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SHAKESPEARE'S IDEAS

More Things in Heaven and Earth

David Bevington

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To Stanley Wells

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I

A Natural Philosopher

TOUCHSTONE Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?

CORIN No more but that I know the more one sickens the worse at ease he is; and that he that wants money, means, and content is without three good friends; that the property of rain is to wet and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun; that he that hath learned no wit by nature nor art may complain of good breeding or comes of a very dull kindred.

TOUCHSTONE Such a one is a natural philosopher.

(As You Like It, 3.2.21–30)

Even if Shakespeare was not a philosopher in the sense of writing essays or treatises arguing philosophical positions and proposing an embracing philosophical scheme, we need to take the ideas in his plays and poems seriously. This book is dedicated to the proposition that the writings of Shakespeare reveal the workings of a great mind. True, we have no literary criticism or other theorizing as such from his pen. Unlike his near-contemporary Ben Jonson, whose theories of dramatic art are loudly proclaimed in prologues, manifestos, satirical diatribes, and recorded conversations, Shakespeare never speaks in his own voice about his ideas on writing or on what we would broadly call his ‘philosophy’. That is because he is a dramatist with a special genius for allowing his characters to speak on their own behalfs without his editorial intervention.

Shakespeare does not discuss philosophers very often, and may not have read widely in them. He cites Aristotle twice in throwaway comments (see Chapter 4). He never mentions Plato or his Academy. Socrates appears once by name as the hapless henpecked husband of

Xantippe (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 1.2.69–70). Shakespeare's four references to Pythagoras seem to regard his ideas as a bizarre joke. Seneca is named once as the quintessential 'heavy' dramatist, not as a philosopher (*Hamlet*, 2.2.400). Although the concept of stoicism is important to Shakespeare, as we shall see in Chapter 6, he uses the word 'stoics' only in a single comic remark to characterize students who prefer diligent study to fun and games (*Taming*, 1.1.31), and he says nothing about Zeno or his followers. 'Sceptic', 'sceptical', and 'scepticism' form no part of Shakespeare's vocabulary, however much he may have pondered what we would call sceptical ideas, nor does he name Pyrrhon or Pyrrhonism or Sextus Empiricus. Shakespeare tends to use 'epicurean' in its slang sense of 'hedonistic'. Medieval theologians like Abelard, Eusebius, Tertullian, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, William of Ockam, and Duns Scotus are nowhere to be found. So too with Renaissance neoplatonists like Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, and Baldassare Castiglione, or radical thinkers like Giordano Bruno. 'Lutheran' surfaces once (*Henry VIII*, 3.2.100) as a defamatory Catholic-inspired label for Anne Bullen. John Calvin's name is absent, even though his widely-circulated ideas are discernible. 'Machiavel' turns up thrice as a synonym for 'villain' or 'political intriguer'. We hear nothing of Agrippa, or Paracelsus, or Ramus. Shakespeare never names Montaigne, although his debt to one essay at least is evident in *The Tempest*.

Is Shakespeare gently laughing at himself when he has Touchstone describe Corin as a 'natural philosopher'? A 'natural philosopher' need not be a guileless innocent; the phrase can suggest one who is innately gifted and wisely self-taught, even if not schooled in a narrowly pedantic sense. It can also suggest one who studies 'natural philosophy', i.e., knowledge of the natural world.

Learned or not, the plays and poems are full of ideas. Writers on Shakespeare from Dr Samuel Johnson and John Keats to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Virginia Woolf, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom, Stanley Cavell, and Stephen Greenblatt have lauded Shakespeare as a great moral philosopher. The titles of numerous critical studies underscore the importance of the topic. Kenneth J. Spalding's *The Philosophy of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1953) discusses the subject under subheadings of 'The Mind of Shakespeare', 'Shakespeare and Man', 'Social Man', 'The Statesman', 'Individual Man', 'Man's Salvation', and 'The Last Question'. Franz Lütgenau's similarly-titled *Shakespeare als Philosoph*

(Leipzig, 1909) asks what Shakespeare's writings have to say about free will versus determinism, relativity vs. certainty, scepticism, Pythagorean doctrine, dualism, Pantheism, astrology, and still more. Ben Kimpel's *Moral Philosophies in Shakespeare's Plays* (Lewiston, ME, 1987) focuses on the duality of good and evil, arguing that Shakespeare ultimately endorses a providential reading of divine justice. John J. Joughin's collection of essays entitled *Philosophical Shakespeares* (London and New York, 2000), devoted to the postmodern proposition that we must acknowledge multiple philosophies in Shakespeare, begins with a foreword by Stanley Cavell addressing the critical problem of how to distinguish the ideas from the literary texts into which they are inseparably woven. Tzachi Zamir's *Double Vision*, subtitled *Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, 2007), analyzes the epistemological and moral bases of philosophical criticism as necessary groundwork for practical criticism. More studies of this kind are listed in the section on 'Further Reading' at the end of this book.

Important as the ideas are in Shakespeare's plays, we are on far less certain ground in attempting to determine which of them are specifically his own. Do Shakespeare's characters sometimes serve as mouthpieces for his own personal beliefs? The notion is attractive because the things that are said by Hamlet, or Lear, or Macbeth, or just about any other thoughtful character are so wise and stimulating and eloquently expressed that we like to imagine that we can hear the author himself. Yet we must be vigilantly aware that each speaker is a narrative voice, even in the Sonnets and other nondramatic poems. If that is true in nondramatic verse, it is insistently more true in drama. Knowing as little as we do about Shakespeare's personal views outside of his writings, we must exercise great care in assuming that we can hear him asking 'To be, or not to be' with Hamlet, or agreeing glumly with the Earl of Gloucester in *King Lear* that 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport', or endorsing Macbeth's nihilistic conclusion that 'Life's but a walking shadow'. One can as easily and fruitlessly generalize on the basis of Puck's 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or Feste's song, 'Then come and kiss me, sweet and twenty; / Youth's a stuff will not endure' in *Twelfth Night*. Shakespeare's utterances often achieve the status of proverbial speech because they are so persuasively and exquisitely worded.

This, then, is the challenge of this present book, as of other earlier studies that have asked about Shakespeare's ideas. He is a remarkable subject because he has revealed so little directly about himself while at the same time uttering such extraordinary wisdom that we want to understand him as a thinker. Biographical information about him has accumulated in considerable detail, but not in the form of letters written by him, or recorded conversations. Our materials for a study of Shakespeare's ideas must be the plays and poems that he wrote.

Shakespeare was a dramatist in ways that tend to conceal the author behind the work. He generally took his plots from known and published sources. The history plays and to an extent *Macbeth* take their basic narratives from Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, newly published in a second edition in 1587. The Roman plays, especially *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, take their narrative material from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated into English by Thomas North in 1579. Many other plays, including *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Othello*, and *Cymbeline*, are derived plotwise from Italian or other continental short stories, plentifully available in England in Shakespeare's lifetime and generally in translation. *Romeo and Juliet* takes as its point of departure a long narrative poem in English by Arthur Brooke called *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet, written first in Italian by Bandell and now in English by Ar. Br.*, 1562, with a long history of earlier versions prior to that of the Italian short-story writer Matteo Bandello. *Hamlet* owes its plot ultimately to Saxo Grammaticus's *Historia Danica* (1180–1208). *Troilus and Cressida* goes back to Homer, Chaucer, John Lydgate, and William Caxton, among others, for its information about the Trojan War and the doomed love affair of the play's title characters. *Titus Andronicus* is seemingly based on a now-lost prose original of which analogs are still available. *Timon of Athens* seems to have been inspired by a dialogue called *Timon, or The Misanthrope*, by Lucian of Samosata (c. AD 125–80). *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, by Shakespeare and John Fletcher, goes back to Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale'. Sometimes Shakespeare extensively revised an already existing play, as in the case of *Measure for Measure*, *King John*, *Henry IV Parts I and II*, *Henry V*, *King Lear*, and perhaps *Hamlet*. He adroitly made use of classical and neoclassical comedies by Plautus, Ariosto, and others in such plays as *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. He showed that

he knew how to capitalize on the narrative traditions of pastoral and romance in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *As You Like It*, *Pericles*, and *The Winter's Tale*. Only *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Tempest* stand as plays for which no single organizing plot can be found as Shakespeare's source, and even here his borrowing from other writers is extensive.

This wide use of sources was characteristic of other Renaissance dramatists as well. As such it points to an important feature of early modern dramatic writing: the author-dramatist was essentially anonymous, or nearly so. Many plays were published without the author's name on the title page or anywhere in the edition. Shakespeare's name did not make an appearance on a printed play-text by him until 1598, when *Love's Labour's Lost* was published in quarto (a small and relatively inexpensive form of book publishing) as 'Newly corrected and augmented by *W. Shakespere*'. By that time Shakespeare may have been in London for a decade or so, gaining steadily in reputation as a dramatist: as early as 1592 his *1* and *3 Henry VI* caught the attention of his fellow-dramatists Robert Greene and Thomas Nashe, and by 1598 he was lauded by Francis Meres as the Plautus and Seneca of his generation. Yet official recognition in print came slowly. The reason we have no manuscripts of his today, or correspondence, or any biography of him written during his lifetime, is that dramatists like Shakespeare were regarded as popular entertainers. Sophisticated readers did not ordinarily 'collect' Shakespeare. When Thomas Bodley gave to Oxford University the library that today bears his name, instructing that institution to assemble in its collection every book published in England, he specified that they need not bother to include plays. Plays were ephemeral. The situation was perhaps like that of today in our cultural estimation of films: we are likely to know who has directed an important film, and who are its lead actors, but seldom are we able to come up with the name of the script writer or writers, unless they happen to be someone like Tom Stoppard with credentials from the more visibly cultured world of stage drama, fiction, poetry, music, etc.

Popular dramatists were generally known in Shakespeare's day as makers and compilers rather than as artists. They were artisans, often drawn (as in Shakespeare's case) from the ranks of performers, who in turn tended to come from the artisan class. James Burbage, builder of the Theatre in 1576 and father of Shakespeare's longtime leading man, Richard Burbage, had been a joiner or expert carpenter. Some

of Shakespeare's colleagues in the company known as the Chamberlain's Men and then the King's Men were members of London's powerful trade guilds, such as the Grocers and the Goldsmiths. Shakespeare's own father had been a manufacturer and seller of leather goods and other commodities in Stratford-upon-Avon. Even Ben Jonson had as his stepfather a mason, and was himself apprenticed for a time, albeit unwillingly, to that craft. Playwriting was a trade, like acting. The dramatist was a journeyman, a craftsman. Our modern conception of creative writing as usually autobiographical in its method and subject would have seemed strange to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Their job was to fashion theatrical entertainments around popular and familiar stories. Such an idea of authorship tends to distance a play from its writer in terms of personal expression. Can an author who chronicles the story of a Richard II or Hamlet be assumed to be searching out ways to express his own views on politics or human destiny?

Patronage of the drama, and in other arts as well, tended to encourage this same sort of craftsmanship in which the maker subsumed his identity into the work at hand. Many of the great paintings of the Renaissance were executed at the behest of church authorities and wealthy patrons. Artists might be commissioned to provide representations of religious subjects for a particular location in a particular church. The subject might well be dictated, such as the Annunciation, or the Descent from the Cross, in which case the details of composition might also be specified, including the size of the painting and the arrangement of the figures. Where, in such an instance, was there room for what we would call creativity? The results in the best-known instances could be astonishingly beautiful and revelatory of the artist's genius, and yet even here the degree of personal expression can be hard to determine.

The same is true in the drama of the early modern period. Shakespeare wrote for his patrons, who were in his case the playgoing public of London. What kinds of pressures would he have felt? Don Marquis, creator of a delightful newspaper column (1913–37) in the *New York Sun* called 'The Sun Dial' and featuring, among others, Archy the *vers libre* cockroach and Mehitabel the cat, devoted one piece to imagining what it would have been like for Shakespeare to write the kinds of plays demanded of him by his popular audiences. Archy the cockroach narrates the account, using no capitals or punctuation because he is

hopping from key to key on Don Marquis's typewriter. He imagines Shakespeare in a tavern, complaining to his drinking companions about the harsh demands placed on him by his unlearned spectators.

what they want
is kings talking like kings
never had sense enough to talk
and stabbings and stranglings
and fat men making love
and clowns basting each
other with clubs and cheap puns
and off colour allusions to all
the smut of the day,

Shakespeare laments. 'give them a good ghost / or two', and 'kill a little kid or two a prince', 'a little pathos along with / the dirt'.

what I want to do
is write sonnets and
songs and spenserian stanzas
and i might have done it too
if i hadn t got
into this frightful show game.

Marquis is of course exaggerating for comic effect, but his main point is still worth considering: a public artist in Shakespeare's situation needed to cater substantially to the tastes of his public. In the title of his 1947 study of Shakespeare, *As They Liked It*, Alfred Harbage adroitly captures the idea that the greatest of English writers achieved his success in good part by telling his audiences what they wanted to hear. To the extent that this is true, what room is left then for saying that the ideas expressed in his popular plays are Shakespeare's own?

The problem of identifying any ideas in the plays or poems as Shakespeare's own is compounded still further by Shakespeare's extraordinary ability to submerge his own personality as writer into the mindset of the characters he creates. He allows Falstaff, or Hotspur, or Cleopatra, or Lady Macbeth to speak his or her innermost thoughts as though without the intervening or controlling perspective of the author. Shakespeare's gift for creating unforgettable characters this way is legendary. It is sometimes called his 'negative capability', meaning

his skill as a dramatist in setting aside his own point of view in order to focus entirely on what the character he has created must be thinking at any given moment. The phrase is John Keats's in praise of Shakespeare, in a letter to Keats's brother Thomas written on 17 December 1817. The letter itself actually points in a slightly different direction: Keats writes that negative capability 'is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason', laying stress on the idea of genius as liberated by creative uncertainties. But the difference doesn't really matter; the definitions are alike in praising qualities for which Shakespeare is justly famous, and 'negative capability' has stuck as a way of describing Shakespeare's remarkable talent for showing us what his characters are thinking, not what the dramatist is trying to prove.

Plays vary greatly as to the extent to which they try to make an identifiable point. A central idea in back of Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1605–6) is that a nearly universal human greed for wealth ultimately consumes itself and is justly punished by its own excesses. We do not seriously distort the evident purpose of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1952) when we say that its aim is to criticize the kind of cultural and political hysteria that led to the Salem witchcraft trials of the late seventeenth century and then much later to the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s. Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* (32 BC) darkly affirms the great commonplace that the will of the gods must be fulfilled, even if in the process Oedipus must suffer a devastating tragic fall. These are all extraordinary plays; to say that they are didactic, in that we can identify an authorial intent, is to make an analytical observation, not to put these plays down as in any way deficient. At the same time, the genre of drama offers a very different alternative. It can encourage the clash of ideas in antithetical debate. Shakespeare is brilliant at this. Is Falstaff right, in *Henry IV Part I*, to celebrate joie de vivre and to revel in the ironies that surround the concept of honour in a time of war, or is Prince Hal right to conclude ultimately that Falstaff is a threat to public order? In *Antony and Cleopatra*, are we to admire Antony for embracing the unrepressed hedonism of Egypt, or should we shake our heads in dismay at his collapse into sensuality? The debate can be internal: is Hamlet right to delay his revenge until he is sure of what he is doing, or is he a coward to put off a duty that he is prompted to 'by heaven and hell' (*Hamlet*, 2.2.585)? He himself is far from sure of the answer. Generally, if we try to determine what is the 'message'

of a Shakespeare play, we are on the wrong track. How then can we talk about Shakespeare's ideas?

One approach is to eschew any search for the 'meaning' of a Shakespeare play in favour of asking, instead, what issues are at stake. What is being debated, and what are the arguments advanced on the various sides? Why do these issues matter, and to whom? How are our sympathies directed by the dialogue and the dramatic situation? To say that Shakespeare avoids propounding a 'message' is not to say that his plays avoid ethical and moral alignments. Quite the contrary. Part of Shakespeare's lasting appeal is that he comes across as so deeply humane. His plays surely invite us to deplore murder and senseless bloodshed, to applaud charitable generosity, to dislike characters such as Iago or Edmund who are cunningly vicious and self-serving, to appreciate romantic heroines like Rosalind and Viola who are so patient and good-humoured and resourceful, and to deny our sympathy to tyrannical bullies like Duke Frederick in *As You Like It* or the Duke of Cornwall in *King Lear* while wishing the best for those like Edgar and Cordelia and Kent in *King Lear* who are outcast and persecuted for their courageous if imprudent rightmindedness. This is not to assert that Shakespeare himself can be said to have endorsed those various views; no doubt we are inclined to suppose that he emphatically did, and that he wrote to foster such idealisms, but we simply have no direct evidence about the man himself. In the last analysis, the question is both unanswerable and unimportant.

To be sure, we do have the testimony of Henry Chettle in 1592 that a certain playwright, unidentified by name but almost certainly Shakespeare, was widely regarded as a man of pleasant bearing and honest reputation. 'Myself have seen his demeanor no less civil than he excellent in the quality he professes', wrote Chettle by way of apology for an attack on Shakespeare by Robert Greene in that same year. 'Besides, divers of worship have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty and his facetious grace in writing that approves his art' (*Kind-Heart's Dream*, 1592). Other testimonials tend to confirm that Shakespeare was well liked, though we need to remember that Greene seems to have despised Shakespeare as an unprincipled plagiarist. Another tribute lauds Shakespeare as one of the most 'pregnant wits' of his time (William Camden, *Remains of a Greater Work Concerning Britain*, 1605), concentrating on his greatness as a writer without saying anything about him as a person. All in all,

these testimonials give us almost nothing to go on in determining whether Shakespeare as a man can be said to stand behind the rich and multitudinous ideas embedded in his writings. We do have the plays and poems, however, and they collectively give evidence of a deep moral commitment that we can locate in what we call ‘Shakespeare’, meaning not only the plays and poems but the multitudinous responses they have elicited over the four centuries or so since Shakespeare wrote.

The plan of this book will be to proceed topically, asking what the plays and poems suggest in continual debate about an array of topics: sex and gender, politics and political theory, writing and acting, religious controversy and issues of faith, scepticism and misanthropy, and Last Things, including the approach of retirement and death. I take up these topics, broadly speaking, in the order in which they seem to have fascinated Shakespeare. Sex and gender are especially relevant in his early years while he is writing romantic comedies. Politics become the central topic of the history plays that culminate in the great series about Henry V written in the late 1590s. Critical ideas about writing and acting are explored with special cogency in the Sonnets and in the plays of Shakespeare’s middle years. Religious controversy and sceptical challenges to orthodoxy come increasingly into focus as Shakespeare turns to the painful dilemmas of the great tragedies in the early years of the seventeenth century. Finally, ideas of closure in both artistic and personal terms seem to be of deep concern to Shakespeare as he contemplates his approaching retirement from the theatre. At the same time, because these topics defy any neat chronological arrangement, and because the topics themselves constantly overlap (as when issues of religion take on political dimensions), the examples and attitudes will range freely over the entire canon.

Implicit in the arrangement of this book is an argument that the ideas presented in Shakespeare’s plays and poems develop over time, and do so in ways that would seem to reflect the author’s changing intellectual preoccupations if not indeed something approaching his own philosophical outlook on important problems of human existence. In his early plays, he dwells in his romantic comedies on the nature of loving relationships, both opposite-sex and same-sex. What can humans discover about who they really are from the ways they behave when they fall in love? How do young men and women differ from one another as they approach the hazards and rewards of amorous

courtship? What indeed is the very nature of gender? Is it inherent in the human constitution, or is it, in part at least, socially constructed? Why are the young women in Shakespeare's comedies often so much smarter and more knowledgeable about themselves than are the young men? To what extent should young people regulate their conduct according to social codes that, in Shakespeare's day especially, mandated marriage as a pre-condition for sexual fulfillment? What role should loving friendship play in the formation of lasting relationships? When two men or two women experience feelings of deep love for one another, should erotic pleasure be embraced also? These are questions that were bound to fascinate a youngish writer still in his late twenties and early thirties when he wrote the plays and poems of the 1590s.

The English history plays are from the same period of Shakespeare's career, in the 1590s. Can we discern in them a developing political philosophy that might seem appropriate to a young author intent on understanding the history of his country and its political institutions, while pondering at the same time what England is like as a place for a young man of ambition to come to terms with the demands of male adulthood? The history plays give Shakespeare immense scope for studying political impasse and the clash of contending ideologies. Is his response that of a political conservative or liberal? These terms change meaning over time, of course; in Shakespeare's case, are we to see him as a defender of the Tudor monarchy? Is he a social conservative in his presentation of class differences, or something more iconoclastic? Is he a defender or critic of war? Is he suspicious of political activism by the common people, or is he sympathetic toward ideas of popular resistance to tyranny, or something of both? Do his ideas about such matters change over time? Perhaps what we should focus on is the development of political ideas in his history plays, as those ideas shift from a broadly providential interpretation of England's civil wars of the fifteenth century to a more pragmatic and even existential view of historical process in the story of Henry IV's usurpation of power from Richard II and its aftermath in the reign of Henry V. To the extent that we can see Shakespeare exploring a more Machiavellian view of historical change, even if as dramatist he withholds his own personal judgement of the matter, we can perhaps see some preparation for the depictions of religious and philosophical scepticism that are to come in the plays of the following decade.

Shakespeare's ideas on his craft as a dramatist and actor, implicit in all he wrote, are explored with special intensity in the Sonnets, in *As You Like It*, and in *Hamlet*, written more or less at the turn of the century when Shakespeare was in the process of shifting genres from romantic comedies and English history plays to problem plays and tragedies. His ideas on art seem well calculated to arm him for the encounter with the large philosophical problems shortly to come in his way. Poetry and drama are, to Hamlet and other eloquent speakers on the subject, ennobling enterprises, deeply moral in the best sense of promoting virtuous behaviour through positive and negative examples. Because great art is immortal, it is able to transcend human mortality and time. To be great art it must address itself to a high-minded audience of those who truly understand; it must not cater to buffoonish tastes or mere popularity. It must approach any classical 'rules' of dramatic structure with great caution, and be ready to construct dramatic genres in a pragmatic and experimental way. Aristotle's notion of *hamartia* (mistake or flaw) can sometimes prove useful in writing tragedy, sometimes not. The important thing, seemingly, is to be flexible and avoid dogmatism. Whether Shakespeare knew Aristotle's *Poetics* is very much open to question, but he must have been acquainted with neo-Aristotelean practice. He makes use of it when it suits his purposes, and often not. He avoids intemperate theorizing.

Questions of religious faith also come into special focus in 1599 and afterwards, as Shakespeare turned increasingly to the writing of problem plays and tragedies. In an age of heated religious controversy, Shakespeare seems to have found himself drawn more and more to the depiction of religious and ideological conflict. He displays a deep knowledge of doctrinal differences, which he generally portrays even-handedly. He makes use of anticlerical humour as did other dramatists and writers, but generally in a more temperate vein. Occasional disparaging remarks about Jews are offset by a characteristic Shakespearean sympathy for those who are the subject of ethnic or racial hatred. Toward Puritans he is less charitable, perhaps because of the virulent opposition of some religious reformers to the stage. His presentation of ghosts, fairies, and other spirits is wittily theatrical, freely admitting them into his plays but in such a way as to leave open the hotly debated issue as to whether such spirits are 'real'. Toward questions of determinism versus free will and the existence of heaven and hell he is equally tactful and indirect. The spiritual and religious values

that he seems especially to prize are those to be sought through charitable generosity, penance, and forgiveness rather than through religiously institutional means.

In the period of his great tragedies, Shakespeare explores pessimism, misanthropy, misogyny, and scepticism with devastating candour and ever-increasing intensity. *Troilus and Cressida* offers a totally disillusioning view of the most famous war in history and its demoralizing effects on both sides. Human relationships fall apart. Supposed heroes betray their best selves in vain assertions of manhood. The hero of *Hamlet* is obsessed with the perception that the world in which he lives is nothing but a 'pestilent congregation of vapors'. His mother's desertion of her dead husband's memory prompts him to accuse womankind generally of frailty and sensual self-indulgence. Misogyny assumes a new urgency in these two plays, as also in the 'Dark Lady' Sonnets: whereas before, in the romantic comedies, male fears of womanly infidelity were unfounded and chimerical, those fears now take on the disturbing urgency of fact. The dispiriting ending of *Julius Caesar* seems to illustrate the sad truth that human beings are sometimes their own worst enemies; in the unpredictable swings of history, nobly intended purposes too often result in the destruction of those very ideals for which the tragic heroes have striven. *Othello* and *King Lear* turn to even darker scenarios by introducing us to villains who see no reason to obey the dictates of conventional morality. The unnerving success of Edmund especially, down nearly to the last moment of *King Lear*, seems to demonstrate with frightening clarity that the gods worshipped by traditionalists like Lear and Gloucester will do nothing to aid old men in distress; indeed, the gods may not exist. The deep pessimism and misanthropy of *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus* do nothing to relieve the existential angst.

Shakespeare's late plays offer a kind of reply or final counter-movement in his career as he moves from thesis (the early work) through antithesis (in the tragedies) to synthesis. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, the pessimism and misogyny of Shakespeare's earlier tragedies are transformed by stage magic into an unstable vision in which a man and a woman reach for mythic greatness by daring to cross the hazardous boundaries of gender difference. The genre of tragicomedy offers Shakespeare a dramatic form in which to fashion a series of happy endings out of the afflictions of his long-suffering characters. The assurances are indeed positive, but should not be read as a simple

refutation of the dispiriting circumstances over which they finally prevail. The gods do oversee human actions in these plays, but they are the gods of the artist's creation. Bearing pagan names like Jupiter, Juno, Ceres, Iris, and Diana, they are the stage contrivances of tragicomedy. The self-aware artifice of these plays turns our attention to the dramatic artist and his craft as he prepares for retirement and death. In this sense, even the late plays offer a profoundly sceptical view of the dramatist's world.

2

Lust in Action

Shakespeare's Ideas on Sex and Gender

The question of Shakespeare's ideas on sex and gender is our place to begin, not only because he addresses these matters intently in the ten romantic comedies he wrote in the 1590s as a young man, from *The Comedy of Errors* (early in the decade) down through *Twelfth Night* (around the turn of the century), but also because the business of locating what we might want to call a Shakespearean idea is especially problematic here. First, as we have said, 'Shakespeare' must be understood to mean not the man from Stratford-upon-Avon who became a famous writer but the plays and poems themselves collectively considered. The man who wrote them is largely inaccessible to us; the plays and poems must stand on their own. Then, too, attitudes toward sex and gender are notoriously located in cultural norms or in deviations from those norms. To the extent that Shakespeare was inescapably a man of his time, writing for popular audiences, he was bound to take popular attitudes on sex and gender into account.

Shakespeare may well have sensed a particular constituency in his audience to whom he wished especially to address the concerns embedded in his plays. London was of course not of one mind about matters of sexuality. Many ordinary citizens, including those engaged in the city's bustling commercial life, tended to endorse the church's insistence on sexual restraint before marriage and fidelity within the marriage contract. Citizens of this temperament tended to disapprove of profanity and anything they regarded as obscene or indecorous. They believed in upright dealings, both in their commercial life and in their domestic arrangements. They liked to think of themselves as decent Christians, piously obedient to the Ten Commandments and to the Beatitudes. As Protestants, they generally supported the campaign of