response of the original audience, in a way which softens and sentimentalises. McGee interrogates the religious debates and injunctions, censorship laws, attitudes to madness, and other matters relating to fundamental issues incorporated in the play. His conclusion is that the Ghost is unequivocally evil, and that Hamlet is satanic as he becomes caught up in his pursuit

of revenge. Virtually every aspect of the hero's behaviour, including his role as fool or madman, reveals him as subject to the Devil's manipulation. After a thoroughgoing examination of the prevailing theological doctrines and prescriptions, and an analysis of censorship in theory and practice, McGee concludes his case against the proposition of a "good" Ghost from Purgatory as follows:

"There are strong grounds for believing that the censorship jealously guarded against the doctrine of Purgatory as expressed in recusant literature, that its attitude to the drama was just as stringent, and that very probably there was no exception to this rule in the licensing of books. To put the matter in more graphic form: it is impossible to find a single Elizabethan who could, in print, voice his belief in Purgatory. Only a Roman Catholic would have wished to do so, for to Protestants Purgatory was either a joke or a confidence trick, or both. But it should be added that not even a Roman Catholic of the time would have believed in a revenge ghost from Purgatory."

Laertes is described as a "villain cast in the mould of Cesare Borgia". Not even Horatio's judgment can be trusted, nor can he escape damnation: "Horatio, it is true, appears to accept that the Ghost is 'honest' but he is a partner to a diabolic pact sworn in the presence of Satan and is no more capable of rational judgment than Hamlet."

Given the thrust of McGee's argument, many theatre-goers and critics would be inclined to inquire what attraction, if this interpretation is correct, the play held for Shakespeare's first audience. McGee's answer is straightforward:

"There is no doubt that the Elizabethans relished their revenge tragedies—the religious prohibitions added spice to the drama. If there was also a lay approval of blood revenge, as has been claimed, it would not have fundamentally altered this basic attitude. Revenge was all the more entertaining precisely because it was forbidden and because at the end it led to Hell and damnation. Far from reducing the dramatic effect for the Elizabethans their religion, which presented them with the prospect of damnation, was 'box-office'. . . . They enjoyed their forbidden fruit and we may therefore ask ourselves why we are so keen to turn it, as it were, into a Newtonian apple—for them the sin of revenge had to have 'no relish of salvation in it'."

If we accept this view, then we must recognise that to the Elizabethans the play which has cast such a powerful spell over audiences for almost four centuries meant something entirely different.

An alternative response, of course, is to grant the validity of the evidence which McGee provides in his audacious study; but to reject the conception of a universality of viewpoint among Elizabethans on such a contentious matter of theology. As Graham Bradshaw argues in his response to Eleanor Prosser's work, which advances a thesis similar to McGee's:

"Protestantism had of course dispensed with Purgatory, as a Roman invention; Eleanor Prosser's *Hamlet and Revenge* [1967] collects a large body of evidence to show how Elizabethans were 'bombarded' with reminders that souls could not return since they were justified by faith alone and proceeded directly to Heaven or the other place. But it is hard to see why the sustained bombardment could ever have been thought necessary, unless people 'needed' it—because their ideas about the after-life were far more confused and jumbled with scraps of folklore and Catholicism than some tidy-minded historians care to suspect."

Although McGee's polemic may win few converts, it will nevertheless be enjoyed for its fluency of style and its abundance of fascinating material.

A VERY DIFFERENT kind of book is Marion Lomax's *Stage Images and Traditions*.<sup>4</sup> Concerned particularly with the years 1607-14, she focuses on such plays as *Macbeth*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, Ford's *The Broken Heart* and 'Tis Pity She's a Whore.

A large part of the pleasure derived from this study lies in following the variety of possibilities, often contradictory, to which stage images are amenable. Marion Lomax is well aware that there are difficulties in insisting on specific meanings arising out of an analysis of these features of the plays. But these symbols are highly suggestive when they act to reinforce thematic patterns manifested in such forms as verbal imagery.

Her account of the role of Diana in *Pericles* is presented in too schematic a fashion, but it does alert the reader to the pervasive significance of Diana as a symbol in the play. More effectively rendered is her exposition of the symbolic significance of the eagle in *Cymbeline*. She is at her best, however, in the chapter on Webster, where her discussion of the significance of visual images and symbols is fully integrated with a wider critical appreciation—as the following quotation, which contrasts the achievement of *The Duchess of Malfi* with *The White Devil*, indicates:

"In many ways the moulding of characters by other characters reaches a greater refinement in *The Duchess of Malfi* and moves beyond the bounds of entertaining burlesque, self-directed deaths, or semi-tragic confusions. In the later play, the moulding of characters is juxtaposed with the visual images and representations of effigies, and is therefore firmly involved with the overlapping of life and death, the natural and the artificial, the private and the public. . . ."

VERY OFTEN, books that explore the social and intellectual background of Shakespeare's England convey an impression that the world of the Elizabethans was so different from ours that we have to think like an Elizabethan in order to gain a proper understanding of the plays. S. C. Boorman's *Human*

<sup>4</sup> *Stage Images and Traditions: Shakespeare to Ford*. By MARION LOMAX. Cambridge University Press, £22.50.

*Conflict in Shakespeare*<sup>5</sup> is refreshingly different, for he provides a fascinating chapter on background which enables the student to acquire valuable insights into the world of Shakespeare's contemporaries—especially a sense of the body/soul dichotomy with all its implications—without attempting to persuade us that Elizabethans were fundamentally different from ourselves.

Shakespeare is also placed in a dramatic context in a chapter which considers the relevance of the miracle plays and the moralities, and examines his immediate precursors and contemporaries. The remainder of Boorman's work is devoted to a critical evaluation of all Shakespeare's plays, using as a central concept the phenomenon of human struggle: "the tensions between soul and body, immortality and mortality, free will and fate, reason and unreason." There is nothing narrowly schematic about his approach, and his critical perceptions, vigorous and incisive, will appeal to a wide range of readers. Although his comments are generally perceptive and well balanced, his discussion of *Measure for Measure*, for example, fails to chart its full complexities because he believes that Shakespeare grafts the realistic part of the play on to a conventional romantic comedy "plot contrivance". As he puts it:

"In the first half of the play Shakespeare had established the main characters as real persons assailed by their disturbing inner struggles, and the starting situation had thus become an epitome of real life, however unlikely the setting. In the second half of the drama these characters had faded into mere players in a plot, sufficiently alive of course, yet out of key with their beginnings."

If this were true, *Measure for Measure* would not be nearly as disturbing and perplexing as generations of critics and theatre-goers have found it. The current Royal Shakespeare Company production gives powerful support to the view that the play is designed with scrupulous care to construction. The final outcome is not revealed: like key characters, we are left

<sup>5</sup> *Human Conflict in Shakespeare*. By S. C. BOORMAN. Routledge, £25.00.

contemplating possible scenarios. The realism of the play is intense, and unlike tragedy or comedy rejects "closure". The world of the stage spills over directly into life outside the theatre.

IT IS WORTH emphasising the vital relationship between critical studies based on a thorough exploration of the text, and the plays on the stage. The recent RSC production of *Troilus and Cressida*, for instance, created a wider awareness of the play's modernity. In many ways *Troilus* represents the touchstone of current Shakespeare criticism: it is the supreme example of Shakespeare's exploration of the most fundamental aspects of the human condition. All values and concepts—even the concept of character itself—are subjected to relentless interrogation.

In an essay which has been concerned with textual criticism, visual imagery, symbolism, and theatre criticism, it may be appropriate to conclude with a comment which reveals the intermingling of these currents and also centres on Shakespeare as our contemporary. Through Shakespeare's tragedies, men's failures possess a moving grandeur. In *Troilus and Cressida* we are conscious of the unforgivable folly and incompetence of mankind: there is no consolation of failed greatness, and Shakespeare intended none. For all its brilliant comedy, the play ends on a bleak note. As one theatre critic (Michael Billington, in *The Guardian*, 27 June 1985) commented on the concluding moments of the 1985 RSC production:

"If any one character sums up the mood of this production it is the Pandarus of Clive Merrison. . . who finally sits picking out a wistful tune on the piano as the lights of battle blaze and as structured society disintegrates. . . a chilling moment: an unforgettable image of a collapsing civilisation."

The effect was to create an image full of resonance for the modern audience—a vision of artefacts remaining after the makers had destroyed themselves.

## After Akhmatova

I never call you in the night;  
That is a right that is not mine.  
Ringing telephones, empty rooms  
Tell me only that I must lie  
And tell myself you're only out,  
Buying cigarettes, or wine.

You'll be back tomorrow afternoon,  
Fresh as clover, false as rain  
That falls a day on desert ground  
And then is gone, lost in the sand;  
As you are lost—silent-winged,  
Lost in freedom; disappeared.

Stephen Schwartz