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Edited by Emma Smith

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Shakespeare's Histories

Edited by Emma Smith



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Preface

This *Guide to Criticism* has two purposes. First, it offers a narrative overview of pre-twentieth-century responses to Shakespeare's history plays, including generous extracts from major commentators. It then presents twentieth-century criticism, divided into thematic sections: 'Genre', 'Language', 'Gender and Sexuality', 'History and Politics' and 'Performance'. Each of these sections includes a short overview of criticism in the area, and then reprints in full two significant recent studies. Thus the *Guide* stands as a substantial critical history and collection of recent criticism, reprinted in a single volume for ease of reference. Secondly, through the overview introductions to each section, and through the extensive bibliographies, the *Guide* also offers those readers who have access to further critical reading some suggestions about how to navigate the great sea of secondary literature on Shakespeare, by indicating key debates or interventions in the critical history. Some of the editorial material is not specific to the histories, and therefore overlaps with the companion volumes, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* and *Shakespeare's Comedies*.

The *Guide* is not, nor could it be, definitive or exhaustive, nor is it intended to canonize those authors and arguments included; rather, it is intended to be indicative of the range and vitality of Shakespearian criticism over four hundred years, from the earliest sixteenth-century responses to the new playwright up to the end of the twentieth century.

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1

The Development of Criticism of Shakespeare's Histories

1590–1660: Early Assessments

Contemporary mentions of Shakespeare are thin on the ground. It is striking – and salutary – for an historical account of early Shakespearian criticism to have its starting-point in Robert Greene's disparaging remark about the young playwright as 'an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his *tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide* supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you' (1592, in Schoenbaum, 1975: 115) – the reference is to the Duke of York's description of Queen Margaret in *3 Henry VI* as 'O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide' (I. iv. 138). Perhaps Greene's animosity was prompted by emerging jealousy of the newcomer's literary powers since, by the time Shakespeare's narrative poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) were published, their author was routinely included in lists of eminent Elizabethan authors. Thomas Nashe refers to the affective power of *1 Henry VI* in his *Pierce Penniless his Supplication to the Divell* (1592):

How would it have joyed brave Talbot (the terror of the French) to think that after he had lain two hundred years in his tomb, he should triumph again in the stage, and have his bones new embalmed with the tears of ten thousand spectators at least at several times, who, in the tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding. (Schoenbaum, 1975: 120)

The *Shakspeare Allusion Book* lists a number of other scattered references and echoes, particularly relating to Falstaff. Francis Meres's commonplace book *Palladis Tamia* (1598) praises Shakespeare's generic versatility:

As *Plautus* and *Seneca* are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent

2 *The Development of Criticism*

in both kinds for the stage; for comedy witness his *Gentlemen of Verona*, his *Errors*, his *Loves Labours Lost*, his *Loves Labours Won*, his *Midsummer Night's Dream* and his *Merchant of Venice*: for tragedy his *Richard the 2.* *Richard the 3.* *Henry the 4.* *King John*, *Titus Andronicus* and his *Romeo and Juliet*. (Meres, 1598: 282)

Here, as in early printed texts of the plays, some of the titles later designated 'histories' are noted as 'tragedies'. Ben Jonson seems to be aiming at Shakespeare's history plays, among others, when he sneers at playwrights who 'with three rusty swords/And help of some few foot-and-half-foot words/Fight over York and Lancaster's long jars' in the Prologue to *Every Man in his Humour* (performed in 1598, with Shakespeare in the cast).

The first substantial act of memorializing and of shaping Shakespeare's critical reputation was the publication in 1623 of a substantial folio volume collecting together thirty-six plays as *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (often known as the First Folio, or abbreviated to F). The title of the work reveals one of its most significant critical legacies: in dividing the plays into three genres in its catalogue, the First Folio established the critical categories still in use today: 'comedies', 'histories' and 'tragedies'. The catalogue also, importantly, confined the genre of history to plays dealing with English, rather than classical, history. Thus the plays listed as histories in 1623 are, in their order, *The Life and Death of King John*, *The Life & death of Richard the second*, *The First part of King Henry the fourth*, *The Second part of K. Henry the fourth*, *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, *The First part of King Henry the Sixth*, *The Second part of King Hen. the Sixth*, *The Third part of King Henry the Sixth*, *The Life & Death of Richard the Third*, and *The Life of King Henry the Eighth*. The organizing principle here seems to be historical chronology rather than date of composition or performance.

John Heminges and Henry Condell, Shakespeare's fellow-actors and the men responsible for the publishing of his collected plays, addressed their prefatory epistle 'To the Great Variety of Readers':

It had been a thing, we confess, worthy to have been wished, that the Author himself had lived to have set forth, and overseen his own writings; But since it hath been ordained otherwise, and he by death departed from that right, we pray you do not envy his Friends, the office of their care, and pain, to have collected and published them; and so to have published them, as where (before) you were abused with diverse stolen, and surreptitious copies, maimed, and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors, that exposed them: even those, are now offered to your view cured, and perfect of their limbs; and all the rest, absolute in their numbers, as he conceived them. Who, as he was a happy imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expresser of it.

His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he uttered with that easiness, that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers. But it is not our province, who only gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that read him. And there we hope, to your diverse capacities, you will find enough, both to draw, and hold you: for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost. Read him, therefore; and again, and again: And if then you do not like him, surely you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him. And so we leave you to other of his Friends, whom if you need, can be your guides: if you need them not, you can lead yourselves, and others. And such Readers we wish him. (Wells and Taylor, 1986: xlv)

The playwright Ben Jonson contributed an elegy:

Thou art a monument, without a tomb,
And art alive still, while thy book doth live,
And we have wits to read, and praise to give.
That I not mix thee so, my brain excuses;
I mean with great, but disproportioned Muses:
For, if I thought my judgement were of years,
I should commit thee surely with thy peers,
And tell, how far thou didst our Lyly out-shine,
Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowe's mighty line.
And though thou hadst small Latin, and less Greek,
From thence to honour thee, I would not seek
For names; but call forth thundering Aeschylus,
Euripides, and Sophocles to us,
Paccuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead,
To life again, to hear thy buskin tread,
And shake a stage: Or, when thy socks were on,
Leave thee alone, for the comparison
Of all, that insolent Greece, or haughty Rome
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show,
To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not of an age, but for all time!
And all the Muses still were in their prime,
When like Apollo he came forth to warm
Our ears, or like a Mercury to charm!
Nature herself was proud of his designs,
And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines!

(Wells and Taylor, 1986: xlv)

In his *Timber, or Discoveries*, first published in 1640, Jonson again addressed Shakespeare's reputation, referring back to Heminges and Condell's 'To the Great Variety of Readers':

I remember the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing, whatsoever to be penned, he never blotted out line. My answer hath been, 'Would he had blotted a thousand'; which they thought a malevolent speech. I had not told posterity this but for their ignorance, who choose that circumstance to commend their friend by wherein he most faulted; and to justify mine own candour: for I loved the man, and do honour his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any. He was, indeed, honest, and of an open and free nature; had an excellent fantasy, brave notions, and gentle expressions; wherein he flowed with that facility that sometime it was necessary he should be stopped. '*Sufflaminandus erat*' ['Sometimes he needed the brake'], as Augustus said of Haterius. His wit was in his own power, would the rule of it had been so too. Many times he fell into those things, could not escape laughter: as when he said in the person of Caesar, one speaking to him, 'Caesar, thou dost me wrong'; he replied 'Caesar did never wrong, but with just cause'; and such like: which were ridiculous. But he redeemed his vices with his virtues. There was ever more in him to be praised than to be pardoned. (Donaldson, 1985: 539–40)

1660–1720: Texts in Print and on Stage

It is to post-Restoration culture that we need to look to see the establishment of many now-familiar preoccupations and approaches to Shakespeare. As Michael Dobson notes, in his study of the 'extensive cultural work that went into the installation of Shakespeare as England's National Poet' between 1660 and 1769:

so many of the conceptions of Shakespeare we inherit date not from the Renaissance but from the Enlightenment. It was this period, after all, which initiated many of the practices which modern spectators and readers of Shakespeare would generally regard as normal or even natural: the performance of his female roles by women instead of men (instigated at a revival of *Othello* in 1660); the reproduction of his works in scholarly editions, with critical apparatus (pioneered by Rowe's edition of 1709 and the volume of commentary appended to it by Charles Gildon the following year); the publication of critical monographs devoted entirely to the analysis of his works (an industry founded by John Dennis's *An Essay upon the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare*, 1712); the promulgation of the plays in secondary education (the earliest known instance of which is the production of *Julius Caesar* mounted in 1728 'by the young Noblemen of the Westminster School'), and in higher education (first carried out in the lectures on Shakespeare given by William Hawkins at Oxford in the early 1750s); the erection of monuments to Shakespeare in nationally symbolic public places (initiated by Peter Sheemaker's statue in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, unveiled in 1741); and the promotion of Stratford-upon-Avon as a site of secular pilgrimage (ratified at Garrick's jubilee in 1769). (Dobson, 1992: 3)

Ben Jonson's half-praise, half-sneer in his elegy about Shakespeare's classical knowledge – 'small Latin, and less Greek' – was an early suggestion of one of the obstacles to Shakespeare appreciation in post-Restoration culture. The Restoration aesthetics of neoclassicism favoured poetry as imitation of classical, especially Roman, authors, and the idea of the writer as educated craftsman following ancient generic rules. This led, inevitably, to a stress on Shakespeare's attempts at the classically sanctioned genres of tragedy and comedy, rather than the vernacular sixteenth-century genre of chronicle history play. Thus Thomas Fuller identifies Shakespeare among *The Worthies of England* in 1662, but is preoccupied with his subject's education, or lack of it:

Plautus, who was an exact Comaedian, yet never any Scholar, as our Shakespeare (if alive) would confess himself. Add to all these, that though his Genius generally was *jocular*, and inclining him to *festivity*, yet he could, (when so disposed), be *solemn* and *serious*, as appears by his Tragedies, so that *Heracitus* himself (I mean if secret and unseen) might afford to smile at his Comedies, they were so *merry*, and *Democritus* scarce forbear to sigh at his Tragedies they were so *mournful*. He was an eminent instance of the truth of that Rule, *Poeta non fit, sed nascitur*, one is not *made* but *born* a Poet. Indeed his Learning was very little, so that as *Cornish diamonds* are not polished by any Lapidary, but are pointed and smoothed even as they are taken out of the Earth, so *nature* it self was all the *art* that was used upon him. (Fuller, 1662: 126)

The introduction of nature as a term of cultural valorization to balance against art is key to the recuperation of Shakespeare in this period. When, for example, Margaret Cavendish defends Shakespeare in one of her *Sociable Letters* of 1664, she argues that Shakespeare transforms his historical materials through the vitality of his characters:

So well he hath expressed in his plays all sorts of persons, as one would think he had been transformed into every one of those persons he hath described; and as sometimes one would think he was really himself the clown or jester he feigns, so one would think, he was also the King and Privy Counsellor... who would not think he had been such a man as his Sir *John Falstaff*? and who would not think he had been *Harry the Fifth*?... Shakespeare's wit and eloquence was general, for, and upon all subjects, he rather wanted subjects for his wit and eloquence to work on, for which he was forced to take some of his plots out of history, where he only took the bare designs, the wit and language being all his own. (Thompson and Roberts, 1997: 12–13)

Early in this process of recuperating Shakespeare is John Dryden's important statement of neoclassical aesthetics, his essay *Of Dramatic Poesie* (1668). Dryden's essay takes the form of a discussion between four

interlocutors: Eugenius, Crites, Lisedeus and Neander, generally believed to represent Dryden himself. While others of the conversationalists praise Ben Jonson as ‘the greatest man of the last age’ because of his adherence to classical rules, particularly the unities of time, place and action (Dryden, 1969: 14), Neander favours Shakespeare for his untutored but instinctive, intuitive expression. Shakespeare is to be praised for his natural learning, despite his flaws:

he was the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the Images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily: when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learn'd; he needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature; he look'd inwards, and found her there. (Dryden, 1969: 47)

In his history plays, Shakespeare is criticized for disregarding the unities of time:

they are rather so many chronicles of kings, or the business many times of thirty or forty years, cramp't into a representation of two hours and a half, which is not to imitate or paint nature, but rather to draw her in miniature, to take her in little; to look upon her through the wrong end of a perspective, and receive her images not only much less, but infinitely more imperfect than the life. (Dryden, 1969: 29)

In the comparison with Ben Jonson, which was to be the touchstone for the nascent literary criticism of Shakespeare in the Restoration period, however, Neander’s emotional loyalties were clear. Comparing Falstaff – ‘the best of comical characters’ (1969: 51) – to Morose from Jonson’s *Epicœne, or The Silent Woman*, Neander sees Shakespeare’s character as a ‘miscellany of humours or images, drawn from so many several men... the very sight of such an unwieldy old debauch’d fellow is a Comedy alone’ (1969: 51–2): ‘If I would compare [Jonson] with *Shakespeare*, I must acknowledge him the more correct Poet, but *Shakespeare* the greater wit. *Shakespeare* was the *Homer*, or Father of our Dramatick Poets; *Johnson* was the *Virgil*, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love *Shakespeare*’ (1969: 50).

In his preface to the first scholarly edition of Shakespeare’s works (1709–10), the poet laureate and tragedian Nicholas Rowe advocates a more historically informed appreciation of Shakespeare’s apparent divergence from classical precepts:

If one undertook to examine the greatest part of these [Shakespeare’s tragedies] by those rules which are established by Aristotle, and taken from the model of

the Grecian stage, it would be no very hard task to find a great many faults: but as Shakespear lived under a kind of mere light of nature, and had never been made acquainted with the regularity of those written precepts, so it would be hard to judge him by a law he knew nothing of. We are to consider him as a man that lived in a state of almost universal license and ignorance: there was no established judge, but every one took the liberty to write according to the dictates of his own fancy. (Rowe, 1709–10: xxvi)

Rowe argues that writing outside the constraints of literary tradition allows Shakespeare's imagination free rein:

I believe we are better pleased with those thoughts, altogether new and uncommon, which his own imagination supplied him so abundantly with, than if he had given us the most beautiful passages out of the Greek and Latin poets, and that in the most agreeable manner that it was possible for a master of the English language to deliver them. (1709–10: iv)

He also recognizes the generic hybridity of many, even the majority, of Shakespeare's plays, arguing that the history plays might be re-categorized as tragedies: 'His plays are properly to be distinguished only into comedies and tragedies. Those which are called histories, and even some of his comedies, are really tragedies, with a run or mixture of comedy amongst them' (1709–10: xvii). Chief among this 'run' of comedy in the history plays was the character of Falstaff, 'allowed by every body to be a Master-piece':

the character is always well-sustained, though drawn out into the length of three plays; and even the account of his death, given by his old landlady Mrs Quickly, in the first Act of *Henry V*, though it be extremely natural, is yet as diverting as any part of his life. If there be any fault in the draught he has made of this lewd old fellow, it is, that though he has made him a thief, lying, cowardly, vainglorious, and in short every way vicious, yet he has given him so much Wit as to make him almost too agreeable; and I don't know whether some people have not, in remembrance of the diversion he had formerly afforded them, been sorry to see his friend Hal use him so scurvily, when he comes to the crown in the end of the *Second Part of Henry the Fourth*. (1709–10: xvii–xviii)

Rowe praises Shakespeare for his historical accuracy:

For those plays which he has taken from the English or Roman history, let any man compare them, and he will find the character as exact in the poet as the historian. He seems indeed so far from proposing to himself any one action for a subject, that the title very often tells you, 'tis *The Life of King John, King Richard, &c.* What can be more agreeable to the idea our historians give of Henry the Sixth, than the picture Shakespear has drawn of him! His Manners are every where exactly the same with the story; one finds him still described with simplicity, passive sanctity,

want of courage, weakness of mind, and easy submission to the governance of an imperious wife, or prevailing faction: though at the same time the poet does justice to his good qualities, and moves the pity of his audience for him, by showing him pious, disinterested, a condemner of the things of this world, and wholly resigned to the severest dispensations of God's providence. (1709–10: xxvii–xxix)

A final, seventh volume appended to Rowe's edition in 1710 added a more extensive critique of the dramatic qualities of the plays in 'An Essay on the Art, Rise and Progress of the Stage in Greece, Rome and England' by Charles Gildon. Gildon's assessment of Shakespeare's art is according to classical precedent, and thus he condemns the plays' contravention of the unities. By definition, Gildon argues, life does not follow these generic rules, and therefore plays based on historical events are likely to fall short of classical standards:

I would therefore recommend to the poet the entire invention of his own fable, there being very few actions in history, that are capable of being made general and allegoric, which is the beauty and essential of both an epic, and dramatic action. Not but the poet may take incidents from history and matter of fact, but then they must have that probability and verisimilitude, that art requires. (1709–10: xliii)

Since Gildon followed Rowe in asserting that the history plays follow their sources closely, they were not likely to achieve this dramatic unity:

since these Plays are Histories, there can be no Manner of Fable or Design in them. I shall not therefore give the Plot but refer the Reader to those Historians where he may find the Stories at large, and by them judge how near Shakespear has kept to the Character, History has given us of them. (1709–10: 338)

Shakespeare, he argues, already knew and pre-empted this criticism, apologizing for his failings in the choruses to *Henry V*:

The Prologue to this play is as remarkable as any thing in Shakespear, and is a proof, that he was extremely sensible of the absurdity, which then possessed the stage in bringing in whole kingdoms, and lives, and various actions in one piece; for he apologizes for it, and desires the audience to persuade their imaginations to help him out and promises a Chorus to help their imagination. (1709–10: 346–7)

In the end, Gildon's view of Shakespeare is mixed:

Shakespear is indeed stored with a great many beauties, but they are in a heap of rubbish; and as in the ruins of a magnificent pile we are pleased with the capitals of pillars, the Basso-relievos and the like as we meet with them, yet how infinitely more beautiful, and charming must it be to behold them in their

proper places in the standing building, where every thing answers the other, and one harmony of all the parts heightens the excellence even of those parts. (1709–10: 425)

Gildon expanded this view in his book *The Complete Art of Poetry* (1718), in which the final chapter offers ‘Shakespeariana: or Select Moral Reflections, Topicks, Similies and Descriptions from Shakespear’ – the first book of Shakespearian quotations.

It is easy to see how the idea of a Shakespeare good in parts also reflects contemporary stage practice. What Gildon is attempting critically – the sifting of worthy from unworthy elements of the plays – scores of stage-plays attempted dramatically, in adapting, rewriting and recombining Shakespeare’s works to suit the tastes of new audiences. These adaptations are themselves works of criticism; often, in prefatory material and epilogues, explicitly so. Many have a definite contemporary political agenda, and many implicitly endorse prevailing neoclassical ideas about generic decorum by disciplining the mixed generic structure of many of Shakespeare’s history plays and identifying them more closely as comedies or tragedies.

In 1680 Nahum Tate’s version of *Richard II* seemed to suggest parallels between the play’s depiction of deposition and the Exclusion Crisis, although Tate disingenuously denied any implied commentary: ‘to form any resemblance between the times here written of, and the present, had been unpardonable presumption in me. If the prohibitors [censors] conceive any such notion I am not accountable for that’ (Vickers, 1974: I, 321–2). Tate alters the characterization of Richard from Shakespeare’s, painted ‘in the worst colours of history, dissolute, unadvisable, devoted to ease and luxury’ (1974: I, 322); instead, he endows his king ‘with the language of an active, prudent prince, preferring the good of his subjects to his own private pleasure’ (I, 323).

Also with an opportunistic eye to political parallels was John Crowne’s *Henry the Sixth, the First Part with the Murder of Humphrey Duke of Gloucester* (1681), presented in its dedicatory epistle as ‘no indifferent satire upon the most pompous and potent folly that ever reigned in the minds of men, called popery’ (Crowne, 1681: [A2]). Crowne also adapted parts 1 and 2 of *Henry VI* as *The Misery of Civil War* (1680), with a prologue describing it as a ‘rod / To whip us for a fault, we too much love / And have for ages liv’d, call’d civil strife’ (Crowne, 1680: A2). In 1700 Thomas Betterton adapted Shakespeare as *King Henry IV, with the Humours of Sir John Falstaff*, and in the same year, Colley Cibber’s influential version of *Richard III*, which was theatrically the most popular of all Shakespearian adaptations in this period, had its first performances. Cibber drew on *3 Henry VI* as well as others of the history plays to create a theatrical vehicle for the actor playing Richard, whose part was amplified with several new soliloquies. Many of the

enduring qualities of this adaptation have been preserved in Laurence Olivier's 1955 film, which uses a number of Cibber's innovations. In 1720 Charles Molloy's version of *Henry V* was performed as the comedy *The Half-pay Officers*, and Theophilus Cibber presented *King Henry VI: A Tragedy* as a warning against civil strife. Aaron Hill adapted *Henry V* in 1723: his *King Henry the Fifth* offers a 'breeches role' for Harriet, the king's sweetheart who follows him to France dressed as a boy. In the same year, Ambrose Philips's *Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester: A Tragedy* (an adaptation of *2 Henry VI*) presented itself as the story of Humfrey, 'a free-born hero' for whom 'destruction is the patriot's doom, / When Kings are only ministers of Rome' (Philips, 1723: A4). Francis Gentleman's adaptation of *Richard II* was performed in 1755.

1720–1765: Editions and Editors

Contemporaneous with the process of adaptation and rewriting for the stage was the attempt to establish a 'correct' text for the study. Alexander Pope's edition of 1723 described itself on its title page as 'Collated and Corrected by the former Editions'. Pope's 'Preface of the Editor' evades the task of the critic in favour of that of the new, humanist textual scholar, the editor. Rather than entering 'into a Criticism upon this Author', Pope sets out to 'give an account of the fate of his Works, and the disadvantages under which they have been transmitted to us. We shall hereby extenuate many faults which are his, and clear him from the imputation of many which are not' (Pope, 1723: I, i–ii). Pope acquits Shakespeare of the charges that neoclassical critics had laid at his door: 'To judge therefore of Shakespear by Aristotle's rules, is like trying a man by the Laws of one Country, who acted under those of another' (1723: I, vi). Rather, Pope repeats the critical orthodoxy that Shakespeare 'is not so much an Imitator, as an Instrument, of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him' (I, ii), and makes a particular feature of Shakespeare's characterization:

His Characters are so much Nature her self, that 'tis a sort of injury to call them by so distant a name as Copies of her. . . Every single character in Shakespear is as much an Individual, as those in Life itself; it is as impossible to find any two alike; and such as from their relation or affinity in any respect appear most to be Twins, will upon comparison be found remarkably distinct. To this life and variety of Character, we must add the wonderful Preservation of it; which is such throughout his plays, that had all the Speeches been printed without the very names of the Persons, I believe one might have apply'd them with certainty to every speaker. (1723: I, ii–iii)

Pope praises Shakespeare's 'Power over our Passions' (I, iii), and also his intellectual control of 'the coolness of Reflection and Reasoning' (I, iv).

Many of Shakespeare's perceived faults are in fact, Pope proposes, errors of the printing and publication process. He surmises that Shakespeare did not authorize or check those of the plays that were published in quarto editions during his lifetime, and that therefore:

how many low and vicious parts and passages might no longer reflect upon this great Genius, but appear unworthily charged upon him? And even in those which are really his, how many faults may have been unjustly laid to his account from arbitrary Additions, Expunctions, Transpositions of scenes and lines, confusion of Characters and Persons, wrong application of Speeches, corruptions of innumerable Passages by the Ignorance, and wrong Corrections of 'em again by the Impertinence, of his first Editors? (I, xxi)

In 1726, a volume appeared with the descriptive title *Shakespeare Restored: or, a Specimen of Many Errors, as well Committed, and Unamended, by Mr Pope in his Late Edition of this Poet*. Its author, Lewis Theobald, proposed numerous new readings and emendations, many of which were plagiarized by Pope for his second edition which appeared in 1728. Pope pilloried Theobald in the first edition of his mock-epic poem the *Dunciad* published a few months later, mocking his pedantry in footnotes wondering whether 'Dunciad' should be spelt 'Dunceiad' and pitying 'hapless Shakespear, yet of Tibbald sore, / Wish'd he had blotted for himself before'. Theobald's riposte was his own Shakespeare edition of 1733, *The Works of Shakespeare in Seven Volumes. Collated with the Oldest Copies, and Corrected; With notes, Explanatory and Critical*.

Theobald's style is effusive:

No Age, perhaps, can produce an Author more various from himself, than Shakespeare has been universally acknowledg'd to be. The Diversity in Stile, and other Parts of Composition, so obvious in him, is as variously to be accounted for. His Education, we find, was at best but begun: and he started early into a Science from the Force of Genius, unequally assisted by acquir'd Improvements. His Fire, Spirit, and Exuberance of Imagination gave an Impetuosity to his Pen: His Ideas flow'd from him in a Stream rapid, but not turbulent; copious, but not ever overbearing its Shores. The Ease and Sweetness of his Temper might not a little contribute to his Facility in Writing: as his Employment, as a Player, gave him an Advantage and Habit of fancying himself the very Character he meant to delineate. (Theobald, 1733: I, xv)

His view of his predecessor and literary rival Pope, and of Thomas Rymer, a critic disgusted by *Othello* (see the companion volume *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, pp. 10–11), is clear; Shakespeare studies has its first real personality clash:

He has acted with regard to our Author, as an Editor, whom Lipsius mentions, did with regard to Martial; *Inventus est nescio quis Popa, qui non vitia ejus, sed ipsum, excidit.* He has attack'd him like an unhandy Slaughterman; and not lopp'd off the Errors, but the Poet.

Praise sometimes an Injury. When this is found to be the Fact, how absurd must appear the Praises of such an Editor? It seems a moot Point, whether Mr Pope has done most Injury to Shakespeare as his Editor and Encomiast; or Mr Rymer done him Service as his Rival and Censurer. Were it every where the true Text, which That Editor in his late pompous Edition gave us, the Poet deserv'd not the large Encomiums bestow'd by him: nor, in that Case, is Rymer's Censure of the Barbarity of his Thoughts, and the Impropriety of his Expressions, groundless. They have Both shewn themselves in an equal Impuissance of suspecting or amending the corrupted Passages: and tho' it be neither Prudence to censure, or commend, what one does not understand; yet if a Man must do one when he plays the Critick, the latter is the more ridiculous Office. And by That Shakespeare suffers most. (1733: I, xxxv–xxxvi)

Theobald's is not, however, the last word in this particular bibliographic and personal spat. In 1747 Pope, together with his collaborator William Warburton, brought out an edition to trump Theobald: *The Works of Shakespear in Eight Volumes. The Genuine Text (collated with all the former Editions, and then corrected and emended) is here settled: Being restored from the Blunders of the first Editors, and the Interpolations of the two Last: with A Comment and Notes, Critical and Explanatory.*

Theobald's edition establishes and promulgates his own theory of the editor's task. This covers three activities: 'the Emendation of corrupt Passages; the Explanation of obscure and difficult ones; and an Inquiry into the Beauties and Defects of Composition' (1733: I, xl). He elaborates on his editorial principles:

Where-ever the Author's Sense is clear and discoverable, (tho', perchance, low and trivial;) I have not by any Innovation tamper'd with his Text; out of an Ostentation of endeavouring to make him speak better than the old Copies have done.

Where, thro' all the former Editions, a Passage has labour'd under flat Nonsense and invincible Darkness, if, by the Addition or Alteration of a Letter or two, I have restored to Him both Sense and Sentiment, such Corrections, I am persuaded, will need no Indulgence.

And whenever I have taken a greater Latitude and Liberty in amending, I have constantly endeavoured to support my Corrections and Conjectures by parallel Passages and Authorities from himself, the surest Means of expounding any Author whatsoever... Some Remarks are spent in explaining Passages, where the Wit or Satire depends on an obscure Point of History: Others, where Allusions are to Divinity, Philosophy, or other Branches of Science. Some are added to shew, where there is a Suspicion of our Author having

borrow'd from the Antients: Others, to shew where he is rallying his Contemporaries; or where He himself is rallied by them. And some are necessarily thrown in, to explain an obscure and obsolete Term, Phrase, or Idea. (1733: I, xliii–xliv)

Theobald echoed Rowe's sense of Shakespeare's fidelity to historical sources: 'he was a close and accurate Copier wherever his fable was founded on History' (I, xlii). Further editions, including those by Thomas Hanmer (1743) and Edward Capell (1767), appeared throughout the eighteenth century as each editor claimed to be improving on the text of his predecessors.

Shakespeare's most significant and influential eighteenth-century mediator was editor and critic Samuel Johnson, whose annotated edition appeared in 1765. Johnson sets out 'to inquire, by what peculiarities of excellence *Shakespeare* has gained and kept the favour of his countrymen' (Johnson, 1765: I, viii). The answer, for Johnson is that:

Shakespeare is above all writers . . . the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirrour of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. (1765: I, viii–ix)

For Johnson, Shakespeare is a philosopher and teacher, filled with 'practical axioms and domestick wisdom', but he argues strongly against the recent tendency to find Shakespeare's greatness in particular passages: 'he that tries to recommend him by select quotations, will succeed like the pedant in *Hierocles*, who, when he offered his house to sale, carried a brick in his pocket as a specimen' (I, ix). Verisimilitude, the quality of creating recognizable individuals, dialogue and scenarios, is key to Johnson's appraisal of Shakespeare's work. Thus '*Shakespeare* has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion', he 'approximates the remote, and familiarizes the wonderful', and his reader can benefit from 'reading human sentiments in human language' (I, xi–xii). This is evident in Shakespeare's history plays, which are to be judged as depictions of humanity rather than of politics or hierarchy: '*Shakespeare* always makes nature predominate over accident; and if he preserves the essential character, is not very careful of distinctions superinduced and adventitious. His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men' (I, xii). Johnson also dismisses classical generic precedent as inapplicable to the history plays, thereby disallowing neoclassical objections:

His histories, being neither tragedies nor comedies, are not subject to any of their laws; nothing more is necessary to all the praise which they expect, than that the changes of action be so prepared as to be understood, that the incidents be various and affecting, and the characters consistent, natural and distinct. No other unity is intended, and therefore none is to be sought. (I, xxiv)

He uses *Henry V* as an example in his argument about how 'imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind':

When the imagination is recreated by a painted landscape, the trees are not supposed capable to give us shade, or the fountains coolness; but we consider, how we should be pleased with such fountains playing beside us, and such woods waving over us. We are agitated in reading the history of *Henry the Fifth*, yet no man takes his book for the field of *Agencourt*. (I, xxix)

Johnson criticizes Shakespeare for loose and sometimes careless plotting, and for a tendency to tail off in the latter part of his plays, so that 'his catastrophe is improbably produced or imperfectly represented' (I, xx), and elsewhere Shakespeare is rebuked for the violation of chronology and his use of anachronisms, and for occasionally strained or wearisome rhetoric. Johnson reserves his most lengthy, and famous, censure for Shakespeare's wordplay:

A quibble is to *Shakespeare*, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible. Whatever be the dignity or profundity of his disquisition, whether he be enlarging knowledge or exalting affection, whether he be amusing attention with incidents, or enchaining it in suspense, let but a quibble spring up before him, and he leaves his work unfinished. A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it. (I, xxiii–xxiv)

Like previous commentators, Johnson allows for a mixture of good and bad qualities in Shakespeare's work: 'he has scenes of undoubted and perpetual excellence, but perhaps not one play which, if it were now exhibited as the work of a contemporary writer, would be heard to its conclusion.' Rather, Johnson argues, 'it must be at last confessed, that as we owe everything to him, he owes something to us; that, if much of his praise is paid by perception and judgement, much is likewise given by custom and veneration' (I, xlvi).

1765–1800: Texts on Page and Stage

Johnson's interest in the texts of the plays did not extend to an interest in their theatrical performance. Sandra Clark describes the eighteenth century's preference for adapted Shakespeare on the stage as a 'paradox whereby Shakespeare's works achieved the status of "classics" in the study while for a long period on the stage the divine Bard (as he came to be called) was often represented by plays only a small proportion of which he actually wrote' (Clark, 1997: xliii). Shakespeare's position in the theatre during the eighteenth century was largely dependent on his tragedies (see Hogan, 1952: vol. II). Bell's Acting Edition of 1774, dedicated to David Garrick, 'the best illustrator of, and the best living comment on, Shakespeare' (Bell, 1969: I, 3), presents itself as 'a companion to the theatre' (I, 8) rather than a critical edition. It prints the texts with the standard performance cuts and emendations, proposing that these changes allow 'the noble monuments he has left us, of unrivalled ability, [to] be restored to due proportion and natural lustre, by sweeping off those cobwebs, and that dust of depraved opinion, which Shakespeare was unfortunately forced to throw on them' (I, 6). Bell's edition also presents itself as an alternative to the increasingly scholarly and specialized writing on Shakespeare, as a forerunner to self-consciously pedagogic or introductory volumes popular in the twentieth century:

it has been our peculiar endeavour to render what we call the essence of Shakespeare, more instructive and intelligible; especially to the ladies and to youth; glaring indecencies being removed, and intricate passages explained; and lastly, we have striven to supply plainer ideas of criticism, both in public and private, than we have hitherto met with.

A general view of each play is given, by way of introduction.

Though this is not an edition meant for the profoundly learned, nor the deeply studious, who love to find out, and chace their own critical game; yet we flatter ourselves both parties may perceive fresh ideas started for speculation and reflection. (Bell, 1969: I, 9–10)

Unlike previous editors, who had praised Shakespeare's fidelity to historical source, Bell's particular stress on theatrical representation finds dramatic success an alternative locus of tribute. Thus the introductory remarks to *Richard III* argue:

whatever doubts may arise as to the real character and figure of our Third Richard, Shakespeare was most undoubtedly right to make him a confirmed, uniform villain: nothing in the medium way would have been half so striking on the stage, and it was equally prudent to present him deformed in figure, as well as in mind; though the unities are grossly, yet they are almost imperceptibly,

broken, in this play; the events appear so admirably connected with, and consequential to, each other: nature speaks in all the characters with plain, intelligible dignity; no bombast swells upon the ear, no improbability intrudes on belief; upon the whole it must always read well, but act better. (1969: III, 3)

Of *1 Henry IV*, the edition notes that ‘against our critical relish, he has mingled mirth, and some very low of its kind, with sadness. However, Falstaff’s luxuriance, and the Prince of Wales’s pleasantry, are excellent: all the Tragic parts, particularly Hotspur’s, are very well written; it is more regular than most of Shakespear’s pieces, but does not, nor never will, please the Ladies’ (IV, 3); *Henry V*, despite some ‘low quibbling comedy’, shows Shakespeare ‘summon[ing] all his powers, to do the hero justice’ (IV, 3); *1 Henry VI* does not meet with approval, since ‘National transactions, however important they may be in their nature and consequences, are not likely to have a very popular effect, as they tend chiefly to indulge political reflection, but have very little to gratify taste. Such pieces as this are also very barren of female characters and affecting circumstances, without which the Drama is too defective’ (VII, 89).

While Shakespeare criticism looks to be a male preserve, women were also increasingly involved, although the assumption in Bell’s edition that history plays had little to offer women readers and audiences may be borne out in their limited commentary on this genre. Elizabeth Montagu’s *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear, compared with the Greek and French Dramatic Poets* (1769) was extensively reprinted and translated, and focuses largely on the tragedies in response to Voltaire’s attack. Montagu scorned as narrow-minded critics who criticized Shakespeare’s learning:

For copying nature he found it in the busy walks of human life, he drew from an original, with which the literati are seldom well acquainted. They perceive his portraits are not of the Grecian or of the Roman school: after finding them unlike to the celebrated forms preserved in learned museums they do not deign to enquire whether they resemble the living persons they were intended to represent. (Montagu, 1970: 17)

History allows Shakespeare to break down ‘the barriers that had before confined the dramatic writers to the regions of comedy, or tragedy. He perceived the fertility of the subjects that lay between the two extremes’ (1970: 66). Since ‘those dramas of Shakespeare, which he distinguishes by the name of his histories, being of an original kind and peculiar construction, cannot come within any rules which are prior to their existence’ (1970: 55), it is rather Shakespeare’s facility in drawing recognizable characters that Montagu most admires: his ‘dramatis personae are men, frail by constitution, hurt by ill habits, faulty and unequal. But they speak with human voices, are actuated by

human passions, and are engaged in the common affairs of human life' (1970: 81). History is a genre more suited to moral reflection than is tragedy: 'the various interests and characters in these historical plays, and the mixture of the comic, weaken the operations of pity and terror, but introduce various opportunities of conveying moral instruction, as occasion is given to a variety of reflections and observations, more useful in common life than those drawn from the conditions of kings and heroes, and persons greatly superior to us by nature or fortune' (1970: 62). Montagu pays particular attention to the two parts of *Henry IV*, praising their characterization, and plotting, and drawing favourable comparisons with Euripides.

Elizabeth Griffith, in her *The Morality of Shakespeare's Drama Illustrated* (1775), described Shakespeare as a 'Philosopher' whose 'anatomy of the human heart is delineated from *nature*, not from *metaphysics*; referring immediately to our intuitive sense and not wandering with the schoolmen' (Griffith, 1971: ix), and thus, perhaps, uniquely accessible and applicable to contemporary women largely denied a classical education. Like Montagu, Griffith is able to claim authority to write on Shakespeare by wresting him from the enervating grasp of the scholar and reinstating him as the poet of everyday life. At times, in her extensive commentary, Griffith speaks consciously as a female reader of Shakespeare, as when she discusses parallels between Hotspur and Prince Hal in their bravery: 'women are apt to esteem the ancient virtue of courage at a higher rate than men in general are' (1971: 226).

Character study was to be the dominant theme of Romantic criticism of Shakespeare, and it had one of its earliest exemplars in Maurice Morgann's *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (1777): 'an Essay professing to treat of the courage of *Falstaff*, but extending itself to his whole character; to the arts and genius of his Poetic-Maker, Shakespeare; and thro' him sometimes, with ambitious aim, even to the principles of human nature itself' (Morgann, 1972: 283). Morgann's defence of his subject from the charge of cowardice was written more in 'the character and tone of an advocate than an inquirer' (Smith, 1963: 203). He attempts to derive a vocabulary with which effects of character can be discussed, differentiating between 'mental impressions' and 'understanding': 'the understanding seems for the most part to take cognizance of *actions* only, and from these to infer *motives* and *character*; but the sense we have been speaking of proceeds in a contrary course; and determines of *actions* from certain *first principles of character*, which seem wholly out of the reach of the understanding' (Smith, 1963: 207). Morgann argues that 'no part whatever of his character seems to be fully settled in our minds . . . it must be a strange art in Shakespeare which can draw our liking and good will towards so offensive an object' (Smith, 1963: 209). This close analysis of a single aspect of a play was something new – and also expounded a controversial proposition. James Boswell records Samuel Johnson's retort: 'Why sir, we shall have the man

come forth again, and as he has proved Falstaff to be no coward, he may prove Iago to be a very good character' (quoted in Morgann, 1972: 12n).

Other character studies by William Richardson (1784), on *Richard III* among others, and by Thomas Whately (1785), comparing *Macbeth* and *Richard III*, set the scene for work by Coleridge and Hazlitt. There were, however, other critical strands also emerging. In 1794 Walter Whiter published *A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakspeare. Containing I. Notes on As You Like It. II. An Attempt to Explain and Illustrate various passages on a new principle of criticism, derived from Mr Locke's doctrine of The Association of Ideas*. Whiter explained John Locke's idea of 'association' as 'the combination of those ideas, which have no natural alliance or relation to each other' (Whiter, 1972: 65). Whiter argued that critics had hitherto been preoccupied by discovering:

the *direct*, though sometimes perhaps obscure allusions, which the poet has *intentionally* made to the customs of his own age, and to the various vices, follies, passions and prejudices, which are the pointed objects of his satire or his praise. But the commentators have not marked those *indirect* and *tacit* references, which are produced by the writer with *no* intentional allusion; or rather they have not unfolded those trains of thought, alike pregnant with the materials *peculiar* to his age, which often prompt the combinations of the poet in the wildest exertions of his fancy, and which conduct him, unconscious of the effect, to the various *peculiarities* of his imagery or his language. (1972: 71–2)

As an example of his method of disinterring connotations and connections between particular words through extensive and densely referenced analogues, his explication of the phrase 'purple testament of bleeding war' in *Richard II* (III. iii. 93) takes in references to editors and critics, the anonymous play *The First Part of Jeronimo*, analogue metaphors of books and binding from *The Winter's Tale* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the 'unbookish jealousy' of Othello (IV. i. 100) and scores of other linguistic correlations (1972: 95–107). Whiter's is an early, painstaking example of the close verbal analysis developed by twentieth-century critics as diverse as Caroline Spurgeon, Frank Kermode and Patricia Parker (see Chapter 3 on Language).

1800–1840: Romantic Appropriations by Schlegel, Coleridge and Hazlitt

This stress on the language of the plays was implicitly continued by Romantic readers. In his *Shakespeare und kein Ende* (translated as 'Shakespeare ad Infinitum') of 1815, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe claimed that 'Shakespeare belongs by necessity in the annals of poetry; in the annals of