

16. Power and Authority

*"But man, proud man,
Dressed in a little brief authority,
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,
His glassy essence, like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven
As makes the angels weep"*

—Shakespeare: *Measure for Measure*

*"It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose
liberty; or to seek power over others, and to lose
power over a man's self"*

—Francis Bacon: Essay, 'Of Great Place'

A clear statement of Shakespeare's, or Bacon's, political opinions is not easy to find for a number of reasons. First, it was not an age when writers could freely speak their minds on political matters, and for this reason what was said was often guarded or deliberately ambiguous. Second, we are dealing with a body of literature written over a period of perhaps 30 or even 40 years during which some opinions undoubtedly underwent modification or even reversal. Third, whether we are talking of Bacon or Shakespeare, there is a persistent scepticism and opposition to dogmatism and a willingness to see both sides of an argument. So, for example, it is possible to argue both that Bacon was a republican (Peltonen) and that he was 'emphatically a monarchist' (Zagorin). Fourthly, the conventional view is that the political philosophy of Bacon or Shakespeare was insignificant and fragmentary. Perez Zagorin states that Bacon never produced a general political philosophy or theory, unlike Hooker (*Francis Bacon*, 1999, pp148 ff).

One thing is certain, though: Bacon was profoundly interested in history and politics and was immersed in them for much of his life. He was a Member of Parliament from the age of 20 and rose to become Lord Chancellor. His love of history is evident throughout his works. As he wrote in his essay *Of Studies*, "Histories make men wise". In a letter to Ellesmere (then Lord Chancellor) in 1605 he wrote: "For as statues and pictures are dumb histories, so histories are speaking pictures". Significantly, he wrote a prose *History of Henry VII* (1622), a king conspicuous by his absence from the Shakespeare canon. In it he described Henry thus: "He was of a high mind, and loved his own will and his own way; as one that revered himself, and would reign indeed. Had he been a private man he would have been termed proud: but in a wise Prince, it was but keeping of distance; which indeed he did towards all; not admitting

any near or full approach either to his power or to his secrets. For he was governed by none."

As for Shakespeare, he wrote as if he lived and breathed politics and moved effortlessly in the corridors of power, which of course would be true if Bacon was Shakespeare. A number of critics and politicians have noted this political intimacy. S. Schoenbaum refers to his "playfully taking the mickey out of the Sir Walter Raleigh set in *Love's Labour's Lost*, concocting a suitable wedding entertainment for the dowager Countess of Southampton with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or advising King James of the respective merits of mercy and justice in *Measure for Measure*" ('Richard II and the Realities of Power', in *Shakespeare Survey* 28, 1975; reprinted in: Catherine M.S. Alexander: *Shakespeare and Politics*, pp91-109). The Duke of Marlborough stated that he had formed his understanding of English history from Shakespeare alone. Abraham Lincoln believed that *Macbeth* was the perfect illustration of the problems of tyranny and murder.

William Hazlitt in *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (1817) wrote:

"Shakespear has in this play shewn himself well versed in history and state-affairs. *Coriolanus* is a store-house of political commonplaces. Any one who studies it may save himself the trouble of reading Burke's *Reflections*, or Paine's *Rights of Man*, or the Debates in both Houses of Parliament since the French Revolution or our own. The arguments for and against aristocracy or democracy, on the privileges of the few and the claims of the many, on liberty and slavery, power and the abuse of it, peace and war, are here very ably handled, with the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher. Shakespear himself seems to have had a leaning to the arbitrary side of the question, perhaps from some feeling of contempt for his own origin; and to have spared no occasion of baiting the rabble."

Enoch Powell, former British Cabinet Minister, said: "The relish and the verve with which Shakespeare's characters speak the language of ambition, intrigue and policy is not synthetic or theoretical—it could only be drawn from experience, and drawn by someone who had felt his own pulse quicken in the excitement of the political struggle" (BBC Talk, 1964). In the American TV programme *The Shakespeare Mystery* (1996) he stated:

"At that time I had been a member of the Cabinet and I'd been in politics for twenty years and I had some idea of what it's like in the kitchen. And my astonishment was to discover that these were the best works of somebody who'd been in the kitchen. They're written by someone who has lived the life, who has been part of a life of politics and power, who knows what people feel when they are near to the centre of

power, near to the heat of the kitchen. It's not something which can be transferred, it's not something on which an author, just an author, can be briefed: 'Oh, this is how it happened'; it comes straight out of experience—straight out of personal observation—straight out of personal feeling, that's the difference which comes over you when you read Shakespeare detached from the Stratfordian fantasy" (transcript of programme is available online at: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shakespeare/tapes/shakespearecript.html>).

Actor or Spectator?

Francis Bacon lived a life that was largely at odds with his basic temperament. It caused him to confess in a prayer: "As I may truly say, my soul hath been a stranger in the course of my pilgrimage". Although, as he said in a letter to Bodley, he knew himself "by inward calling to be fitter to hold a book than play a part", he nevertheless led his life in "civil causes". In this he was reiterating one of the major themes of Renaissance civic humanism, which ascribed great importance to the *vita activa*, or active life, of man as a citizen and participant in the Commonwealth. In the Proem to *The Interpretation of Nature*, written about 1603, he notes: "Believing that I was born for the service of mankind and regarding the care of the commonwealth as a kind of common property which like the air and water belongs to everybody, I set myself to consider in what way mankind might be best served, and what service I was myself best fitted by nature to perform. I was not without hope, that if I came to hold office in the state, I might get something done too for the good of men's souls...". In fact, he gives a number of reasons for his involvement in public affairs. First, his birth and education seasoned him in business of state. Second, though he was dedicated to the service of mankind, he allowed that a man's country had special claims on him.

There was also the subtler temptation that if he secured a place of honour in the state it would give him command of industry and brains. The project of discovery could not be undertaken by one individual but required co-operation on a larger scale. Earlier, in 1592, in the famous letter to Burghley he had written that a place where one could have "commandment of more wits than of a man's own" was essential for bringing in "industrious observations, grounded conclusions, and profitable inventions and discoveries" which could be used to replace the arid speculation of scholastic philosophy. He continued this theme in his 1594 device at Gray's Inn when he suggested that Elizabeth should establish four institutions for the advancement of learning comprising a library, a botanical and zoological garden, a museum and a laboratory. Elizabeth was not sympathetic, but in

The Advancement of Learning in 1605 Bacon returned to the theme, calling for a "brotherhood of scientists" whereby an exchange of information would occur among the scholars of Europe.

Bacon's problem, as he himself suggested, was that he was a philosopher who was trying also to be a politician. Shakespeare, too, seems concerned about this difficulty. Hamlet, of course, is the paradigm, but his tragedy is that he cannot make the transition from contemplation to action. Both Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* and Prospero in *The Tempest* are also thinkers rather than doers, and both have been rulers bored by the task of ruling. Prospero neglected the city of Milan in order to study the liberal arts. "My library was dukedom large enough", he declares (see Chapter 19). Vincentio describes himself as one who has "ever lov'd the life removed" (Act 1, Scene 3) and is described by Escalus, in the classical tradition, as "one that, above all other strifes, contended especially to know himself" (Act 3, Scene 2). He, too, is preoccupied with contemplative activity and is therefore negligent in carrying out his political duties. He had been lax in enforcing the laws designed to curb vice, with the result that Vienna, where "liberty plucks justice by the nose" (Act 1, Scene 3), has become a corrupt city and there is a general defiance of authority.

Pragmatist or Moralist?

Part of the difficulty for a thinker who is also a ruler is that he is likely to recognise in himself some of the weaknesses and vices that he is obliged to correct in others. As G. Wilson Knight says, "all passions and sins of other men have reflected images in his own soul" ('Measure for Measure and the Gospels', in *Wheel of Fire*). His ability to feel anger is then diminished and so too is his willingness to punish and inflict pain. In other words, the thinker feels too much sympathy and understanding towards his subjects and thus lacks the element of harshness and ruthlessness which may be necessary to impose order. Both Prospero and Vincentio come to realise that a failure to punish causes greater suffering for the people, though their punitive action has to be tempered by mercy and understanding. Prospero can, of course, use his magical powers to lead people away from evil, whereas Vincentio has to resort to political skills such as deception, disguise and intrigue. He may have to break some moral rules, but for unselfish reasons, in order to bring about the greatest good. He frequently lies, he eavesdrops on private conversations, he pretends to be a member of a holy order and he contrives a shocking and immoral bed trick.

The dramatist seems concerned in this play about the conflict between ethics and politics. Of course, the title itself comes from the Sermon on the

Mount: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (*Matthew* 7: 1-2). In other words, we are all sinning, imperfect humanity and we should forgive one another. This is one meaning of the play's title. But there is another meaning. In society we cannot forgive and do nothing. We have to punish lawbreakers. While a New Testament morality may be applicable in the private sphere, it seems inadequate in the public arena, and *Measure for Measure* appears to be searching for a public mean between the extremes of pure Machiavellianism and pure Christianity. The word 'measure' in the title itself means not only amount or portion but also moderation, restraint or an avoidance of extremes.

Harold Bloom calls the work a "simultaneous invocation and evasion of Christian belief and Christian morals" (*Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, p359). He thinks the latter triumphs and that the play is blasphemous. Bloom dismisses any suggestion that the work is a religious allegory, but it is difficult to escape the conclusion that, at least in part, it is. There are frequent allusions to different parts of the Sermon on the Mount throughout, and the play's plot line follows that of the parables of the talents (*Matt.* 25) and the vineyard (*Matt.*21), in which departing masters test, observe and return to distribute reproof and forgiveness. Indeed, the Duke is in a sense God, hidden from the people but moving among them in disguise. God tries to govern humanity with prophets, priests judges, kings while at the same time testing his chosen deputies—"hence shall we see, if power change purpose, what our seemers be" (Act 1, Scene 3). He fails, just as God failed to control recalcitrant humanity in the Old Testament, so that when Vincentio returns, disguised as a friar, it is analogous to God appearing to man in the form of Jesus. He even says that "I come to visit the afflicted spirits here in prison... that I may minister to them accordingly" (Act 2, Scene 3), just as *1 Peter* states: "By which also He went, and preached unto the spirits in prison" (3:19). In the New Testament parallel, Angelo's role of merciless, legalistic and hypocritical deputy belongs to the Pharisees.

We should note that Bacon had a conceit of God which would fit in perfectly with the divine role of Vincentio. In the preface to the *Advancement of Learning* (1605), which appeared within a year of the play, the following passage occurs: "For of the knowledge which contemplates the works of Nature, the holy Philosopher hath said expressly; that the glory of God is to conceal a thing, but the glory of the King is to find it out: as if the Divine Nature, according to the innocent and sweet play of children, which hide themselves to the end they may be found;

took delight to hide his works, to the end they might be found out; and of his indulgence and goodness to mankind, had chosen the soul of man to be his Play-fellow in this game". Again, later in the work itself he says: "For so he (King Solomon) saith expressly, The Glory of God is to conceal a thing, but the Glory of a King is to find it out. As if according to that innocent and affectionate play of children, the Divine Majesty took delight to hide his works, to the end to have them found out, and as if Kings could not obtain a greater Honour, then to be God's play-fellows in that game, especially considering the great command they have of wits and means, whereby the investigation of all things may be perfected...".

Shakespeare is surely also drawing a parallel between Vincentio and James I, who ascended the throne in 1603, the year before the play was first performed. The Duke is presented as a New Testament pacifist leader who maintains the allegiance of his subjects with surveillance, appeals to conscience and spectacles of punishment and forgiveness. James I's motto, '*qui nescit dissimulare, nescit regnare*'—"he who does not know how to dissimulate does not know how to reign"—could equally apply to Vincentio, whom Lucio calls the "old fantastical duke of dark corners" (Act 4, Scene 3). James, like the Duke, tried to rule with a mixture of cruelty and mercy and, like the Duke, allowed his ministers to do most of the "dirty work" (*Measure for Measure*, although probably first performed at court in December 1604, was not published until 1623, towards the end of James's reign).

The dramatist seems to be suggesting that, although the law, however cruel, has to be upheld in the real world, it must be tempered with mercy and tolerance. So, on the issue of sex, licence is bad, but so too is puritanical repression. Under the Duke's liberal rule, there was too much freedom. Under Angelo's influence, there is too much restraint, for human beings are, after all, sexual creatures. Angelo's attempt to stamp out prostitution altogether displays an ignorance of humankind. "Does your worship mean to geld and spay all the youth of the city?", asks Pompey. Lucio suggests that it is no more possible to extirpate illicit sex than to put down eating and drinking. In other words, any humane system of justice must start with the facts of human nature and proceed from there. "Justice must be sought for in the nature of man" was Cicero's view. And it seems to be Shakespeare's as well.

The contrast between egotistical realism and ineffectual idealism is a recurring Shakespearean theme. Now, there is no doubt that Shakespeare's sympathies tend towards the idealist, for he represents the 'soul' of society, whereas the realist merely exhibits self-love. But the dramatist shows that both extremes are politically dangerous: they fail to "divide with reason

between self-love and society" (*Of Wisdom for a Man's Self*). And of course, apart from being ineffectual, the pure idealist can easily be duped by others for their own bad ends. D. Daiches draws attention to this moral:

"If Brutus had been a less simply virtuous man, he would not have helped to kill one of his best friends and brought tyranny to Rome (the opposite of what he intended). If Othello had been less innocent, he would not have trusted Iago and so he would not have been brought to murder his wife. If Hamlet had been less of a sensitive idealist, he would not have destroyed his own house as well as the house of Polonius. A more worldly Brutus, a less morally sensitive Hamlet, a tougher and more cunning Othello, would have done less harm in the world" ('Guilt and Justice in Shakespeare', in *Literary Essays*, 1956).

The connection between Christianity and politics, and whether there is a distinction between private and public virtue, dominates the 10 or so English History plays, which make up more than a quarter of the entire *opus*. These plays are almost entirely confined to the political realm and rarely stray into profound psychological explorations of the soul, such as we find in, say, *Macbeth*. In his tragedies Shakespeare seeks to transcend the limits of politics, a point to which we shall return towards the end of this chapter. Nevertheless, this distinction between the Histories and the Tragedies is somewhat arbitrary, and the History plays certainly do not seek to set politics above ethics, except in so far as Shakespeare represents the kings doing so; instead, there is again this recurring problem of reconciling the two. To be specific, it is presented as a conflict between self-interested Machiavellianism on the one hand and selfless Christianity on the other. The dramatist makes us fully aware of the difficulty of achieving a genuine compromise between these extremes, while at the same time he highlights the easiness of being both a superficially professing Christian and a secret Machiavellian.

In *King John* the papal legate, Cardinal Pandulph, represents extreme moralism, which admits no possibility of compromise and sanctions assassination and war. King John and King Philip of France represent Machiavellian realism and their vision, though cynical, cruel and corrupt, is clearly preferable to Pandulph's. But Philip the Bastard, whom the dramatist has invented, stands in a mid-position between the extremes of pure morality and Machiavellianism and his vision is superior to both. Although a moral realist, he is guided not by self-interest but by a sense of decency, unity and justice, and in writing the play Shakespeare is a self-conscious propagandist for justice, though keenly aware of its fragility and hence the need for propping it up.

In the theatre of Shakespeare's time the Machiavel was a person who put his own personal survival and power above any traditional moral

restraint. He was, in short, a self-interested individualist with no traditional scruples about social responsibility. In pursuing his own ends, he adopts the tricks of the trade as outlined by Machiavelli in *The Prince*: he puts on acts, he appears religious to sway the 'vulgar', he manipulates others and he is ruthless and cruel when he needs to be. He will lie, cheat, deceive or kill to stay in power. Many of Shakespeare's villains are clearly Machiavel figures: Bolingbroke, Richard III, Macbeth, Iago, Claudius, Edmund are well-known examples. However, Shakespeare does not completely dismiss Machiavellian methods but suggests that some *realpolitik* qualities are necessary for political leadership, provided that they are used for the public good rather than personal power.

The supreme object of royal policy in the Histories is the unification and pacification of England, but only Henry V comes close to success in this endeavour. Does Shakespeare present Henry as, in the Chorus's words in *Henry V*, the "mirror of all Christian kings", or as a ruthless Machiavellian pretender who prosecutes an unjust war in order to promote unity at home and to conceal his own illegitimacy? Certainly, the Chorus presents an idealised monarch, but the actions of the play itself present a man who is thoroughly Machiavellian and whom we the readers or audience see through. Shapiro, in his acclaimed *1599*, suggests that on the question of the war, "Shakespeare fills the play with competing, critical voices: the backroom whispers of self-interested churchmen, the grumblings of low-life conscripts, the blunt criticism of worthy soldiers who know the leaders make promises they have no intention of keeping, the confessions of so-called traitors, the growing cynicism of a young boy off to the wars, the infighting among officers, the bitter curses of a returning soldier" (*op.cit.*, p104-5). These voices also point us in two opposite directions about Henry himself, but arguably Harold Goddard in *The Meaning of Shakespeare* and others are correct in arguing that the author sets out subversively to debunk the hero as a hypocritical strongman.

Henry's decision to invade France is motivated by money and power, as we know from the discussion between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely in the very first scene. His own justifications do not bear close moral scrutiny and would actually disqualify him from the English throne. His reaction to the gift of tennis balls is a childish and gruesome threat to create "many a thousand" French widows. His treatment of his would-be assassins in Act 2, Scene 2, is merciless. He then invades and conquers France, using threats of mass rape and massacre to induce surrender. He warns the city of Harfleur that it will see its naked infants "spitted upon pikes" if it resists. He kills all the prisoners of war and executes Bardolph, an old crony from his Boar's Head days, for a relatively

minor theft. He does succeed in temporarily re-unifying a terribly fractionalised England, precisely because he is an astonishingly able and ruthless Machiavellian manipulator. But the play repeats one of the central themes of the English histories: stagecraft may be essential to successful politics, but it cannot substitute for political legitimacy over the long term. All that Henry has won is achieved at great personal cost in terms of his own humanity and, as "our bending author" stresses in the Epilogue, it will all be lost within a generation.

Henry V is indeed riddled with irony, and there is clear evidence, both internal and external, that the play is a satire on royal delusion. Henry believes that he is the centre of the universe, but in truth there is nothing at the core because he has reduced himself to a vacuous and hypocritical play-actor. Moreover, we know from his other works that Shakespeare's ideal rulers are not ruthless Machiavellian despots like Henry V but tolerant Christians with only a tinge of Machiavellianism. The Duke in *Measure for Measure* and Prospero in *The Tempest* are two obvious examples. Prospero, in particular, combines power over himself with power over the outer world. Another example is Prince Escalus in *Romeo and Juliet*. He continually strives to temper his judgments about the Montague-Capulet feud with compassion and parity.

Turning to Bacon, we find that in 1624 in his paper *Considerations Touching a War with Spain* he writes that "I will never set politics against ethics; especially for that ethics are but a handmaid to divinity and religion". In the essays he constantly returns to the twin themes of reconciling practical politics with Christian morality and the need for moderation and avoidance of extremes. In *Of Revenge*, for example, he tells us that, while loving one's enemies may hold in private life, "public revenges are for the most part fortunate, as that for the death of Caesar". In *Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature* he suggests that, while Christian charity is the highest moral good, misanthropic dispositions "are the very errors of human nature, and yet they are the fittest timber to make great politics of". In *Of Simulation and Dissimulation* he writes that while dissimulation is "but a faint kind of policy" and "it is the weaker sort of politicians that are the great dissemblers", nevertheless "the best composition and temperature is, to have openness in fame and opinion; secrecy in habit; dissimulation in seasonable use; and a power to feign if there be no remedy".

As with his attitude to love, Bacon's politics were affected by the influence of his family motto: *mediocria firma* ('safety in moderation'). In both cases, idealistic desires are considerably tempered by a realistic assessment of things as they are. Thus in the essay *Of Innovation* he states the pros and cons of change: "What is settled by custom, though it be not

good, yet at least it is fit". On the other hand, political change is inevitable: "He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils; for time is the greatest innovator". In the end, he falls down in favour of progress: "A forward retention of custom is as turbulent a thing as an innovation; and they that reverence too much old times are but a scorn to the new. It were good, therefore, that men in their innovations would follow the example of time itself, which indeed innovateth greatly, but quietly, and by degrees scarce to be perceived".

In Shakespeare there is a similar revulsion against extremist positions. In *Troilus and Cressida* we are presented with the two extremes which we have just discussed in relation to Bacon. While Troilus and the Trojans generally personify an irrational and emotional idealism, Ulysses and the Greeks represent rationalism without compassion, a purely realistic or Machiavellian attitude to life. L.C. Knights is surely correct in saying that "political order and authority—so the play as a whole forces us to conclude—are not concepts to be accepted without question, independent of some prior ground from which they draw their justification" (*Hamlet and Other Shakespearean Essays* p156).

In her chapter on 'Shakespeare's Political Plays' in *The Frontiers of Drama* Una Ellis-Fermor makes another point which is relevant to our purposes. She says that up to *Henry V* the playwright has been concerned in the Elizabethan phase mainly with what the office of king requires in the man, while in his Jacobean phase his main concern is with what the office does to the man: "He passes, that is, from an interest centred chiefly in building up the picture of an ideal king or leader, to a study of the effect on the individual of the demands and privileges of his office" (*The Frontiers of Drama*, 1945, p37). This analysis would fit perfectly with Bacon's authorship of Shakespeare, for he would have been writing from his own experience. During Elizabeth's reign Bacon aspired unsuccessfully for political office. At the same time, as one who considered himself more fit by nature 'to hold a book than to play a part', he would have felt acutely aware of his own probable inadequacies for really high office. This would explain the dramatist's obvious affinity to characters like Brutus and Hamlet and his admiration for a king like Henry V who possessed some of the more active qualities that he lacked.

Moreover, Bacon's rejection of his friend Essex, which developed from 1596 on, finds clear parallels in Henry's rejection of his friend Falstaff, Brutus's killing of his friend Caesar and Hamlet's rejection of Ophelia. These actions, in three plays written or revised between 1598 and 1602, are justified in the plays on precisely the grounds Bacon gave for his abandonment of Essex: friendship must give way to political principle.

Indeed, Brutus' statement that it was "not that I lov'd Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more", could be transposed as: 'not that I loved Essex less, but that I loved England more'.

Ellis-Fermor maintains that for Shakespeare in his Elizabethan period the wide canvas of public life was more attractive than the illimitable experience of the spirit. Again, this analysis would fit an author who was then aspiring to political power and therefore had a peculiar interest in political affairs. Shakespeare's Jacobean preoccupations, on the other hand, also accord with the thoughts of a man who has had some experience of 'great place'. As Ellis-Fermor sees it, the men in these later plays who fail to meet the demands of public life are of interest not because they prove unfit for office but because they are unfitted by office for something which the author perceives to be of deeper value.

Monarchist or Republican?

Few of Shakespeare's kings cut heroic figures because there are too many abuses of power. Henry V at moments is the only real exception: attending to the needs of his people by moving from tent to tent as he visits his troops on the eve of Agincourt, for example. The historical monarchs are generally not good kings. Indeed, some—like Richard II, Henry VI and Richard III—are clearly bad. Yet it is a common assumption that in his plays Shakespeare upheld the monarchy, the Tudor Myth and the Divine Right of Kings. As a monarchist and a conservative, he is said to have believed in maintaining the existing social order and all legitimate authority. In short, he was a royal propagandist whose only quibble was over which monarch should govern.

A major influence in this direction was E.M.W. Tillyard in *The Elizabethan World Picture* and *Shakespeare's History Plays*.^{*} He maintained that in political matters Shakespeare abandons his usual free-ranging speculations in favour of a more reactionary line. In common with English Renaissance writers generally, he believed in the "Chain of Being", a hierarchical universe ordained by God in which some kind of order or degree on earth had its counterpart in heaven. Thus monarchs like Lear—"every inch a king"—would be at the top of the human chain and the dispossessed, like "poor Tom", would be at the bottom. Everyone should know their place and not seek to rise above their station. Political obedience was a religious duty and rebellion against a legitimate king was never

^{*} To his credit, Tillyard hoped that the latter work "served to strengthen the ideas of an educated Shakespeare, and of a poet more rather than less like Dante and Milton in massiveness of intellect and powers of reflection" (p325).

justified. Vengeance belonged only to God. A bad ruler was sent as a scourge by God and a usurper and his heirs would always be punished. This tied in with the theory of the divine right of kings, which evolved in Europe in the Middle Ages and was upheld by James I in his speeches and writings. It maintained that hereditary monarchy was the system approved by God, that the king makes the final decisions on all aspects of government and is accountable to God alone, and that non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God.

Moreover, it is alleged that in his history plays Shakespeare was penning a celebration and legitimisation of the Tudor myth. It arose during the reign of Henry VII and was later formulated in the writings of Sir Thomas More, whose *History of Richard III* (written 1513-18) presents Richard as deformed, evil from his birth and plotting to become King, and Polydore Vergil, whose *Historia Anglia* (1534) was written at the request of Henry VIII to legitimise the Tudor dynasty. Vergil's argument claims that Henry IV's illegal seizure of the crown from Richard II broke the God-given order of the universe and resulted in all the disasters that followed: the early death of Henry V, the bloody civil war known as the Wars of the Roses and Richard III's murderous, despotic reign. Vergil claimed that England was rescued by Henry Tudor as God's instrument on Earth, bringing peace and plenty by uniting the houses of York and Lancaster. Thus the myth was basically the notion that, in contrast to the dark age of anarchy and bloodshed in the 15th century, the Tudor period of the 16th century was a golden age of peace, order and prosperity.

In 1548 Edward Hall reinforced the myth in *The Union of the Two Noble Houses of Lancaster and York*, arguing that England's woes began when Henry Bolingbroke usurped the crown of Richard II and in so doing committed the crimes of perjury, usurpation and tyrannicide. According to Tillyard, "Shakespeare knows that Richard's crimes never amounted to tyranny and hence that outright rebellion against him was a crime". But it also seems reasonable to argue the opposite, namely that in Shakespeare's view Richard II was an evil tyrant who deserved to be deposed. We see the dilemma presented in the character of John of Gaunt, uncle of Richard II and father of Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV. In Holinshed's *Chronicles* he is a greedy aristocrat, but Shakespeare, following John Froissart's *Chronicles* more closely, turns him into the voice of reason, wisdom and patriotism. In his speeches, Gaunt adheres to the theory of the divine right of kings and refuses to support any action that would put Richard's life at risk, even though he knows that Richard was an accomplice in the murder of his brother the Duke of Gloucester. Richard himself propounds the divine right theory, notably in Act 3, Scene 2 (*Richard II*):

*"Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king".*

Nevertheless, at the same time, the play poses the question whether a king, though legitimate by birth, deserves to rule regardless of how much he abuses his power. And Gaunt, in his 'other Eden' monologue on his deathbed, proclaims (Act 2, Scene 1) that Richard should voluntarily relinquish the crown because he has betrayed "this royal throne of kings" by exploiting the loyalty of his subjects for his own personal glory. Throughout the play the meaning of legitimacy is explored and expanded and it is abundantly clear that inheritance is not the only form it takes. Richard cannot fulfil his duty to his people because he lacks the qualities needed to govern well. He is a murderer and a thief. He has done nothing to gain the people's support; on the contrary, he has taken the money of his already poverty-stricken subjects and used it on his 'favourites' and to finance the war in Ireland. He is morally weak, sexually licentious and dishonourable to his marriage bed. He is a wastrel, more interested in fashion than the good of the realm, and he surrounds himself with self-serving flatterers. His selfishness and lack of political sophistication have thrown the country into crisis.

In Chapter 6 we noted that *Richard II* was first published, anonymously, in 1597, with the deposition scene omitted. We have also noted that parallels have been drawn between Richard and Elizabeth on the one hand and between power-hungry courtiers Henry Bolingbroke and Essex on the other. Elizabeth I herself made the connection after Essex tried to stage a rebellion against her in 1601. Some commentators go so far as to suggest that Shakespeare meant the parallel and even that he may have favoured the Essex plot, just as his patron the Earl of Southampton did.* Yet, if he really did, it is a complete mystery why he was left alone whereas John Hayward, the author of the pamphlet on *The History of the Reign of Henry IV*, was imprisoned and, according to Schoenbaum, were it not for Bacon's "discreet intervention", he probably would have been executed (*op. cit.*, p101). We have seen that Bacon, although thwarted by Elizabeth and the Cecils and friendly with Essex, nevertheless increasingly distanced himself from the Earl's erratic fortunes after the mid-1590s, even though Elizabeth refused to heed Essex's requests for his promotion.

Yet Shakespeare chose to write the play at this particular time, with the obvious parallels. Is it possible that the play was both a warning to Elizabeth and an attempt to sabotage Essex's growing threat? For one

* See, for example, Evelyn May Albright, 'Shakespeare's Richard II, Hayward's History of Henry IV and the Essex Conspiracy', *PMLA* 46, 1931, pp645-719.

thing is clear in the play: although Richard does not deserve to be king, neither does Henry Bolingbroke, who is portrayed as a scheming Machiavellian hypocrite. As soon as Richard departs for Ireland, Henry arrives back in England with an armed force, insisting that he has returned only for his inheritance as the new Duke of Lancaster, but we know that he has really come for the crown. We are warned against thoughtless acceptance of Bolingbroke by seeing that he meets disapproval and opposition immediately after the *coup* and through his first pangs of conscience, which will increase in the plays to come. His usurpation will inevitably lead to equally dangerous consequences for the kingdom. As Henry IV, Bolingbroke is confronted with rebellion after rebellion.

Moreover, in 1595-7, when the play was written, there did not seem to be any immediate threat to the Crown from Essex. Is it possible that, by encouraging a parallel between Essex and the Machiavellian Bolingbroke, Shakespeare was trying to arouse suspicion about the Earl? At that time, a ruthless coup against a living and successful monarch by Essex was unlikely to succeed, but was the playwright issuing a warning about the future? We should remind ourselves that at this very time Bacon himself was warning Essex about his behaviour. In October 1596 he wrote to the Earl that he could never fully win the Queen while maintaining active military stature and directly courting the affections of the Commons: "I demand whether there can be a more dangerous image than this represented to any monarch living, much more to a lady, and of her Majesty's apprehension" (*Life and Letters*, ed. Spedding, vol. 3, p43). As we have already said, Bacon was by now becoming increasingly aware of the Earl's fascist tendencies.

Whatever Shakespeare's motives, *Richard II* dramatises the weaknesses of deriving political power either from divine right alone or from naked force and violence. And it is a theme to which the playwright returns again and again. Possession of a title in itself does not make a king. In *Macbeth* we see that King Duncan is good, wise and well loved. When Macbeth drinks the 'poisoned chalice' and becomes king by murdering him, he is haunted by his demons and becomes so obsessed with the maintenance of his power and position that he barely has time to be a real king. On the other hand, Banquo, who possesses no royal blood, deserves kingship through his honest, moral character. No matter how strong the forces of evil may be, Shakespeare seems to say, good will inevitably and ultimately triumph, and since this must be the will of God, it must be by 'divine right'. Therefore, although both Richard II and Macbeth take their 'divine right' for granted, it has nothing to do with royal heredity and derives instead from the quality of the man. Or indeed woman, for in *King Lear* Cordelia

is the most pure and virtuous of Lear's daughters, and therefore the most fit to rule, emphasising once again that 'divine right' lies not in the lineage or the name but in the heart and mind. We should also note that in this play it is Lear's absolutist refusal to listen to wise counsel that paves the way to disaster.

Of course, being sceptical about the divine right of kings or royal absolutism does not imply that Shakespeare was questioning monarchy *per se*. Nonetheless, he did show interest in other forms of government and, significantly, after the trouble with *Richard II* and at a time when English histories were being more and more heavily censored,* he switched to a Roman setting in *Julius Caesar*, probably written in 1599, and returned to it later in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. There is no indication in any of these Roman plays that Shakespeare is opposed to republicanism or that he supports autocracy against the people, despite what Hazlitt and others have said. Indeed, *Coriolanus* is, as Anne Barton suggests, unique in the canon for the tolerance and respect it accords an urban citizenry ('Livy, Machiavelli and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*', *Shakespeare Survey* 38, 1985, reprinted in Alexander, *Shakespeare*, pp67-90). They care about motivation, their own and that of their oppressors and, unlike the crowd in *Julius Caesar*, the citizens of the republic can think for themselves. *Coriolanus* is indeed a "store-house of political commonplaces", to use Hazlitt's words. It touches on the distribution of wealth, the problem of order, the relations of power, the education of elites, and many more.

The play is also partly a dramatisation of the Machiavellian thesis (in the *Discourses*, not published in English until 1636) that the conflict between the plebs and patricians, which endured throughout the history of the Roman republic, so far from being a weakness in the regime, was the source of its greatest strength. Coriolanus—"the supreme epitome of republican pre-Christian heroism"—hates the plebs because they are preoccupied with the safety and comfort of their bodies and care little for honour. He thinks they do not deserve their freedom because using freedom well requires virtue which they do not care about. His policy would lead to their enslavement and, had the tribunate not been instituted, they would have been subjected. As Jaffa says, the institution of the tribunes, the officers elected by the plebs to protect their rights, represents a decisive

* In March 1599 the Order of the Bishops included the injunction that "no English histories be printed except they be allowed by some of Her Majesty's Privy Council"; quoted in Shapiro, *op. cit.*, p154. This Bishops' Ban also decreed that no plays were to be printed "except they be allowed by such as have authority".

** Harry V. Jaffa: 'An Interpretation of the Shakespearean Universe' in: John Alvis and Thomas G. West: *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, 1981.

turn in Rome's history towards the mixed regime which became the essence of Roman republicanism. If the plebs had been subjugated as Coriolanus wanted then to be, Rome would have become, like Sparta, an oligarchic military regime whose army would have had to stay at home to maintain slavery.

Such is the argument of critics like Anne Barton and Harry Jaffa. If true, then it might even suggest that Shakespeare also favoured a mixed constitution or tripartite state in England, composed of kings, nobles and commons, in which Parliament represented the safeguard against tyranny. James I himself even made the parallel between England and republican Rome in 1606 when he attacked "tribunes of the people whose mouths could not be stopped", by whom he meant his opponents in Parliament. If Shakespeare sympathised with some of their arguments, then once again we have confirmation of his view that authority, or the right to exercise power, has to be earned and that it derives from a willingness both to consult with others and to put their interests first.

There is nothing in what we have said about Shakespeare's attitude to the monarchy with which Bacon would disagree. We have to bear in mind that he was an aspiring politician and had to be careful in his choice of words. He certainly did tell James I that nothing could bring him to disagree with the 'profound' philosophy of the *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, which James had written in defence of the divine right of kings in 1598. But the meaning here is not clear. The fact that he could not 'bring himself' to disagree does not preclude the possibility of actual disagreement; and by referring to James's philosophy as 'profound' he may have meant simply that it was obscure. Such double meanings are typical of Bacon throughout his writings, as of course they are of Shakespeare.

James believed that the king sat in the throne of God and in the *Trew Law* he wrote of the monarch as "making statutes and ordinances... without any advice of Parliament or estate". He also suggested that the king could suspend laws made in Parliament "upon causes known only to him". While he does not believe that Bacon's views were as extreme as the king's, J.W. Allen maintains that he does seem to have supported the claims of the Crown to disregard the law when a real and urgent need arose (*English Political Thought, 1603-60*, 1938). However, Allen's evidence supports no such conclusion. First, he mentions a 1611 naval case in which Bacon claimed, rightly as a matter of fact, that there was nothing in law to prevent the king from empowering commissioners to imprison or seize the goods of subjects without reference to a court of law. Here Bacon merely stated the legal position—he was not expressing moral approval.

The second piece of evidence is Allen's mistaken interpretation of a passage from Bacon's essay *Of Judicature*. According to Allen, Bacon is saying that when law obstructs action in the public interest, then it must be disregarded if the king so decides. But a study of the whole passage reveals that Bacon is exhorting lawyers not to prevent the king from acting in the public interest (in his first example, Allen has transposed an 'is' into an 'ought'; here he transposes an 'ought' into an 'is'):

"Judges ought, above all, to remember the conclusion of the Roman Twelve Tables, *salus populi suprema lex* ('the safety of the people is the supreme law'); and to know that laws, except they be in order to that end, are but things captious, and oracles not well inspired: therefore it is a happy thing in a state, when kings and states do often consult with judges; and again, when judges do often consult with the king and state... Let judges also remember, that Solomon's throne was supported by lions on both sides: let them be lions, but yet lions under the throne, being circumspect that they do not check or oppose and points of sovereignty".

Perez Zagorin is adamant that Bacon "was emphatically a monarchist" (*op.cit*, p149). But this is much too simplistic. If we look elsewhere, we shall see that Bacon rejects despotism. In the *Advancement* he argues that a prince becomes a tyrant as soon as he takes "all into his own hands" and does not care "for the consent of his nobles and senate" but administers "the government by his own arbitrary and absolute authority". He also suggests not only that monarchs be susceptible to the advice of scholars but also that they themselves be learned: "It cannot be but a matter of doubtful consequence if states be managed by empiric statesmen, not well mingled with men grounded in learning. But contrariwise, it is almost without instance contradictory that ever any government was disastrous that was in the hands of learned governors". In this sense, Bacon was clearly an opponent of autocracy. Moreover, in the chapter on 'Typhon, or a Rebel' in *The Wisdom of the Ancients*, he comments that princes, "being debauched by the long custom of empiring, and bending towards tyranny, they endeavour to draw all to themselves, and, contemning the counsel of their nobles and senators, hatch laws in their own brains—that is, dispose of things by their own fancy and absolute power".

In the essay *Of Nobility* Bacon says: "A monarchy, where there is no nobility at all, is ever a pure and absolute tyranny, as that of the Turks". Indeed, in this essay Bacon even goes further and praises certain 'democracies': Switzerland, "for utility is their bond, and not respects" (by 'respects' he means consideration of particular persons); and Holland which "in their government excel; for where there is an equality the consultations are more indifferent, and the payments and tributes more

cheerful". Such statements make it likely that Bacon had no preconceived notions about the ideal form of government. Ultimately, it should be judged by its 'utility', but utility in a moral sense because "power to do good is the true and lawful end of all aspiring" (*Of Great Place*). This is an essential part of the message of Shakespeare's political plays in a nutshell, as is also another telling remark in the same essay: "It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty; or to seek power over others, and to lose power over a man's self" (*Of Great Place*). The megalomania of Macbeth and Lear are obvious examples of the very process which Bacon is describing. At the same time in *Lear* we are offered a reversal of this process in what is clearly a redemptive parable of a king who loses the world but gains his soul.

Order, Rebellion and Poverty

In Shakespeare's play about the Trojan war, *Troilus and Cressida*, the Greek general Ulysses argues that a society without a fixed and stable order cannot survive:

*"O, when degree is shak'd,
Which is the ladder of all high designs,
The enterprise is sick! How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenity and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels,
But by degree stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows!"* (1.3.101-110)

Ulysses advocates a world where every part of society—army, school, city, community—is governed by 'degree', which means everybody knowing their place on the 'ladder' governed by the 'high designs' of God, king and general, and not trying to climb above it. In *Coriolanus*, the Roman tribune Menenius explains this with a parable. The human body only works when every organ sticks to its job, he says. If the stomach became fed up and tried to rise above its humble position, the whole body would die. The same is true, he says, of society. Of course, we cannot necessarily assume that the dramatist shared these views. Yet Bacon seems to have done so. In the *Advancement* he writes: "Nothing doth derogate from the dignity of a state more than confusion of degrees". The idea of a civilised order in terms of music is also found in the *Advancement*: "men, who are full of savage and unreclaimed desires of profit, of lust, of revenge; which as long as they give ear to precepts, laws, to religion,

sweetly touched with eloquence and persuasion of books, sermons and harangues, so long is society and peace maintained; but if these instruments be silent, or that sedition and tumult make them not audible, all things dissolve into anarchy and confusion".

Certainly, the plays show rebels and bad characters being punished. When Macbeth murders King Duncan, while the king is staying as a guest in his castle, we see it as a crime against a number of moral codes—a breach of proper hospitality, a crime against the divinely appointed king, and so when Macbeth is killed at the end of the play, we see this as the rightful punishment of a man who has tried to overturn the order of the world. On the other hand, the fact that Shakespeare also depicts evil rulers who are justly overthrown does not necessarily mark him as a progressive or even a radical.

In plays like *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* the portraits of mob rule seem to suggest a political conservatism: the common man does not have the capacity to rule himself. In the former play the plebeians are worked up into a fury by Mark Antony and become a lynch mob, threatening Cinna the poet that they will "tear him for his bad verses", and *Coriolanus* calls the citizens "the beast with many heads". But perhaps it is aristocratic attitudes rather than conservatism as such that we detect in this bias. Indeed, throughout the works the independent sub-noble world of artisans and craftsmen exist largely as the dramatist's butt: Bottom and co. in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, are used to amuse the nobility by their clumsiness. And there is no doubt that Bacon shared these aristocratic attitudes. In his essay *Of Praise* he writes: "For the common people understand not many excellent virtues: the lowest draw praise from them; the middle virtues work in them astonishment or admiration; but of the highest virtues they have no sense or perceiving at all".

If Shakespeare supports the social order, then he is not likely to sympathise with rebellion to overthrow it, especially when its consequences are often the opposite to those intended. Thus *Julius Caesar*, written in 1598-99, has parallels similar to *Richard II*. Again, there is an ageing autocrat who is overthrown by a Machiavellian warrior and the reader can hardly avoid seeing analogies between the final years of the Roman Republic and *fin-de-siècle* England. Essex and his circle are represented by Cassius and his co-conspirators, and again Shakespeare seems to be warning against the chaos and blood-letting that tended to result from assassination. Instead of averting dictatorship, the killing of Caesar hastens it. However noble Brutus's motives, "an action carried out in the name of "liberty, freedom and enfranchisement" (Act 3, Scene 1) leads to "domestic fury and fierce civil strife" (Act 3, Scene 1), followed by the deaths of all

the conspirators (Robin Headlam Wells: *Shakespeare's Humanism*, 2005, pp140-141). Conspiracies, it seems, seldom achieve their intended effects. Headlam Wells argues that "the play is Machiavellian in the sense that it dramatises a pragmatic and sceptical view of politics which recognises that virtue and utility are not always compatible" (p143). In a note he quotes from Machiavelli's *The Prince*: "How men live is so different from how they should live that a ruler who does not do what is generally done, but persists in doing what ought to be done, will undermine his power rather than maintain it".

In *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (1948), John Danby asks the question: when is it right to rebel? (see pp196-205). He concludes that Shakespeare's thought runs through three stages: (1) In the Wars of the Roses plays, *Henry VI* to *Richard III*, he shows that rebellion against a legitimate and pious king is wrong, and only a monster such as Richard of Gloucester would have attempted it; (2) In *King John* and the *Richard II* to *Henry V* cycle, Shakespeare adopts the official Tudor ideology, by which rebellion, even against a wrongful usurper, is never justifiable; (3) and from *Julius Caesar* onwards, whenever Shakespeare dramatises regicide, usually to justify tyrannicide, he moves away from English history (probably in consequence of Essex's rebellion of 1599, in which Shakespeare's patron was implicated) to the camouflage of Roman, Danish, Scottish or Ancient British chronicle matter.

Danby's conclusion is that Shakespeare, while deliberately avoiding the metaphysical and doctrinal aspects of religion, "was thoroughly imbued with the finest spirit of Elizabethan Christianity" (p204). Shakespeare began by seeing a new thrustful godlessness attacking the pious medieval structure represented by the good king Henry VI. Regretfully, he then comes to terms with the times as he saw them under Elizabeth. Last, he recognised the iniquity of the Machiavel's rule. To this he opposed the society that Lear's and Gloucester's prayers demand, a transcendent society adequate to the necessity of a community of goodness in which Lear's regeneration and Cordelia's truth might be completed: A Utopia and a New Jerusalem" (p202). Later, he writes:

"I do not myself believe that there is a necessary contradiction between tragic vision and religious vision—though some tragedies can be irreligious... In Shakespeare's case, tragic clairvoyance and Christian perception are not mutually exclusive modes of vision. To me, the clairvoyance of *King Lear* is hardly distinguishable from religious insight. It is not only our profoundest tragedy; it is also our profoundest expression of an essentially Christian comment on society. Its gifts are those of gentleness, compassion and truth: patience and charity" (pp202-5).

We may not entirely agree with all of this comment, particularly the reference to the 'official Tudor ideology', but there are valuable insights here which may not be far off the truth.

Bacon's attitude to rebellion and civil war is no less equivocal than that towards monarchy. Nowhere does he issue an outright condemnation of rebellion. In the *Advancement* he points to one aspect of the moral dilemma by citing a very Shakespearean example:

"We see when M. Brutus and Cassius invited to a supper certain whose opinions they meant to feel, whether they were fit to be made their associates, and cast forth the question touching the killing of a tyrant being a usurper, they were divided in opinion; some holding that servitude was the extreme of evils, and others that tyranny was better than a civil war; and a number of the like cases there are of comparative duty; amongst which that of all others is the most frequent, where the question is of a great deal of good to ensue of a small injustice, which Jason of Thessalia determined against the truth; aliqua sunt injuste facienda, ut multa juste fieri possint ('some things must be done unjustly in order that many things may be justly done'). But the reply is good, Auctorem praesentis justitiae habes, sponsorem futurae non habes ('you have the author of present justice; you have not a surety for future justice'). Men must pursue things which are just in present, and leave the future to the Divine Providence."

From this we could conclude that Bacon would have condemned the conspiracy to murder Caesar, as indeed does the author of *Julius Caesar*. But in neither case is Caesar exonerated from some responsibility for his own death. In his short piece on the *Civil Character of Julius Caesar* Bacon explains his character in such a way as also to explain his fate. Although he regarded Caesar as the most formidable character of the Roman world, he also believed that he was naturally inclined to a despotic attitude which rendered him dangerous to the Republic and blind to his enemies. According to Bacon, he wished "not to be eminent amongst great and deserving men, but to be chief amongst inferiors and vassals". Moreover, he was so besotted by his own greatness that he no longer knew what danger was. This is exactly the same analysis as Shakespeare in the play, who makes Caesar utter the following:

*"Caesar should be a beast without a heart,
If he should stay at home today for fear.
No, Caesar shall not. Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he:
We are two lions litter'd in one day,
And I the elder and more terrible. (2, 2)*

Bacon's political programme has to be pieced together from his various

writings, but when we consider it as a whole we discover that it has many anti-establishment elements. Indeed, Hugh Trevor-Roper considers it a curious irony that the Country Party of the 1630s and 1640s lined up with Bacon's rival Coke when it was Bacon who advocated the very policies of decentralisation of power and laicisation that were at the heart of their own politics:

"All the reforms of the law which would be loudly and angrily demanded by a rebellious people in the 1640s had been lucidly and loyally demanded, a generation before, not by Coke, but by Bacon. It was the same in education. Bacon, the greatest advocate of lay reason and lay religion, would have reformed the universities, dethroned Aristotle, introduced natural science; he would have stopped the growth of grammar schools and built up elementary education; he would have decentralised charitable foundations, whether schools or hospitals, for 'I hold some number of hospitals with competent endowments will do far more good than one hospital of exorbitant greatness'; he would have decentralised religion, planting and watering it in the forgotten 'corners of the realm'; and he would have decentralised industry, trade, wealth, for 'money is like muck, not good except it be spread'. When we read this evidence—evidence which is obvious, inescapable, constant throughout his writings—we can easily agree with the greatest of English seventeenth century historians, S.R. Gardiner, that if only Bacon's programme had been carried out, England would have escaped the Great Rebellion" (*Religion, the Reformation and Social Change*, 1967, pp244-5).

Bacon was particularly concerned with the problem of poverty. Indeed, his aim of new sciences was primarily designed to this end. In *The Masculine Birth of Time* he addresses the prospective student of the new philosophy:

"My dear, dear boy, that which I purpose is to unite you with things themselves in a chaste, holy, and legal wedlock; from which association you will secure an increase beyond all the hopes and prayers of ordinary marriages, to wit, a blessed race of Heroes or Supermen who will overcome the immeasurable helplessness and poverty of the human race, which are the source of more destruction than all giants, monsters, or tyrants, and will make you peaceful, happy, prosperous, and secure".

It was his hatred of poverty which led Bacon to attack the practice of enclosure and the accumulation of wealth in a few hands. In *The True Greatness of the Kingdom of Britain* he again praises the example of the Low Countries, "who could never have endured and continued so inestimable and insupportable charges, either by their natural frugality or by their mechanical industry, were it not also that their wealth was dispersed in many hands, and not ingrossed in few; and those hands no so

much of the nobility, but most and generally of inferior conditions". This idea is repeated in the essay *Of Sedition and Troubles* from which Trevor-Roper quoted: "Above all things, good policy is to be used, that the treasure and moneys in a state be not gathered into few hands; for, otherwise, a state may have a great stock, and yet starve: and money is like muck, not good except it be spread".

However, Bacon's was not the extreme vision of Thomas More. He disliked extreme radicalism in politics as much as extreme conservatism:

"All those which have written of laws, have written either as philosophers or as lawyers and never as statesmen. As for the philosophers, they make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light because they are so high. For the lawyers, they write according to the states where they live, what is received law and not what ought to be law; for the wisdom of a law-maker is one and of a lawyer is another" (*Advancement*).

Beyond Politics?

Ellis-Fermor argues that Shakespeare gives first a series of studies of individuals sacrificed in one way or another to the exigencies of public life, and then moves to a final and positive study in the last plays of the individual spirit triumphing over the superficial values of politics. In other words, the view ultimately prevails that politics can have no final claim on the individual life of the spirit: thought is free. John Wilders also draws attention to this message: "At the heart of Shakespeare's conception of politics lies the paradox that a rule of law is necessary to protect men against their own inherent savagery, yet few men are willing to be governed, and government itself may destroy the unique individuality of a Caliban (or a Hotspur or a Falstaff) which is the very quality which gives society its richness and vitality" (*The Lost Garden*, p129).

This disillusionment with the contemporary shows of politics was certainly felt by Bacon. On the day after he appeared in the Court of Chancery in 1617 in purple satin, he wrote in a letter that "this matter of pomp, which is heaven to some men, is hell to me, or purgatory at least". These words are echoed by Lear in his madness: "Take physic, pomp, expose thyself to feel what wretches feel". And again: "Through rough tatter'd clothes great vices do appear: robes and furr'd gowns hide all". The truth is, as we have already seen, that Bacon never felt career politics to be congenial to his nature, but he nevertheless felt it was his duty to play a part because politics is necessary to the good society. Towards the end of his life he admitted that "my soul hath been a stranger in the course of my pilgrimage". This is precisely the impression we get of Shakespeare's

attitude, and it connects with what Wilders calls the paradox of political activity.

I think, though, that in his Jacobean plays it is not so much that Shakespeare shifts from an emphasis on politics to an avowal of transcendent values; rather, he tries to integrate politics into a more general ethical and philosophical pattern. Earlier, Henry V had posed the dichotomy: "Every subject's duty is the King's, but every subject's soul is his own". Certainly, as members of a community, our duty is to work rationally for the good of the community, but in his Jacobean plays especially Shakespeare demonstrates that this duty applies to kings as much as to their subjects. In this respect, a play like *King Lear* is just as 'political' as, say, *Henry V*, but the message is now much more critical. It is that kings should be concerned less with their divine right and more with their divine duty. Lear realises his fault in the prayer in Act 3, Scene 4, from we have already quoted:

*"I'll pray, and then I'll sleep.
Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads, and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these? O I have ta'en
Too little care of this: take physic, pomp
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just".*

Here the author reveals his own concern with, and perhaps even neglect of, "the immeasurable helplessness and poverty of the human race", as Bacon put it. But it is not merely Shakespeare's concern that is essentially Baconian: his remedy is identical. Gloucester expounds it in Act 4, Scene 1:

*"Here take this purse, you whom the heaven's plagues
Have humbled to all strokes: that I am wretched
Makes thee happier: Heavens deal so still:
Let the superfluous, and lust-dieted man,
That slaves yon ordinance, that will not see
Because he does not feel, feel your power quickly:
So distribution should undo excess,
And each man have enough".*

The concern with the problem of poverty was not peculiar to Bacon or Shakespeare, although it was a largely aristocratic rather than bourgeois preoccupation. But the solution was much less usual. Yet here it is, spelt

out clearly and emphatically in the prose of the aristocrat and in the plays of the poet.

The bourgeois emphasis was on rights and liberty. But Bacon tends to denigrate or at least qualify liberty. "Liberty plucks justice by the nose", declares the Duke in *Measure for Measure*. And, of course, there is the ironical exclamation of Brutus after the murder of Caesar: "And waving our red weapons o'er our heads/ Let's cry 'Peace, freedom and liberty'". Madame Roland's cry—"Ah, liberty what crimes are committed in thy name"—would have been echoed by Shakespeare or Bacon, who significantly wrote no essay on this theme.

For the essayist, as for the dramatist, while the freedom of the individual mind is paramount, the freedom of the individual's actions must be restrained in the interests of the wider community. We have to adjust our rights to the rights of others, while maintaining the truth of our inner vision. Such is Shakespeare's approach to the political problem, as it is the approach of Francis Bacon. It was essentially an expression of the custom of *'noblesse oblige'*—an aristocratic concept which had no affinity with bourgeois ideology. It offers further rebuttal of the mistaken identification of the poet with the petty bourgeois tradesman from Stratford.