Reading Shakespeare Historically

Lisa Jardine

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Introduction

It is more than ten years since I first grappled in print with the relationship between history and the plays of Shakespeare.[1] In that time I have been able to participate in an extraordinarily productive debate amongst scholars of the English renaissance on both sides of the Atlantic. This debate has been broadly concerned to develop our understanding of the ways in which a historically situated study of the works of Shakespeare plays a central part in studies of early modern text and culture. At the moment when western culture as a whole reconsiders the fragments of its heritage and searches its history for some point from which to see itself, once more, reassuringly whole, Shakespeare studies too are preoccupied with the relationship to the past. In both cases the task is not nostalgic reminiscence, but a fresh understanding of the rootedness of our present uncertainties, derived by some kind of engaging dialogue with the textual residue of history.

The process of development of my own thoughts on Shakespeare has been shaped by that vigorously developing debate, and coloured by its various and varied contexts and locations. It has also inevitably been marked by the strong way in which my personal intellectual history (within which literary studies form only a part of an academically diverse collection of interests and areas of expertise)[2] has intersected with those of others pursuing alternative lines of thought, sometimes in entirely different fields of inquiry.[3]

I have learnt more than I would ever have imagined possible from people with intellectual agendas entirely different from my own, and with interests derived from distinct cultural formations. What has characterised the debate as a whole has been a shared energy, and a passionate commitment to deepening our intellectual grasp of the present we inhabit, and of contemporary issues which challenge our understanding. The differences of opinion (occasionally the head-on confrontations on public platforms) have been as important and as formative as the agreements. The alliances formed have at times been unpredictable, the disagreements correspondingly unexpected: in discussions of gender and power, feminists have crossed swords with new historicists; on other occasions specialists in gender studies and those in history have found themselves together proposing alternatives to arguments expounded by deconstructionists and post-structuralists.[4] Over the same period, what used to be termed new historicists have clarified their intellectual practices and emerged as two distinctive schools of thought: one predominantly committed to a study of Shakespeare determined by text criticism and

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psychoanalysis, the other more inclined towards a study framed by recent work in anthropology and in economic and social history.[5] If pressed to identify my own practice and affiliations as a Shakespeare critic I would probably declare myself as inclining to the latter group of interests.

My own developing work on Shakespeare has been shaped by a number of preoccupations arising directly out of the context in which I live and work. The first has undoubtedly been the strong impression made upon me by dialogue about the theory and practice of Shakespeare studies with professional colleagues and with students on both sides of the Atlantic—in Britain and in the United States. It was North American Shakespeareans who responded immediately and enthusiastically to *Still Harping on Daughters*—North American feminist Shakespeareans, specifically, who generously included me in the vigorous discussions about gender and power which took place at the annual conferences of the Shakespeare Association of America in the mid-1980s.[6] These debates were a far cry from the dignified exchanges of views which took place annually under the auspices of the International Shakespeare Association, run by the Shakespeare Institute at Stratford-upon-Avon in England. The ISA's annual conference was an 'invitation only' affair, whose carefully circumscribed topics and interests were selected by a small group of distinguished, mostly European Shakespeareans. The delegates at the SAA's huge annual meeting, by contrast, came from schools of English in colleges and universities across the length and breadth of America (and beyond). For every one of these delegates Shakespeare was the lodestar figure on their intellectual map, and the purpose of the conference each year was apparently to decide, as a matter of urgency, where the vital centre of Shakespeare studies currently lay in relation to American literary and cultural studies as a whole. Practically any issue of the day was available to be thrashed out in a small crowded seminar room, or before a large, excitable audience on a plenary platform at the SAA, and thrashed out such issues were. It took very little time, then, for me to discover that Shakespeare studies stand in a very different relationship to the totality of cultural studies in the United States from the one we take for granted in Britain.[7]

The second shaping influence on my thinking about Shakespeare has been my academic move from Jesus College, Cambridge to Queen Mary and Westfield College (QMW), in the University of London. Teaching is the cornerstone of our intellectual formation as scholars and critics. If your students cannot follow your train of thought, then you probably haven't yet got it quite straight yourself. If your students will not accept your argument, then you need to ask yourself what you are overlooking which stands between them and agreement (since, on the whole,

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students are more generous and more likely to give you the benefit of the doubt than academic colleagues). At Cambridge it was easy never to ask the question, 'Does Shakespeare matter?' Teaching there at the very heart of British high culture, one took entirely for granted in one's teaching the centrality of his plays to a literature course. I could assume that my students would claim familiarity with the entire corpus of works (including the poems).[8] Most of my students had already formed opinions on the worth of the major plays in the Shakespeare canon, and would confidently offer views as to the relative merit of specified passages of blank verse.[9] It was, in fact, extremely difficult to coax students into confessing ignorance on any point of textual detail in a play under consideration—such was their expectation that as élite students they ought to be able to master Shakespeare.

My London students, by contrast, are quite comfortable confessing ignorance of all but a small number of Shakespeare's plays (*Hamlet, Lear, Othello*, their set text for their A-level examination), and voluble in their willingness to admit that they have difficulty construing the lines on the page. Most important of all, they require persuading that the study of Shakespeare is as important as I persist in insisting it is. What is the study of Shakespeare for? Arguing the case for Shakespeare with my students at the University of London has forced me to scrutinise my own motives and assumptions. I have been obliged to make explicit the fact that I believe that the continuing presence within British culture of the texts of Shakespeare's plays—familiar, quotable—has laid down a kind of cultural sediment which marks our everyday communal life in telling ways. That is why an appeal to Shakespeare on the part of a British politician or public spokesperson continues to resonate.

I once set as an assignment for my class at QMW the instruction that they should listen to television or radio news bulletins—it was the season of political party conferences—and try to identify tags from Shakespeare used to give authority to a politician's pronouncements. As I left the college that day, I turned on my car radio to hear the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kenneth Baker, exhorting the party faithful of the Conservative Party not to lose confidence in Conservative economic policy, in spite of the fact that mortgage interest rates had just been raised for the third straight month in a row. What was needed, he insisted, was unflinching commitment to the Party, and courage in the face of adverse pressures affecting even their own pocket-books. In conclusion he urged them not to lose heart, to stand their ground in the face of press criticism and public hostility:

> ...he which hath no stomach to this fight,
> Let him depart.[10]

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A direct, deliberate quotation from the St Crispin's Day speech in *Henry V*, in the full expectation that his audience would 'hear' a rhetorical call to arms in the face of impossible odds. Many of my students also tuned in to the speech (designed as a 'sound bite' by its author, and much repeated on bulletins throughout that day), and picked up the reference. When we assembled for the next class, all my students were prepared to admit that an author whose texts could still be used vividly and reliably to particular political effect could not be deemed a 'dead' author.

Which brings me back to the differing significance of Shakespeare as a curriculum author—a canonical author—in the United States and in Britain. Cultural appeal to Shakespeare in the United States is significantly different from that made in British public life. In an editorial on the deepening international crisis in Bosnia in the *International Herald Tribune*, which I happened to pick up in the summer of 1993, Shakespeare's *Henry V* was again invoked in a rallying cry. The editorial began:

> The West's worst moral and political disaster since the Nazis is coming to a climax. And just as many politicians and institutions paid for the failure to stop Hitler, so many of them will pay dearly for allowing the Serbian tyrant, Slobodan Milosevic, to destroy Bosnia.[11]

The piece accused Europe and the United States of a policy of appeasement in Bosnia worthy of Neville Chamberlain, and of standing by and watching crimes against humanity on a scale which, in 1945, the West had promised would never again be tolerated. It concluded:

> [Whatever happens now,] the inhumanity will remain unhealed. Looking at the scene in Bosnia, we should say what Shakespeare, in *Henry V*, had the French noble say as he looked down at the shattered field of Agincourt: 'Shame and eternal shame, nothing but shame!'

Here Shakespeare's *Henry V* invoked as a moral touchstone: Shakespeare says, 'Shame and eternal shame, nothing but shame', and so ought we all to do, before the humiliating spectacle of the Bosnia debacle. But a number of features distinguish this, North American, appeal to Shakespeare (I think, quite typically) from the kind of use made by the British Chancellor of the Exchequer. In the first place, the reader is not asked to take a tone drawn specifically from the play mentioned. *Henry V* is a triumphalist play (however Shakespeare tempers its message in his dramatisation).

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If you want to awaken in your readers a deep communal sense of the unacceptability of ethnic slaughter in petty partisan disputes, why choose to refer to a play about a nationalist victory on the grand scale? There is, in fact, something curious about quoting the French version of Agincourt in the play at all, since, in the interests of the structural coherence of the play, the dramatisation of French military action consists in fleeting moments of delay, indecision and poor judgement, punctuating a full and exhilarating depiction of the unexpected victory of a small, bedraggled band of plucky Britons over a highly organised, well-equipped French army. In the second place, the editorial writer's choice is not a 'memorable' quotation: it is not a familiar Shakespearean tag, nor even a passage from a much anthologised soliloquy. Until our attention was drawn to it, we might never have recalled this passage in Shakespeare at all (it is the leader writer who alerts us to its belonging to the canon, 'we should say what Shakespeare...').

And indeed, in a sense, I suspect, this phrase as used in the *International Herald Tribune* editorial is not a quotation from the play at all. It is a quotation from Kenneth Branagh's box-office-success film of the play.[12] It can be found significantly highlighted in Branagh's published screenplay, where a brief Shakespearean glimpse of the French commanders' dawning realisation that they have lost the day becomes a studied piece of moralising in the midst of the graphic carnage of the battlefield.[13] Branagh publicly said that his version of Shakespeare's *Henry V* was an anti-war film; here the quotation selected is part of the material deliberately highlighted cinematographically so as to focus that theme.[14]

It is worth staying with this example a little longer. Since the appearance of the Oxford Shakespeare edition of *Henry V*, edited by Gary Taylor, that edition has become, for many Shakespeare specialists, the standard reference edition. At the time that I read the *International Herald Tribune* editorial it was the edition I had to hand, the edition I turned to when I wanted to reflect upon the implications of the use of the quotation. It was interesting, therefore, to look up Taylor's text for further illumination on 'Shame and eternal shame, nothing but shame!' and to find that this line does not figure in the main body of Taylor's edited text at all.

All editions of *Henry V* are based on the 1623 first folio version of the play, as opposed to the 1600 quarto.[15] In his compelling introduction to the Oxford Shakespeare edition, Gary Taylor explains clearly why he has chosen to integrate the quarto version of the 'Shame and eternal shame' scene with the hitherto universally accepted folio version, to produce a hybrid from which the 'Shame and eternal shame' line is missing. The reasons he gives for doing so are given in his Appendix A. He argues that the Dauphin ought not to figure in this scene, on

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grounds of the structural coherence of the plot, and emends the text accordingly. Justification for drastic editorial revision here, in other words, boils down to the fact that (as Taylor sees it) this scene is inconsistent with the revised focus of the play. In other words, Taylor 'edits out' 'Shame and eternal shame' because, in his view, such sentiments no longer accord with the strongly British nationalistic focus of the folio play, and have survived only as a kind of shadow or echo of an earlier version. We may be shocked that an editorial decision should be taken on such overtly critical (and therefore by definition subjective) grounds, but that is material for a whole other discussion. What is relevant here is that for Taylor the scene and the sentiment are 'unShakespearean', in the sense that in some way (which Taylor is prepared to treat as critically definitive) they are at odds with the play as a whole. So what is happening when the *International Herald Tribune* invokes it as a canonical moral touchstone?

I did not choose this instance in order to disparage an American columnist for not knowing (or, in Taylor's terms, not being sufficiently critically sensitive in relation to) his *Henry V*. I actually think the use made of Shakespeare here is a valid one within the American cultural frame. The appeal is to a consensus view of civilised human behaviour, and Shakespeare stands for that shared recognition. The cultural advantage of using Shakespeare is, I think, that here is a cultural reference point older than the United States, which is not, however, parochially American, but in some unspecified sense 'universal'. In my British example, the purpose of the Shakespeare allusion was to trigger an immediate recognition, a sense of cultural belonging. According to Raymond Williams's view of culture and ideology, that sense of belonging does not require that you know the reference, but merely that you share with those around you the sense of its being a shaping part of your landscape of beliefs.[16] In the American case, the appeal is to an authority—to a named figure whose ethical insights, as expressed in his surviving texts, ought to be taken seriously by 'right-minded' people. And in the American case, since the persisting centrality of Shakespeare to the culture is neither agreed upon nor widely felt, the appeal to a particular passage from a particular play leans heavily on the expectation that many readers will have seen the film version starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson, in which that passage is memorably framed by the screen action (evocative in its graphic, mud-splattered misery of news footage from Sarajevo).[17]

To claim the continuing importance of Shakespeare in contemporary American culture is a more delicate affair than drawing attention to the ease with which he can continue to be conjured up as an emotional reference point. In particular, it can readily be argued that to claim Shakespeare as a cultural touchstone, a canonical

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text, in North America, is to affirm the priority of Western European culture at the expense of all the other cultures which have gone into the American 'melting pot'. Recent North American Shakespeare criticism has been typified by an interest in the many ways in which key contemporary issues (gender, power, race) can be made to reverberate by juxtaposing our twentieth-century version with Shakespeare's early modern treatment of the same themes. Not, of course, that Shakespeare ever catechises on gender, power or race, but new historicist criticism has brilliantly excavated the way in which a kind of issue-grounded *explication de texte* or close reading can elucidate our own cultural assumptions. The desire to 'speak with the dead', which Stephen Greenblatt so memorably made the starting point of his own Shakespearean negotiations is, surely, the desire to initiate a conversation about burning questions in the here-and-now with the thoughtful past, as it survives in the textual residue of a 'great author'.[18]

So much for anecdotal attention to responses to *Henry V* on either side of the Atlantic. What would constitute a more properly historicised response to this most paradigmatic of the English history plays? In a book with 'history' in its titie there must surely be some treatment of a Shakespearean history play. And indeed I do consider it a crucial part of my critical argument for 'reading Shakespeare historically' that my approach will produce a distinctive version of *Henry V*—a play with a historical theme, received first in a period historically distinct from our own, and with its reception now coloured both by the Branagh film success and by the much publicised information that Branagh's stage performance in the role reduced to tears the heir to the British throne, Prince Charles.[19]

I have spoken about the strenuously 'British' (in fact, English) strain in *Henry V*, which has lent itself to propaganda use in contemporary Britain.[20] Yet when we look at the play today, what strikes us first is the counter-currents and fissures which cut across the ringing confidence of the Harfleur or St Crispin's day speeches. We may choose to pause with this notion of flawedness, faultlines and ideological counter-currents—and that, indeed, has been a tendency in a significant amount of recent criticism of quality.[21] But we may choose instead to register 'indeterminacy' (ideological or otherwise) as a sign that we should listen attentively to the multiple resonances of the text, for thematic points of contact between early modern culture and our own. 'Indeterminacy' alerts us to the fact that when we 'speak with the dead', our own historical moment presses us to choose as the subject of our conversation topics which have only now once again come into cultural view, after a period of occlusion. It is no accident, and may turn out to be the tragedy of our own time, that readings of *Henry V* at the present historical moment stumble repeatedly

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at the complexity of representation within the play of nationalism and ethnic identity.

If we had not watched with horrified fascination on the evening news bulletins as an integrated, multi-racial, multi-faithed community in Old Yugoslavia disintegrated into territorial fragments of so-called 'pure' ethnicity and separate religious beliefs, we would not, I contend, be able to recognise as sharply as we currently do the problems lurking within *Henry V's* depiction of fervour for English nationalism. Now, however, it is the pathos of the contradiction between Henry's proud boasts of 'Englishmen' pure and true, and the fact that his own progeny will be hybrid Anglo-Gallic, which attracts our critical attention. And when we take up our conversation with the play text—interrogating the lapses into silence produced by the accidents of the historical process—the play itself responds with confirmation that this is indeed a vital theme, and one which we can use to animate the action, and to see more deeply into the plot's construction.

Like the opening scene of the play, the closing scenes of *Henry V* direct the dramatic spotlight onto the issue of royal lineage. Henry's elaborate naming of the French royal house as his close kin (brother, sister, cousin) contrasts starkly with the adversarial and oppositional language of the body of the play—a play centred on conflict and warfare. It ushers in the wooing scene, in which Henry contrives to gain the 'love' of his 'cousin' Catherine, a wooing which confirms a match which is a crucial part of Henry's demands in settlement of his triumph at Agincourt:

King Henry
Yet leave our cousin Catherine here with us.
She is our capital demand, comprised
Within the fore-rank of our articles.[22]

England's seizure of the French crown by force is to be cemented and endorsed by a marital alliance, an alliance which Henry is anxious to represent as a consensual one.

At the moment of marital alliance with which *Henry V* draws to a close, women (the perpetual onlookers thus far in the action) are finally given a voice:

Queen Isabel
So happy be the issue, brother England,
Of this good day and of this gracious meeting,
As we are now glad to behold your eyes—
Your eyes which hitherto have borne in them,
Against the French that met them in their bent,

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The fatal balls of murdering basilisks.
The venom of such looks we fairly hope
Have lost their quality, and that this day
Shall change all griefs and quarrels into love.[23]

'Love' and 'happy issue' belong to the language of courtship, and thus reintroduce the matter of inherited claim to title so prominent in the play's opening scenes. Throughout this final scene such language is consistently juxtaposed with the terminology of peace treaty and contractual rights exacted under duress. His private wooing over, Henry negotiates his bride-to-be's acquisition with her father openly as part of a territorial transaction:

King Charles
We have consented to all terms of reason.

King Henry
Is't so, my lords of England?

Warwick
The King hath granted every article:
His daughter first, and so in sequel all,
According to their firm proposed natures.

Exeter
Only he hath not yet subscribed this:
where your majesty demands that the King of France, having any occasion to write for matter of grant, shall name your highness in this form and with this addition: (*reads*) in French. *Notre tres cher fils Henri, Roi d'Angleterre, Hériter de France*, and thus in Latin, *Praeclarissimus filius noster Henricus, Rex Angliae etHaeres Franciae.*

King Charles
Nor this I have not, brother, so denied,
But your request shall make me let it pass.

King Henry
I pray you, then, in love and dear alliance,
Let that one article rank with the rest,
And thereupon give me your daughter.[24]

Consent has here acquired a curiously coercive tinge. The French King has 'consented' to all the terms of the treaty forced upon him by France's humiliating defeat at the hands of the English. Kate has become an 'article', the first in a

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sequence ‘according to their firm proposed natures’. She figures in an inventory of goods exchanged, which includes the designation of Henry, ‘heir to France’ — not *his* heirs, but he himself endowed with the legal right to the French crown.

The point here is not the by now commonplace one that, in spite of courtship rituals, early modern marriage is unproblematically regarded as a ‘traffic in women’. Rather, I draw attention here to the sleight of the dramatist’s hand. ‘Consent’ to the marriage alliance between France and England blurs the blatant aggression of the seizure of France in a war fought on tenuous legal grounds. The audience’s assent to the proposition that England has ‘won’ France legitimately is effected dramatically by the scene in which Henry woos Kate. As part of the dramatist’s strategic plan for shifting the audience’s attention from warfare to wooing, Shakespeare alters both history and his source and tacitly erases the legitimate French heir. In Shakespeare’s version of the historical narrative’s final resolution the Dauphin—the first-born son of the King of France, legitimate natural heir to the throne of France—vanishes.[25] His disappearance makes the emergence of a new heir—Harry, King of England—apparently unproblematic. In the absence of a male heir the throne of France passes through the female line (the route of all the dubious lineal connections in the play). The new husband of France’s only daughter claims the throne of France by way of a love-match marriage.

As a rule, the marriages which provide the final plot resolution in a Shakespearean play bind up the loose ends of the story, and resolve the difficulties for lineage which the passions of individuals have created.[26] On the face of it *Henry V*, too, draws to a close to a chorus of commitments to family, and to the alliances of major landholdings which marriages between great families confirm and consolidate:

King Henry
Peace to this meeting, wherefor we are met.
Unto our brother France and to our sister,
Health and fair time of day. Joy and good wishes
To our most fair and princely cousin Catherine;
And as a branch and member of this royalty,
By whom this great assembly is contrived,
We do salute you, Duke of Burgundy.
And princes French, and peers, health to you all.

King Charles
Right joyous are we to behold your face.

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Most worthy brother England, fairly met.[27]

But the situation is by no means so clear in the case of kinship between royal families. In the formation of national identity there is an inevitable tension between royal marriage (in which the two partners come from different nations, and may effect a cross-national territorial merger) and the passing on of the crown by lineal descent; and there is a straight contradiction between lineage and conquest. If the monarch is a 'true born' son of the nation, what is the status of his heirs if he marries a foreign princess? What if the monarch is a true-born daughter, who legally becomes part of the line of her husband should she marry?

None of these tensions would seem strange to a public whose cultural memory included the strain of the marriage of Mary Tudor to Philip of Spain, and anxiety over the (unsuccessful) courtship of Elizabeth by the French Duke d'Anjou.

As Shakespeare's *Henry V* draws to its dynastic conclusion, these tensions are articulated explictly by none other than Harry himself:

King Henry

If ever thou be'st mine, Kate—as I have a saving faith within me tells me thou shalt—I get thee with scrambling, and thou must therefore needs prove a good soldier-breeder. Shall not thou and I, between Saint Denis and Saint George, compound a boy, half-French half-English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard? Shall we not? What sayst thou, my fair flower-de-luce?

Catherine

I do not know dat.

King Henry

No, 'tis hereafter to know, but now to promise. Do but now promise, Kate, you will endeavour for your French part of such a boy, and for my English moiety take the word of a king and a bachelor.[28]

As Henry woos Kate to declare herself his wife of her own volition (attempting to extract a private promise of commitment from her),[29] he articulates the obvious fact that their offspring will be of mixed nationality—'half-French half-English' as he puts it.[30] Here woman is that site where the male fiction of the pure and proper blood-line is both founded *and* undermined. Her fecundity guarantees the posterity of the family, but her alienness threatens to taint its ethnic purity.[31]

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In *Henry V* Shakespeare fudges the issue of pure lineal entitlement to the crown, and the taint of foreign blood.[32] To tease out the ingenious slippages in the plot a little further, let us return to the wooing scene. Why is this scene so fraught with sexual anxiety—specifically an anxiety about masculinity?[33] My short answer is, because the stage representation of Catherine as a sexual subject problematises the crucial plot fiction of the smooth transition from nationalist conquest to the triumph of pure lineage. By interrupting the smooth transition from military victory to seizure of the throne with a courtship, Shakespeare introduces a *doubt* about the general possibility of effecting such lineal transactions without the weakening intercession of women (inevitably necessary to continue and consolidate the line).

Long before it is certain that Henry will be victorious, Catherine has apparently transferred her allegiance to the English cause. What else is her enthusiastic attempt to learn the rudiments of English but a capitulation in advance of the fact?[34] The sexual innuendo of the 'English lesson' transposes the impending 'conquest' of France into a 'conquest' of France's women—into the familiar proposition that women are 'won' in battle (as Tamburlaine wins Zenocrate's affections as well as her body in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*).

The editors find the English lesson at 3.4 charming, but we might want to consider its timing, and, in particular, the tone of the scene which immediately follows it. Realising the gravity of the military situation, the French Dauphin rails against the loose women of France, whose sexual exploits with Englishmen have produced the doughty descendants of the Normans who now threaten the French with defeat:

> **Dauphin**
> By faith and honour,
> Our madams mock at us and plainly say
> Our mettle is bred out, and they will give
> Their bodies to the lust of English youth,
> To new-store France with bastard warriors.[35]

There is a heavy genealogical irony in his outburst, which is given added emphasis by the confusion of the syntax. The Dauphin maintains that it is the fault of French women that the English troops are cross-bred to combine the dour tenacity of the English with the 'quick blood' of the French. The true-blooded Frenchmen are fit only for 'the English dancing-schools'—their purity of line is also their weakness. But are the 'bastard warriors' already fighting on the English side, or are they future products of the 'rape' which will be France's imminent defeat?

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The Dauphin's outburst picks up all too clearly from the bawdy language which Alice and Catherine inadvertently introduce into their language lesson:

Catherine
Comment appelez-vous les pieds et la robe?

Alice
De foot, madame, et *de cown.*

Catherine
De foot et *de cowr*? O Seigneur Dieu! Ils sont les mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user. Je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! *De foot* et *de cown!* Néanmoins, je réciterai une autre fois ma leçon ensemble. *D'hand, de fingre, de nails, d'arma, d'elbow, de nick, de sin, defoot, de cown.*[36]

[Catherine
How do you say 'the feet' and 'the gown'?

Alice
'foutre' (fuck) and 'con' (cunt), madam.

Catherine
'foutre' and 'con'? Heavens! These are words which sound so bad, corrupt, gross and immodest that it is unseemly for a gentlewoman to use them. I would not dare speak such words before the nobles of France for the whole world. Phew! 'Foutre' and 'con'! Still, I'll recite my whole lesson one more time...]

Is Catherine one of the 'madams who mock us' here?[37] Already punning on sexual intercourse with the English aggressor, she seems too readily to invite the accusation, made immediately afterwards by the Dauphin, that all inter-national royal intercourse is shameful lust, the products of such sexual activity bound to undermine the integrity of the nation state. It is as a result of cross-breeding between Norman women and English men that an English stock has been produced which is currently trouncing the French on the battlefield:[38]

Dauphin. O Dieu vivant!
Shall a few sprays of us,
The emptying of our fathers' luxury [lust],
Our scions, put in wild and savage stock,

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Spirt up so suddenly into the clouds

And over-look their grafters?[39]

Weakening of national stock is regularly laid at the door of women as the prospect of a seepage, a loss of integrity of blood through their lineal involvement. In 4.5, Bourbon's outburst at the prospect of military humiliation at the hands of the English (whether or not it includes explicit expressions of national shame)[40] diverts attention deftly on to French women. The stain of defeat to masculine honour is vividly captured by the prospect of carnal intercourse between the two nationalities —an intercourse in which women carry the shame (and blame) as bearers of cross-bred bastards:

Bourbon

Once more back again!
And he that will not follow Bourbon now,
Let him go home, and with his cap in hand
Like the base leno [pimp] hold the chamber door
Whilst by a slave no gentler than my dog
His fairest daughter is contaminated.[41]

By contrast, integrity of nation amongst men alone is consistently represented as a struggle in which national differences are clearcut (no blurrings or leakages), and unions considered and intentional. Catherine's English lesson is immediately preceded by a scene in which the united 'English' troops deconstruct themselves into an Englishman, an Irishman, a Welshman and a Scot, distinct in their speech, attitudes and interests, and at loggerheads, uncovering the fiction of a 'pure' English nation, and provoking the passionate cry from the Irish MacMorris: 'What ish [is] my nation?'[42] Under conditions of shared interest—here a shared benefit to be gained by acquiring France as adjunct to the British Isles—alliances may be forged between the separate nations, but these supposedly stop a long way short of assimilation into one nation state with intermingled ethnicities and shared social practices.

This fictional distinction between the inevitable outward flow of blood through marriage and the inward, non-mingling integrity of race can be clearly seen in *1 Henry IV*—a play in which the conflicts and pragmatic alliances between the separate territories of Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England are dramatically central.[43] Douglas of Scotland, Glendower of Wales, Hotspur for the northern territories of England and Mortimer for the south form an abortive alliance against Henry IV, an

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alliance which is always doomed through mistrust and lack of commitment on the part of its participants. Because of its inherent weakness (deliberately emphasised to offset the 'true' alliance of interests which supports the king), there is a clear tension between Henry IV's rhetoric of single (English) nationhood and unique national identity, and the actuality: Wales claimed by the Tudors (Henry V is Prince of Wales)[44] but contested by Owen Glendower; armed conflict with Scotland in which Henry Percy on behalf of the crown has temporarily subdued the Scots, and continued resistance to English settlement in Ireland (where an earlier attempt at subduing the Irish, we are reminded, led to Richard II's downfall).

In this play, the language difficulties which complicate Henry's courtship of Catherine in *Henry V*, and which critics sentimentalise, are used to make it clear that the union of interests which Mortimer, Glendower and Hotspur claim to have made is a shallow strategic convenience. While holding Mortimer to ransom after he has failed to put down his Welsh rebellion, Glendower has married him to his daughter. In the very scene in which Glendower, Mortimer and Hotspur carve up the map of mainland Britain between them, [45] the fiction of their integrity is sharply underlined by the entry of 'the ladies', their wives: Mortimer cannot understand a word his Welsh wife says, unless his father-in-law acts as interpreter.[46]

In *Henry V* the tension between the pure race and the aspiration to territorial expansion is a constant source of rhetorical anxiety, from the Archbishop of Canterbury's fudged endorsement of Henry's claim to France onwards. Henry's claim rests precisely on the *impurity* of his blood—his French ancestry. Nor is this thematic resonance an accident of the play: its contradictions are fundamental to all expansionist nationalism.

The fundamental contradiction at the heart of expansionist nationalism is dissolved in *Henry V* by appealing to the inevitability of female fallibility. Were women pure, the suggestion seems to be that that would guarantee the continuing purity of the nation; because women are inevitably 'impudent', the sullying of national stock is also inevitable. From the very start of the play the fissure which opens up in nationhood and its territorial rights stems from claims through the female line. However complex and deliberately confusing the Archbishop of Canterbury's account of Henry's claims to the throne of France under Salic law, what comes clearly through is the litany of women's names enabling the supposed transfer of rights from one line of male heirs to another.[47] And it is Catherine's susceptibility to being 'won'—willingly joining her French stock to Henry's English—which covers for the possible illegality of Henry's seizure by force of the French crown at the end of the play. In spite of Kate's protesting that alliance with Henry

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betrays the French cause, verbal sleight of hand allows Henry to shift to her the responsibility for capitulating to England, and surrendering France's territory:

> **Catherine**
> Is it possible dat I sould love de *ennemi* of France?
>
> **King Henry**
> No, it is not possible you should love the enemy of France, Kate. But in loving me, you should love the friend of France, for I love France so well that I would not part with a village of it, I will have it all mine; and Kate, when France is mine, and I am yours, then yours is France, and you are mine.[48]

In 1600 no unified Britain existed. England, Wales, Scotland and parts of Ireland were not incorporated into an economic and political unit, with perceived common European objectives and a shared desire to preserve their insular integrity against threats of annexation by external forces. The differences amongst the people of the nations manoeuvering for advantageous alliances which would ultimately produce the 'United Kingdom' were as fully in play and as visible as the likenesses. As we now know, the cohesiveness of such a union is underpinned by a carefully fostered fiction of 'sameness' (of cultural practices and religious belief)—my jewishness, your scottishness are not at issue as long as the Britain we inhabit remains intact.

The Shakespeare criticism which emerged during the Second World War as part of the British 'war effort' attended vigorously to the parts of the history plays which prefigured union, and resolutely ignored those which mirrored the antagonisms amongst the constituent peoples.[49] The nationalistic Shakespeare 'industry'—the commercial exploitation of the image of Shakespeare, and his history plays in particular as quintessentially British, now a main plank in the 'propaganda' version of Shakespeare's cultural centrality—is in the direct line of descent from this war era Shakespeare/Harry.[50]

The first critics explicitly to recognise this were, I think, the British critics Graham Holderness and Terence Hawkes, who reinserted key secondary works and interpretations of Shakespeare into the social and political context from which we have traditionally separated our own critical activities.[51] Their work prepared us for the (for me) startling shift of attention which we critics have made in recent years in our work on Shakespeare's history plays. I find it hard to believe, personally, that I failed for so long to see the fractures in the plays' nationalistic rhetoric. As the Eastern bloc has collapsed, as the Soviet Union has been dismantled into its constituent faiths and ethnicities, and as the knock-on effect has led yet

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again to the disintegration of the Balkan States, the precariousness of the nation state has re-emerged as an issue in those very plays which had supposedly stood for the permanence of union. We are beginning to interrogate Shakespeare's texts for clues to our understanding of ethnic conflict in an unstable political world. In just such critical shifts in our dialoguing with the texts of the past lies the historicity of the reading of Shakespeare.

The essays in this collection chart both my own shifting relationship with a historicised Shakespeare, and a series of precise moments of engagement with issues thrown up by the historical process itself.

The intellectual place of women in history was a topic which absorbed much attention on the part of feminist academics in the early 1980s. The earliest essay here, 'Cultural confusion and Shakespeare's learned heroines: "These are old paradoxes"', arose from my interest in the significant role allowed to intellectual women in the fifteenth century, but intriguingly denied them (and denied in the historical account) in the twentieth century.[52]

By the mid-1980s, text critics were becoming intrigued by the fruitful collaboration of social historians and social anthropologists, which was yielding an entirely unexpected, vivid version of everyday life in the early modern period. The 'making strange' of our own past, on the model of Clifford Geertz's engagement with other cultures, opened up the possibility of dialogue between ourselves and our own cultural precursors. Out of that historical moment came 'new historicism'—much misunderstood by literary critics, but, with hindsight, a recognisable response to the invitation to treat our forebears as 'other'. The two pieces of work with which this collection of essays opens belong to that exciting moment in Shakespeare studies:' "Why should he call her whore?": Defamation and Desdemona's case', and '"No offence i' th' world": Unlawful marriage in *Hamlet*'. In both I draw on archival material uncovered by social historians, of a culturally unfamiliar kind, but which turns out to set up reverberations with key textual moments in the plays under consideration. It was 'new historicist' work of this kind which opened up the possibility of constructive exchange between historians and text critics, an exchange which will undoubtedly continue to deepen our understanding both of history and of texts.

Both these pieces, it should be said, caused a good deal more of a disturbance in the text critical community than I had expected (or than readers may consider credible, since they now seem to me quite 'tame'). There was something fragile about the alliances that were formed at that time under the general rubric of 'new historicism'—alliances between men on the left of criticism, and feminists; alliances between deconstructionists with historical leanings, and cultural materialists with a

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healthy suspicion of purely textual abstractions. The first version of '"Why should he call her whore?"' was delivered on a panel with the title 'Gender and Power', at a meeting of the World Shakespeare Association held in Berlin in 1986. It deeply offended some of the 'power' participants, because I took issue directly with 'new historicist' critics who had, I alleged, overlooked problems of gender in their treatment of power and authority in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. The first version of '"No offence i' th'world"' was written for a conference of historically-minded text critics held at the University of Essex. Once again, unexpected differences arose between those whose historical approaches were fundamentally textual and theoretical (for whom 'history' tends to mean the distinctive mentalities manifested in texts of different periods), and those for whom the historicity of texts resides more in those features which share the strangeness of that textual residue of any period accidentally preserved in archives and record offices.

The first version of 'Twins and travesties: Gender, dependency and sexual availability in *Twelfth Night*' was written for a plenary session of the Shakespeare Association of America meeting in 1989, and subsequently included in a volume edited by the convener of that plenary, Susan Zimmerman, entitled *Erotic Politics*.[53] The occasion is probably remembered by participants in the session more by the fact that Peter Stallybrass and I enacted stage cross-dressing there and then by exchanging jackets before delivering our papers, than for what we either of us had to say. In my own work, however, I think this was the point at which I acknowledged that historicist text studies and psychoanalytical text studies did have things to say to one another (a recognition which has, I hope, borne fruit in my more recent work, particularly since I have had the benefit of Professor Jacqueline Rose as colleague and friend at Queen Mary and Westfield College).

The stage cross-dressing which we had been told in the 1970s that we should ignore as a historically specific stage convention, in the 1980s that we could detect as generating a current of sexual innuendo circulating in the texts of the comedies, was suddenly foregrounded as a crux for our understanding of renaissance identity-formation. As was usual (for critics of my generation), the first step towards such an understanding was taken by Stephen Greenblatt in his article 'Fiction and friction', which drew psychoanalytical criticism more straitly into conjunction with social history and anthropology.[54] For myself, a shift in the centre of critical focus led helpfully to my being able to reassess and revise my own position on what is to be learned from the treatment of cross-dressing in a play like *Twelfth Night*. Anyone who recalls my discussion of travesty in *Still Harping on Daughters* will recognise that 'Twins and travesties' represents a change of heart on my part—one informed by the changing relationship between my reading and our history.

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Between 1988 and 1993 most of my scholarly energies were taken up with an intellectual historical study of the Netherlandish humanist Desiderius Erasmus. This work culminated in a book entitled *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1993). 'Reading and the technology of textual affect: Erasmus's familiar letters and Shakespeare's *King Lear*' is a spin-off from that work, and owes its inception to my colleague at Queen Mary and Westfield College, Dr Lorna Hutson, who read my Erasmus book in manuscript form while the two of us were co-teaching the first-year course on Shakespeare. She pointed out to me the way in which my enriched understanding of letter-writing as a Renaissance cultural practice had direct implications for our understanding of the plot of a play thick with exchanges of letters, like *King Lear*, and provided me with a wealth of detailed suggestions which I was able fruitfully to pursue.

The closing pieces in this collection of 'essays'—attempts at historicising my reading of Shakespeare—drift away from the plays of Shakespeare to those of near-contemporary playwrights, and to broader issues concerning the attempt to merge historical and text critical practices. All that we have learned from our engagement with the quintessentially canonical dramatist of the early modern period in Britain turns out to revivify and intensify our historicised sense of Shakespeare's distinctiveness, which in turn proves fundamentally illuminating for the period as a whole. I use Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* and Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling* to enlarge and thicken the strangeness which I discovered in the Shakespeare plays, restoring them to meaningfulness for us. The resulting essays —'Alien intelligence: Mercantile exchange and knowledge transactions in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*' and 'Companionate marriage versus male friendship: Anxiety for the lineal family in Jacobean drama'—confirm for me the impossibility of any longer isolating a rehistoricised Shakespeare from the richly suggestive culture and history of the period in which his plays were produced.

Throughout this book the disciplines of history and of literary studies are interwoven to produce a single narrative which historicises the renaissance text. The most recent and groundbreaking work in history confronts the most recent critical pronouncements on canonical literature. As I have gone on, however, I have found there to be an asymmetry in this conjunction. Because I write here primarily as a specialist in Shakespeare, I am bound to use 'history' as if that discipline were less available for scrutiny and critique than literary studies. 'History' here tends to validate and confirm textual insights, pinning them to the 'solid ground' of a revered pursuit less 'subjective' than criticism.

As a historian myself at other times and in other places, I have felt the need to register here the fact that historical studies themselves are currently poised ready

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1 'Why Should He Call Her Whore?' Defamation and Desdemona's case

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Emilia

Why should he call her whore? who keeps her company? What place,

what time, what form, what likelihood?[1]

My concern in this work is to use the textual traces of early modern social relations as the point of encounter with early modern agency—specifically the agency of those whose point of view has tended to be excluded from dominant cultural production (non-élite men and all women). My proposal is that the social relations in the community, as conveyed to us in the 'shaped' accounts which come down to us, position the self (the subject) at the intersection of overlaid maps of acknowledged interpersonal connections. This in turn can helpfully sharpen our response to the dramatisation of interpersonal relations on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, if we regard stage dramatisation as the focusing of otherwise inchoate 'experience' into socially constructed units of meaning, for the purpose of clear and distinct transmission of plot to audience. So the present piece of work is not just offered as one more novel way of enhancing our reading of Shakespeare's texts; it is proposed as a very particular way of recovering some sense of connection between the textual and the social—recovering, perhaps, a distinctively *cultural* dimension in early modern textual production.[2]

The shift towards such a cultural dimension has come, in my own case, from a sense of limitation within textual studies. Specifically, in some recent 'historical' work on *Othello*, a commitment to textuality has seemed to carry the consequence that the critic is no longer to be held responsible for distinguishing verbal suggestions of Desdemona's guilt which enter the play as interpretations or anticipations of her actions, from the 'tale' (the construction as plot, in the text) of those actions themselves. The result has been that Desdemona has come increasingly regularly to be 'read' as guilty by association (with what had been said of her), and her death has been presented as punishment (ideologically and individually), instead of tragic injustice.[3] In my view, methodologies which erase the agency of any main protagonist so effectively from the interpretation are fundamentally flawed.[4] It is one thing to suggest that, textually, female figures are deprived of the power

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and authority to control the interpretation and evaluation of their actions (that texts place them permanently in the object position in the narrative); it is quite another to continue to sustain the traditional historical view that the lived experience of women down through history has been as objects.

In seeking to develop a methodology which would restore subject status (subjectivity, even) to the female figure in history, one significant objective seemed to be to find some means of distinguishing in a text between casual verbal formulations involving women, and what I shall specify as *events* in which women participate. Here I take *event* to be a configuration of circumstances and persons which was perceived as having a shape, so that it carried a shared meaning for the early modern community: although our access to such a configuration is necessarily via surviving textual remains which give it shape, we are able (I shall argue) to distinguish such an event as socially and culturally meaningful in the flow of incidents and social interactions.[5] Take, as an extreme case of the former, the following piece of scurrility on Iago's part, in the opening scene of Act 2 of *Othello*:

> **Iago**
>
> *[Aside.]* He takes her by the palm; ay, well said, whisper: as little a web as this will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio. Ay, smile upon her, do: I will catch you in your own courtesies: you say true, 'tis so indeed. If such tricks as these strip you out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not kiss'd your three fingers so oft, which now again you are most apt to play the sir in: good, well kiss'd, an excellent courtesy; 'tis so indeed: yet again, your fingers at your lips? would they were clyster-pipes for your sake.... *[Trumpets within.]* The Moor, I know his trumpet.
>
> **Cassio**
>
> 'Tis truly so.[6]

Lewd innuendo at Desdemona's expense enters the text without on-stage acknowledgement; and the overly-courteous Florentine Cassio's reply adds to the joke, as he apparently assents to the implied unchastity of her behaviour (*Iago*. 'The Moor, I know his trumpet'/*Cassio*. ''Tis truly so'). None of us, I think, imagines that this piece of wordplay weighs very heavily in the balance of the play's developing value-system; indeed, we do not imagine that the figure Cassio, on the stage, has heard the pun. Yet the play on words is there (as it is also, at equivalent moments, in *Troilus and Cressida* and in *The Merchant of Venice*) and, in the increasingly intricate games that Shakespearean critics play with the text, it is made increasingly to count

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of Queen Elizabeth, Between the Years 1559 and 1597, London, Joseph Lilly, 1867, p. 194: 'At Maydstone in Kent there was one Marget Mere, daughter to Richard Mere, of the sayd towne of Maydstone, who being vnmaryed, played the naughty packe, and was gotten with childe, being deliuered of the said childe the xxiiij. daye of October last past, in the yeare of our Lord 1568, at vij. of the clocke in the afternoone of the same day, being Sonday' (the child is a monstrous birth, revealing the mother's sinful behaviour). I am grateful to Carolyn Whitney-Brown for drawing my attention to this example. Ian Archer confirms for me that in the Bridewell records the phrase 'naughty pack' is consistently used as a synonym for 'whore', e.g. *Bridewell Court Book I*, fol. 62: Lewse Hochyn, 'a naughty packe' committing whoredom is punished, and Ellyn Holt, 'a lewd, naughty pack' who 'as a "bribyng drab" went in the name of Nicholas Williams of the Chamber with whom she dwelt, to a butcher for a shoulder of mutton and a breast of veal', likewise (Ian Archer, personal communication, November 1987).

37. *Depositions*, pp. 90–1.
38. See N.Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988, for a similar argument about pardon tales. Where depositions survive for the supposed slanderer, they invariably try to undermine the character of the person supposedly defamed.
39. There is a striking example in the Durham records of the inside/outside of the house boundary being breached, and drawing 'outsiders' into a case of wife abuse (then, as now, customarily treated as 'private') (*Depositions*, pp. 97–8): 'Ex parte Agnetis Carr adversus Thomam Carr, maritum suum. WILLIAM BAYKER, of the city of Durham, yoman, aged about 40 years. This examinate was in Durham that present day, when the parties and all their compeny cam home with them frome their mariadge here to Durham, wher they dwelt as man and wif togither, by the common report of the people. Mary, this examinate was not present at their mariadge. He saith that he belyvith that Thomas Carr, articulate, haith not used nor entretyd the said Agnes, his wyf, as an honestman ought to have doon; for this examinate was personally present at one tyme, enspeciall when the parties had bein at the lawe, and the said Thomas then commanndyd to take hir, the said Agnes his wyfe, home with hym, and to use hir as he aught to doo; and immediatlie after ther home commynge quietly togither, according as thei were comandyd, this examinate, and one John Woodmose, was doon to the market-place, and commyng by the said Carr's doore, the said Agnes was wepinge and sore lammentyng, sainge that hir said husband Thomas wold not suffer hir to tarye that night with hym

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