

Shakespeare's
Tragic
Skepticism

Millicent Bell

Yale University Press New Haven and London

Published with assistance from the foundation established
in memory of Oliver Baty Cunningham of the
Class of 1917, Yale College.

Published with assistance from the foundation established
in memory of Amasa Stone Mather of the
Class of 1907, Yale College.

Copyright © 2002 by Millicent Bell.
All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including
illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections
107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for
the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bell, Millicent.

Shakespeare's tragic skepticism / Millicent Bell.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-300-09255-5 (alk. paper)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616—Tragedies. 2. Shakespeare,
William, 1564-1616—Philosophy. 3. Skepticism in literature.
4. Tragedy. I. Title.

PR2983 .B45 2002

822.3'3—dc21 2002003122

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and
durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book
Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For all my loves:
Gene, Tony, Meg, Kiki, Tim,
Michael, Georgia, Rebecca, Alex*

Contents

Preface ix

introduction *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear,*
and *Macbeth* 1

one Hamlet, Revenge! 29

two Othello's Jealousy 80

three "Unaccommodated" Lear 138

four Macbeth's Deeds 191

epilogue The Roman Frame 241

Selected Bibliography 279

Preface

Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism has an ambitious aim. In writing it, I have tried to mark out a pathway across a trampled field, discussing plays more commented on over four centuries than anything else ever written except the Hebraic-Christian Bible. But in the case of Shakespeare, there is always something true and important that seems not to have been said before. As for the inevitable dependencies and derivations, everyone who has ever written about Shakespeare knows that it is really not possible to acknowledge fully the diverse influences of past criticism upon one's present thinking. So in writing this book I have avoided massive annotation. I have also tried to restrain myself from trumpeting my own discoveries too confidently or pointing insistently to my differences from others. The originality I may have achieved will be evident, I hope, to the fellow scholar whose business it is to keep track of such things. But the book is also addressed to the general reader who may or may not be interested in that sort of claim.

I was, of course, first prompted to write this study of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* by the realization that much previous discussion tended to confine and reduce their variousness and contradictions. There has always been a simplifying readiness to impose the critic's own con-

ventional ideas about life and its meaning upon Shakespeare—to make expectable, generally consoling stories out of the strange sequences of episode and language that actually present themselves. But those plausible stories, those familiar ideas that reassuringly “make sense” of experience for the majority of mankind in each generation—especially ideas about the definition and stability of human character and the moral significance of behavior, or even about the discoverable links to one another of human events—these were not always sustained by the plays. I began to suspect, as some others have, that Shakespeare’s was one of those rare minds that get around to the other side and see the moon’s other face, where, until space travel, no crater had a name. I discovered that I wanted to show the prevailing importance in his greatest plays of a skepticism that has been noted only in a partial, cursory way when it has been noted at all. If the plays express his thinking, he may have been someone who took seriously skeptical challenges erupting in his time, challenges that put received convictions into question. He seems to have shared with Montaigne, his near-contemporary, not only general doubts of what had long been assumed about the universe and mankind but also doubt concerning the reliability of our own power to perceive and conclude anything. Montaigne’s ideas, expressed in the famous essays Shakespeare certainly read, became a repeated reference in my book as representation of a general skeptical viewpoint emerging in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I have felt it important, however, also to note that what we witness as the poetry and action go forward in these plays is a nostalgic attachment to those very convictions skepticism denies. In these dramatic explorations one can sometimes come upon a denial of denial itself. The result is a *contest* of feelings and ideas. Contradicting effects come into view as we discover the theatricality of life in *Hamlet*, epistemological anguish in *Othello*, the view that man is a stripped animal in *Lear*,

the collapse of the sense of time's sequential order in *Macbeth*, or the revelation of history's duplicity in the Roman plays.

Criticism has tended to overlook the apparent inconsistencies, gaps, and contradictions in Shakespeare's tragedies which I see not as faults of craft but as part of Shakespeare's poetic-dramatic version of reality and expressions of a skeptic viewpoint. At the start of the twentieth century, the most influential of modern critics of Shakespeare, A. C. Bradley, insisted that "the center" of Shakespearean tragedy "may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing from action." But unlike many less keenly observant critics who have come in Bradley's wake, he himself admitted that this idea "was an exaggeration of a vital truth" because "it is a tragic fact" that "men may start a course of events but can neither calculate or control it." Bradley understood that the fearful and mysterious quality of tragic experience in these plays was not to be seen adequately as the operation of a benevolent moral order in which human choice always plays a role. Nor as the consequence of blind accident, either. Critics have rarely admitted that Shakespeare leaves the dilemma unresolved.

I am very grateful to have found encouragement for my own views in a dissenting strain of modern criticism. After the midpoint of the twentieth century, the notion that Shakespeare was a sort of existentialist or absurdist gained attention (partly as a result of Peter Brooks's 1962 production of *King Lear*, which had drawn inspiration from Beckett's *Endgame*). Readings began to appear, like that of Wilbur Sanders (*The Dramatist and the Received Idea*, 1968), which challenged the dominating "providential" interpretation Bradley had clung to despite his awareness of its dubious truth. William Elton, in his learned *King Lear and the Gods* (1966) buried the idea that *King Lear* was "optimistically Christian." Nicholas Brooke, in his 1979 edition of *King Lear*, observed that in this

play “all moral structures, whether of natural order or Christian redemption, are invalidated by the facts of experience.” Going further in the next decades, a new English school of “cultural materialists” soon questioned the presence in *King Lear* not only of the idea of universal divine governance but also of the humanist faith in the heroic self. Jonathan Dolliver, in *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare’s Contemporaries* (1984), said that the play “repudiates the essentialism which the humanist reading of it presupposes.” I have been influenced by this view, though I feel that it overlooks the *agon* which makes for tragedy, the struggle *for* a selfhood that we witness not only in *King Lear* but in the other plays.

I have remained impressed by Norman Rabkin’s pioneering suggestion, in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (1954) as well as his more recent *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (1981), that Shakespeare’s complexity was more than the “ambivalence” prized by the New Criticism. It was, Rabkin suggested, a species of “complementarity” analogous to the state of matter described by the physicist Oppenheimer. Rabkin observed: “What is problematic in *Hamlet* is not accidental but rather lies at the center of [Shakespeare’s] intention. . . . It is critical fideism [or] . . . ‘bardolatry’ to assume that every ‘ambiguity’ we can find is a mark of the poet’s genius. . . . But . . . virtually everything in the play is problematic.” I have found it useful to go back to see how Shakespeare’s relation to his sources often itself illustrated the problem as it was duplicated for the playwright in the creation of his plays. My perception that this relation was often an ironic one had been strengthened when I read Howard Felperin’s chapter on *Hamlet* in *Shakespearean Representations* (1977). Though my “archaeological” interest in sources is different from Felperin’s, I have agreed with him that Shakespeare’s plays “inhabit the gap between things and the pre-ordained meaning of things, between experience and

inherited constructs of experience.” Stephen Booth, in *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (1983), argues that *King Lear* “refuses to fulfill the generic promise inherent in its story.” According to Booth, Shakespeare demonstrates in his treatment of character “the impossibility of definition,” and that “all human perception of pattern is folly” — and yet manages to assert pattern and order through language and makes the audience “think in multiple dimensions.” *Macbeth*, Booth writes, is a play in which “finality is regularly unattainable,” and “characters will not stay within limits,” and “cause and effect do not work”; the play manipulates the audience to experience conflicted responses.

I have also tried to speculate about the origins of the plays in what existed in Shakespeare’s outer world. In a period of unprecedented social mobility and personal refashioning, the inconstancy of personal identity was felt by persons who would never have formulated such a matter so abstractly. Uncertainty about the explanation of events large or small, whether the succession of the crown or a failed harvest or a child’s death, made obscure, however unphilosophically, the very meaning of cause for ordinary men and women. I have trusted my feeling that the plays richly incorporate an awareness of many specific *historic* issues that entwine with more general problems. Mundane conditions of shifting social power, or of problematic class, gender, race, and generational relations, can be glimpsed in each play. One cannot write about Shakespeare’s great tragedies without taking account of the presence of such immediate historic realities as threats against the crown, the appearance of a new class of homeless persons, the eruption of the witch mania, racial encounters promoted by travel and urbanism, or increasing tensions between the old and the young. These specific social matters project themselves, for a mind like Shakespeare’s, upon ultimate questions, and promote the response of skepticism — as well as the resistance to it.

Like everyone writing about Shakespeare today, I have learned much from the no-longer-so-new “New Historicist” argument that social power and its associated ideology work to determine the meaning of Shakespeare’s plays as of other works of the literary imagination. But the debate still waged about the role of “subversion” seems unresolvable to me, for I believe that the complex of dominant orthodoxy is not easily simplified, nor is dissidence as obviously “contained” as some suppose. In Shakespeare the battle of contrary viewpoints is, as the witches say in *Macbeth*, both “lost and won.” And in this way Shakespeare stands outside any system that presumes the imperatives of a culture to be inherent in the nature of things—though the New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt probably would deny that there is any possible way of standing entirely “outside.” Shakespeare, one might almost propose, is an early-seventeenth century New Historicist of sorts, bounded by his own time and place yet enabled by his skepticism to view his culture with detachment.

Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) established a possible chart of the ways personal identity was constituted in sixteenth-century England, and this book has strengthened my acceptance of the view that personhood is invariably a construct of available models. But it is also my conviction that this very perception is at the heart of Shakespeare’s plays in a peculiar way. That essential interiority is implied by Hamlet’s statement that he has “that within which passeth show” has been claimed by some modern scholars who attribute to Shakespeare and the Elizabethan sonneteers the invention of the modern psyche. But this view is contested both by the mostly American New Historicists and by the Cultural Materialists, mostly English (Dollimore and Alan Sinfield and others, like Francis Barker, Anne Barton, and Catherine Belsey). I find that Shakespeare’s tragedies are themselves stagings of this debate. In *Hamlet* the new personal will that is the maker of

the self is forced into tragic contest with imposed social selfhoods but cannot find any other mode of being than the ones they offer.

One modern critical work bears a title I nearly borrow, Graham Bradshaw's *Shakespeare's Scepticism* (1987). Bradshaw's book has been an inspiring groundbreaker of my subject, though his coverage is different. He devotes most attention to works I don't discuss and deliberately declines concern with the context of Renaissance Early Modernism, its material conditions, and its war of ideas. But he does employ a concept he calls "perspectivism" to describe a relativism resulting from such unresolved contrasts of viewpoint as that of Othello and Iago. I have been interested further in the effect of uncertainty upon such polarities, however; in the case of Othello and Iago, I have wanted to show the origin of Othello's "fall" in the dissolution of these fixities, a dissolution that seems to validate Iago's own skepticism about the self. And I have insisted more than Bradshaw on the "tragic" element that I want to recognize in my own title—the effect of a skeptic view that is imposed upon idealism only at a terrible cost and after awful struggle.

My procedure has been a "close reading" of Shakespeare's words and of the succession of scenic effects, the accumulations and subtractions that establish or disestablish our impression that these resemble things happening to real persons. Consequently, among the scholars to whom I have incurred a clear debt there are, most especially, the editors of the editions of the six of Shakespeare's plays I have quoted from—G. R. Hibbard, editor of the 1987 Oxford *Hamlet*; E. A. J. Honigmann, editor of the 1997 Arden *Othello*; R. A. Foakes, editor of the 1997 Arden *King Lear*; A. R. Braunmuller, editor of the 1997 New Cambridge *Macbeth*; David Daniell, editor of the 1998 Arden *Julius Caesar*; and David Bevington, editor of the 1990 New Cambridge *Antony and Cleopatra*. In addition I have consulted other modern editions, like Harold

Jenkins's 1982 Arden *Hamlet*, Philip Edwards's 1985 New Cambridge *Hamlet*, Norman Sanders's 1984 New Cambridge *Othello*, Jay L. Halio's 1992 New Cambridge *King Lear*, Nicholas Brooke's 1990 Oxford *Macbeth*, Kenneth Muir's 1984 Arden *Macbeth*, and Michael Neill's 1994 Oxford *Antony and Cleopatra*. To the annotations of these editors I have resorted at numerous points for enlightenment in the interpretation of Shakespeare's language, though to none of them should my own sometimes dissenting readings be attributed.

Speaking of editions, I should point out that though I have resorted to editions of Shakespeare that generally "modernize" his original text somewhat, I have not followed the same practice with the three most important works from which he drew inspiration in writing the plays I discuss: Montaigne's *Essays* and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, both of which he knew in contemporary English translations, and Raphael Holinshed's historical chronicles of English and Scottish history. I have chosen to quote from John Florio's edition of the *Essays* (1603), Thomas North's of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes, Compared Together* (1579), and Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587) for the language that communicated to Shakespeare Montaigne's speculations, Plutarch's biographies, and Holinshed's historical interpretations. Sometimes even a turn of phrase in these sources enlightens one about Shakespeare's own view of the subject he took in hand.

Obligations are not, of course, confined to the influence of books. I am proud to declare my particular gratitude to two brilliant friends who were readers of my manuscript in its early stages, Helen Vendler and Christopher Ricks. They not only offered me warm interest and approval of what I had tried to do but gave my manuscript scrupulous reading and provided suggestions for improvement or development. Such encouragement also came from another prepublication reader, Michael Goldman. And portions of

the book written when it had hardly got under way had a fortunate reception for which I am grateful from the editors of the journals that published them in earlier form: *Yale Review* ("Othello's Jealousy," Spring 1997, pp. 120–136), *Hudson Review* ("Hamlet, Revenge!" Summer 1998, pp. 310–328), and *Raritan* ("Othello's Moor," Spring 2002, pp. 1–14). I am also very grateful for the care and interest in the book's development shown by my editors at Yale University Press, Lara Heimert and Dan Heaton. Besides these, there has been one constant counselor and affectionate encourager, my husband, Eugene Bell, who also read and expertly critiqued my manuscript.

Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism

Introduction

Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth

Shakespeare is no more ready than Iago to wear his heart upon his sleeve for daws to peck at, and maybe, like Iago, he really has no heart. What he is “trying to say” in his plays is hardly distinguishable in the chorus of ideas that his poetry and dramatic structures make us hear. The Romantics thought he was “myriad-minded”—Coleridge’s term. His entertainment of contraries, his apparent self-contradiction, showed the “negative capability” Keats said was the mark of literary genius. In modern times, T. S. Eliot felt that Shakespeare had no general ideas worth talking about. Nevertheless, Eliot offered his own egregious simplification, a “Senecan Shakespeare,” while warning against accepting it too seriously: “About anyone as great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong.”

In offering a skeptical Shakespeare, a doubter of many received views about humanity and the universe, I feel the diffidence Eliot urged one to have. I believe that the plays I am examining in this

book exhibit the effects of a potent philosophic skepticism verging upon nihilism. Yet criticism always simplifies. It is always an expression of the critic's own bias. Any correspondence I feel between my own doubting mood at the start of a new century and Shakespeare's own fin-de-siècle condition may be an illusion, just as the biases of earlier readers made them discover in Shakespeare their own confidence in a universe in which everything had its place and all meanings were secure and accessible. I know that my extract leaves something behind. Like others today, I may be too sure that an earlier school of critics was too sure that Shakespeare believed in the rule of divine intention and stable order in the cosmos and in human society. "Take but degree away, untune that string, and hark what discord follows" was, for a while—but no longer is—a favorite quotation from *Troilus and Cressida*. We are more likely, now, to think that it may not express the writer's personal view about the knowable design of the world and man's proper place in it. Do *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* give us confidence even about who one is? One's very soul, that immortal essence once thought to be God-implanted and unalterable, might, these plays sometimes suggest, be so elusive and variable as to bring its very existence into question. Though Shakespeare makes character so vivid that it survives all inconsistency and seems almost to require no proof of itself, I shall argue that the plays flout traditional ideas about human selfhood as a known and consistent quality by which a man or woman is identified. As for the plot of time by which events are linked together—a sequence and relation that makes rational sense of human experience—this, too, may not have seemed self-evident to Shakespeare either. His greatest plays seem to rely upon the commonsense logic that connects what happens with causes in circumstances and character; after all, it is only by believing in that logic that we are able to carry on in life. Yet significant gaps and paradoxes disrupt the sequences of action

in these plays and bring such coherence and meaning into doubt. They even, finally, provoke us to wonder what one might really know about these matters or anything else. One might doubt that human perception was a reliable instrument. Shakespearean confidence in that instrument seems hardly secure. Troilus's question in *Troilus and Cressida*, "What's aught but as 'tis valued?" persists in his major tragedies despite Hector's answer to relativism,

Value dwells not in particular will,
It holds his estimate and dignity
As well, wherein 'tis precious of itself.

Shakespeare allows us to put some trust in the prospect of getting at the final truth and worth of things, but he also invites us to question the absoluteness of our ideas and the validity of our impressions in the most radical way.

A working title for this book was *Honest Shakespeare*—meant to give our author a characterization ambiguously awarded to Iago. Although *honest* is also applied to someone like Desdemona—to mean female chastity as well as truthfulness—William Empson, who counted fifty-two occurrences of the word or its cognates in *Othello*, also pointed out years ago that it had an emergent sense as description of a type of person coming into view in the new century, one who was uninhibited by abstract principles. Iago is mistakenly called honest by those, like Othello, who trust him to tell the truth, and the term grows more and more ironic as it is applied to a man who lies continually and whose true feelings, if he has any, are disguised rather than evident. But a further irony may be suggested by the word's meaning as descriptive of a nonsense speaker who dispenses with exalted beliefs and declines to differentiate between seeming and being. In a word, a skeptic. Shakespeare, of course, the creator of Hamlet, who seems to see either man or woman not only as a quintessence of dust but also as

the paragon of animals—“noble in reason, infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god”—is hardly himself to be identified with the most cynical and hateful of all his characters. But the Iago who is so cruelly contemptuous of those, like Othello, who think life is more than a shadow-play of illusions, expresses a part of Shakespeare’s mind as much as Othello does. And this can be seen in the four great tragedies in which the will to belief in universal coherence and meaning struggles, often unsuccessfully, against skepticism. The title I finally settled on, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism*, stresses more accurately the way *tragedy* results from skeptic disillusion; Hamlet feels *at one and the same time* the wonder of the human creature and the beauty of the world which has become a “sterile promontory” to him. His mood is one of tragic loss from which he sees no recovery. This is a mood very different from that of Iago, who, unlike Othello, has never believed or loved, and whose character belongs to the genre of comedy.

That ideas contend with one another in Shakespeare’s writing is a quality he shares with the skeptic near-contemporary with whom I find him comparable, Michel de Montaigne. Montaigne’s curiously moving, often evasive, often self-revelatory confessions of alternating belief and unbelief are not merely a feature of his response to the dogmas of his religion. They are duplicated in his attitudes toward numerous other generally accepted assumptions about mankind and the world. Taken as a whole, Montaigne’s essays dramatize the unreadiness of his belief to come down on any conclusion without allowing for the possibility of its opposite. It is that representative skeptic method of balancing opposing views which was to be inherited from Montaigne by Pierre Bayle, who, at the end of the seventeenth century, made his famous encyclopedic dictionary a dramatization of the “method of doubt,” in which one opinion was posed against another. I am suggest-

ing that Shakespeare's thought, if we can assert anything about it, is, like Montaigne's or Bayle's, dialectic or dialogic. It pits an idea against its opposite. It looks to me as though Shakespeare—writing as he did at a time of cultural crisis when old convictions and new doubts were contending in men's minds—put contrary views into combat to test their strength. His plays are never allegorical—they never dramatize directly the contest of ideas—yet in them ideas contend from line to line in the richest language the stage has ever known. Through the action and language of the plays he invites his audiences to question, from moment to moment, the inherited, standard truths of his time. He also allows his audiences to view fearfully the results of abandoning the prop of such beliefs. This is the hidden structure of argument in Shakespeare's plays. Within these plays there are particular poetic occasions, like the soliloquies, which miniature such a structure. The most famous soliloquy of them all, Hamlet's "To be or not to be . . ." is just such a balancing of alternatives—about the "nobler" course, about the right expectation concerning death's aftermath, about the process of choice itself. The presence of contraries in the one man is, of course, notable in the case of Hamlet—a matter not merely of ideas but of a personality in which so many irreconcilabilities cohabit that he seems, if we watch too closely, to be not one but a dozen separate persons—and only Shakespeare's incomparable way of giving all his hero's speech a certain tone keeps us from noticing. One of the secrets of his high poetry is the way its complex verbal effects both enrich and contradict one another.

Where did Shakespeare's skepticism come from? I believe that the relation of contemporary economic and social turmoil to skepticism about personal definition is salient in *King Lear*. *Othello* may be said to take place in a Venice contemporary with the real London in which social identities might collapse and the self lose its moorings. *Hamlet*, for all its derivation from ancient legends of

tribal revenge, exhibits the personal self as something sought rather than securely endowed, a condition that bears a relation to the circumstances of a new age of social mobility. The anxiety produced by the tensions of Elizabethan-Jacobean power struggles has something to do with Macbeth's lost confidence in the progress of events as a comprehensible sequence. Over the whole complex scene in which thought and life interacted and reflected one another, there hung a doubt of the human capacity to perceive life truly. This doubt is expressed with a curious precision in *Othello* but could also have been heard in contemporary witchcraft trials, a parallel I shall have occasion to enlarge upon in my chapter dealing with that play.

Is it too simple to suppose that during the years 1564 to 1616, when Shakespeare was alive, the uncertainty of common life unsettled settled convictions? Shakespeare's plays, as I shall show, reflect anxieties somehow become more intense and universal than previously. To begin with, traditional ideas about an inexplicable correspondence between disturbances in the human and natural worlds seemed confirmed by contemporary phenomena to an extraordinary degree. Such natural disasters as the unusually frequent crop failures that caused universal distress in the 1590s anticipated the development of a world ruled by market forces remote and incomprehensible to the average person. Even a good harvest was perverse misfortune for the hoarder referred to by Macbeth's Porter — an apt illustration of life's non-sequiturs. That Lady Macbeth never explains the fate of those absent children to whom she once gave suck may not have seemed a puzzle to early audiences; only half of London's children survived into adulthood. The sudden death of old as well as young was a constant reminder of the inexplicable. In 1603, around the time when Shakespeare was writing *Measure for Measure* and *Hamlet*, plays full of verbal reference to death and disease, one-sixth of the inhabitants of London — thirty-six thousand

persons—died of the plague. The theaters were closed from mid-April of that year to the following April. James I was crowned in the midst of this siege of pestilence during a week in which more than eleven hundred Londoners died of it, and he had had to cancel his inaugural ride of pomp through the city. Like so much of life, the plague was a demonstration that disaster could strike without apparent origin—for so unknown was the source of infection that orders were sometimes given for the slaughter of the city's dogs and cats, though these animals were the population's safeguards against the London rat, the real vector. The secret causes of things were hidden from sight.

The Elizabethan-Jacobean person tended to believe that drought and pestilence were evidences of a universal disturbance. It would be readily felt that the storms that rage in *Julius Caesar* or *King Lear* are not merely poetic metaphor of social and political turmoil but literal symptoms of discord and disorder in all things. Not only had there been an earthquake in London in 1580, but the heavens seemed to manifest the arrest of normal rhythms in the universe by the nova in Cassiopeia in 1572, the comet of 1577, planetary conjunctions in 1583. Eclipses of the sun and moon aroused a peculiar terror. The obliteration of the heavenly regulators of the passage of day and night and of the months of the year was probably profoundly alarming to the average person, who did not understand the causes. Shakespeare seems to refer to contemporary astronomical perturbations and their effect on the public mood in all of his major tragedies. Taking note of the unnatural terrors of various sorts that accompanied the death of the old King Hamlet, Horatio mentions the phenomena supposed to have preceded the assassination of Caesar, recently depicted in Shakespeare's own play. To these portents Horatio adds "disasters in the sun" and the moon's eclipse, reminders to the theater audience of the solar and lunar eclipses of 1589–1601. Maybe G. R. Hibbard,

the excellent Oxford editor, goes too far in saying that Horatio's remark occurs only to advertise *Julius Caesar* and "does not advance the action in any way." Catastrophe will come to Denmark in due course, though it will take the whole length of the play for its full measure to arrive. Nature's disorders will be shown to correspond to human disorders.

So the night passed on the battlements of Elsinore, where men barely recognize one another and the ghost appears, is a night like that in *Macbeth* when Duncan will be murdered. There is relief when Horatio, in such exquisite fashion, welcomes the "morn in russet mantle clad [who] / Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill" at the end of the scene. But this mood is temporary. Ahead lie all the deaths, none of which is the consequence of any deliberated human plan—the deaths not only of Gertrude and Claudius, but of Polonius and Laertes and Ophelia, and of Hamlet himself—before the ghost's expectation of revenge is realized. On the night of Duncan's murder, the moon is down, as Fleance observes to Banquo, and he has not heard the clock. All heaven's "candles" are out, though Banquo dismisses this condition with a domestic witicism: "There's husbandry in heaven." More true to the portent of this particular night is the later description by Lennox and Ross of the hours that followed when the earth was "feverous and did shake," and "By th' clock 'tis day / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp"—as though there had been both earthquake and eclipse, bringing to mind images of deadly fever and strangulation. *Macbeth's* setting of darkness lit by guttering lamps, of foul weather that hides the illuminations of sun, moon, and stars, of day turned into night, is not simply a poet's way with gloomy scenic atmosphere but a reference to the terror of real moments remembered by Shakespeare's audience when the regulators of clock and calendar disappeared from the skies. Such phenomena seemed more portentous because human events abounded in sudden change and

inexplicable reversal of normal expectation. In *King Lear*, Gloucester, a representative credulous Elizabethan, fears that “these late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good” — reflecting a widespread response to the successive eclipses of both in conjunction with the Gunpowder Plot in the autumn of 1605. Othello sees his wife’s supposed betrayal as a time when there

should be a huge eclipse
Of sun and moon, and . . . th’ affrighted globe
Should yawn at alteration.

Such a sense of cosmic cause beyond mankind’s control made human events seem without origin in the will and character of any person—and was, indeed, a threat to the idea of moral responsibility. For all his predestinarian convictions, Calvin protested the determinism implied by astrology and would have accepted not only Cassius’s famous protest, “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings,” but also Edmund’s sneer at his father’s astrological notions and Iago’s insistence that “’Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus. . . . The power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills.” Calvin called the idea that “all the evils wherewith the stars threaten us do proceed from the order of nature” a “phantasy,” a way of pleading, wrongly, “that our sins are not the cause.” But the mystery of human causes often seems in Shakespeare’s plays, as it often seemed in common experience, to be impenetrable.

Socially, historians have come to realize, the England of “good queen Bess” was only fitfully merry for most, and uncertain for all. Economic dislocation and political instability were as present as the skies in the minds of English men and women as Elizabeth’s long reign came to an end. Those mysteriously frequent seasons of drought or blight had combined with the long-time trend of the enclosure of agricultural land to change the rural world, sending

men and women by the thousands in quest of a new basis of life, reduced to rags and beggary like Lear's "poor, naked wretches" and wandering along England's roads or seeking uncertain reconstitution in the great city of London. It was in 1601 that Parliament passed a poor-relief act obliging local parishes to help the needy, but reluctance to support the poor from other places led to "settlement laws" limiting migration. "Rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars" were subject to whipping, banishment from the realm, or even execution. There was an army of young men in their teens or twenties who came to London from their distant homes seeking apprenticeships and hoping to prosper in the city—lured by the generally delusive myth of Dick Whittington, the dream of a total change of self from low to high. There was a new breed of "masterless men," defined as persons who acknowledged no affiliation to any superior in the medieval ladder of authority.

Others discovered unprecedented opportunity in a volatile economy. The more fortunate or canny achieved a wealth that transported them to styles of life, to senses of selfhood, their parents could not have imagined. As Hamlet remarks to Horatio in response to the jokes of the gravedigger, "The age is grown so picked [concerned with fashion] that the toe of a peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier he galls his kibe" — that is, scrapes his heel. Shakespeare himself was an example of the way wealth and status were accessible in the booming theater industry of a London seething with moneymaking. There was a febrile "culture of consumption" which attracted the newly prosperous from the remotest parts of the land to the great city that was the source of political and economic authority. London grew from 80,000 to 200,000 inhabitants in Shakespeare's lifetime. So conspicuous were these newcomers that official proclamations were issued urging their return to their rural homes to maintain the immemorial order and separations of the commonwealth, for, as King James himself said in 1616,

“as every fish lives in his own place, some in the fresh, some in the salt, some in the mud: so let everyone live in his own place, some at Court, some in the Citie, some in the Country.” Yet even for the fortunate, there was always the risk of slipping into a limbo of declassification and poverty. Even a favorite at court might fall out of favor, a fortune might be wasted or lost. For so very many, either way, the scheme of life that had once defined what one was and how one would live one’s life had so thoroughly disappeared that there was a changeover in the traditional social categories that contain the self, and men and women found themselves behaving in new roles and differently costumed like actors in a play, as Shakespeare himself was likely to say.

During Shakespeare’s lifetime, moreover, it was not only new social actualities that placed former assumptions in doubt. The minds of men and women were charged with the effects of cultural reformulations of a philosophic or religious sort. As it has been easy enough for historians to see, the Protestant attack on the institutional authority of the Catholic Church had opened a new source of uncertainty as Protestantism began to multiply the churches. Each was militant for its own creed; there was no longer any unquestionable, universal guide. In England the religion endorsed by the authority of the state in Henry VIII’s time began by being Roman Catholic but went to a Catholicism in which the king was the head of the church yet persecuted extreme Protestants as well as “papists”; then the rule of the secular state became decisively Protestant under Edward VI and decisively Roman Catholic again under Mary Tudor; and Protestant again under Henry’s third child, Elizabeth. It was also true that though religious faith was more intense than it had been for centuries, this faith had the daunting task of keeping at bay the devastating idea that God did not exist at all. The charge of skepticism was everyone’s term of abuse, though Erasmus had defended his readiness to believe the truths of religion

precisely because he was a skeptic. He had declared, in *The Praise of Folly*, that “human affairs are so obscure and various that nothing can be clearly known”—so one had best be a Christian Fool and lead a Christian life. To this, Luther had expostulated, “How can he believe that which he doubts?” The Holy Ghost, he said, “is not a skeptic and he has not inscribed in our hearts uncertain opinions, but, rather, affirmations of the strongest sort.” Erasmus’s skepticism actually merged with the view of the counterreformation Jesuits concerning the necessity of dogma and the renunciation of reason, for both agreed that one could not arrive by one’s own powers of mind at true interpretations of Scripture, as the Reformers were saying. But the Protestant leaders wrote tracts attacking the skepticism of Rome. And the Catholic Church said that the Reformers were skeptics in disguise because they invited every man to discover his private truth—howsoever it differed from that of everyone else.

Renaissance skepticism was the special product of a state of belief that required an allowance of faith in the place of rational proof—thus an escape from, not an assertion of, atheism. Before writing his famous essays, Montaigne had translated a book by the fifteenth-century Spanish theologian Raymond Sebond, which was put on the Church’s Index of Forbidden Books because it seemed to exalt reason and experience over dogma. Montaigne claimed that he had been prompted to this task by the threat to his Catholic faith of Lutheranism—to which Sebond’s writing was a response. But when Montaigne came to write the longest and most famous of his essays, which called itself an “apologie” for Sebond, he himself went beyond his master in radical skepticism. Montaigne argued that reason was only an available aid to faith, as God willed it to be. “It is faith onely, which lively and assuredly embraceth the high mysteries of our Religion.” It is the obligation of man to put in the service of faith “all the reason we possesse.” Yet

our reason is a weak instrument. “All our wisdom is but folly before God; that of all vanities, man is the greatest; that man, who presumeth of his knowledge, doth not yet know what knowledge is.” The very weakness of our understanding, if we recognize it properly, leads us to God more readily than our presumption of knowledge. Such skepticism was as far as possible from the modern disbelief that is a kind of certainty in itself. It consisted of a readiness not so much to deny what had always been believed as to say that one could not really know one way or another. Understandably, the Catholic Church has never been at ease about Montaigne. His faith was accepted on its stated terms when his collection of essays was first published, yet his book was placed on the Index in 1676, as Sebond’s writing had been a hundred years before. There is no reason to suspect that Montaigne’s faith was not sincere—perhaps even passionate—precisely because it existed under threat. The fideist wall against doubt was always in danger of being breached. But his fideist faith is only one side of Montaigne’s ambivalence, shared perhaps with Shakespeare when Hamlet vaguely suggests to Horatio that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in his philosophy. On the other side there was unredeemable doubt.

Atheism was almost inadmissible in Shakespeare’s day, though some accused persons are known to have confessed being *saved* from it. Thomas Harriot, the polymath intellectual whose perfected system of algebraic notation is still used, and who observed sunspots before Galileo with a telescope perhaps devised by himself, had a reputation for impiety though he always declared his religious faith. He had been the tutor of Sir Walter Raleigh—who sent him to Virginia, about which he wrote the first major colonial report—and Raleigh was sometimes suspected of atheism, too. One of the judges at Raleigh’s treason trial warned him not to let “Harriot, nor any such Doctor, persuade you there is no eternity

in Heaven, lest you find an eternity in hell-torments.” As Stephen Greenblatt has pointed out, atheism, an unacknowledgeable or “unspeakable” viewpoint, was always a mark of damnation and otherness. That the accusation was made against Raleigh shows, moreover, that it was associated with the most absolute of political crimes.

Both Shakespeare and Montaigne exhibit, I believe, the effects of the current inclination of thought called Pyrrhonism, after Pyrrho, the third-century B.C. Greek who taught that nothing can be known. Science was about to open an era of self-confident discovery of natural causes, to suggest that not only could the motion of the planets and the sources of disease be discovered but that *everything* could be known. As the seventeenth century went on, the discoveries of science eventually established the very concept of causality. But it was doubt that initiated that search. Descartes’s great enterprise started from a universal doubt from which only the famous *cogito* might rescue him. It enabled him to believe both in the existence of the world—about which God would not deceive us—and in God himself and a God-ordered world of first and secondary causes. Newton’s *Principia* of 1687 is the culmination of the idea that not only is the universe knowable but that what happens in it can be explained by natural law.

Yet at the end of the sixteenth century this view still had not emerged. Only a few kinds of truth, like mathematical proofs, were practically attainable. Francis Bacon aspired, with his grand inductive program, to the ultimate restitution of “moral certainty,” a concept borrowed from theology by which one might be sure of most things after observing and evaluating the facts. Bacon’s efforts were directed precisely against that devastating suggestion of Montaigne that nothing could be rationally concluded as true. Montaigne said, “Que sais-je?”—and had the question struck on a medal with a representation on it of a poised balance, calling it

his “emblem.” The answer was: “Nothing.” It was doubt itself and the weakness of the human mind in discerning the meaning and connection of events that sustained such a mind as Montaigne’s in a condition of precarious faith.

How complexly doubt and credulity—or faith—contested in the mind is well illustrated by the response even of advanced thinkers to the topic of witchcraft, the obsession of the age. Few disputed the existence and power of witches throughout the seventeenth century. Robert Boyle, the inventor of the vacuum pump and the discoverer of the Law of Gases that bears his name, professed a belief in witches. Joseph Glanville, the author of the *Scep̄sis Scientifica*, who asserted that the greatest enemy of science was unwarranted belief in what cannot be proved, attested to a belief in witches and employed skeptical arguments to demolish the dogmatism of the critics of the witch belief. Even Montaigne’s distinguished French contemporary, the political philosopher and reputed skeptic Jean Bodin, believed in sorcery and urged the burning of witches. It is not surprising that those who flatly refused to believe in witches were identified as atheists; the active presence of Satan might seem to guarantee, after all, the presence of God. Glanville said, “Those who dare not bluntly say, ‘There is no God’ content themselves (for a fair step and introduction) to deny there are Spirits and witches.” But at the same time, witchcraft, with its suggestion that human nature can be inexplicably altered by possession, and the events of life directed into unexpected courses by forces beyond our detection—or visible only by demonic and misleading prophecy—must have attracted precisely the skeptical mind already impressed by the obliquity and mystery of life rather than by its evident meaningfulness. Was Shakespeare’s mind so attracted? Perhaps we can only guess about his thoughts about this current intellectual topic, thoughts that may be just barely visible where witches are actually present, as in *Macbeth*, or suggestively referred to, as in *Othello*. In

reading *Macbeth* one may suppose that the attraction of the belief in witches to the skeptical mind is to be explained by what the witches betoken—that the cosmos and the social world were not so obviously the expression of a rule of universal order. The witchcraft trials of the day, which Shakespeare must have followed with the same curiosity as everyone else, were, moreover, a demonstration of how inaccessible all truth might seem—a thought that prevails in *Othello*.

About disbelief in witches as a test of one's readiness to set aside irrational ideas, Montaigne was cautious. He does say, in the essay "Of the Force of Imagination," "It is very likely that the principall credit of visions, of enchantments, and such extraordinary effects, proceedeth from the power of imaginations, working especially in the mindes of the vulgar sort, as the weakest and seeliest, whose conceit and beleefe is so seized upon, that they imagine to see what they see not." But he says also, in another essay, "It Is Folly to Referre Truth or Falsehood to Our Sufficiencie,"

It is not peradventure without reason, that we ascribe the facilitie of beleeving and easines of perswasion, unto simplicitie and ignorance. . . . Forasmuch therefore, as the minde being most emptie and without counterpoize, so much the more easily doth it yeeld under the burthen of the first perswasion. And that's the reason why children, those of the common sort, women, and sicke-folke, are so subject to be mis-led, and so easie to swallow gudgeons. Yet on the other side, it is a sottish presumption to disdain and condemne that for false, which unto us seemeth to beare no shew of likelihood or truth: which is an ordinarie fault in those who perswade themselves to be of more sufficiency than the vulgar sort. So was I sometimes wont to doe, and if I heard any body speake, either of

ghosts walking, of foretelling future things, of enchantments, of witchcrafts, or any other thing reported, which I could not well conceive, or that was beyond my reach . . . I could not but feele a kind of compassion to see the poore and seely people abused with such follies. And now I perceive, that I was as much to be moaned myselfe: Not that experience hath since made me to dicerne any thing beyond my former opinions: yet was not my curiosity the cause of it, but reason hath taught me, that so resolutely to condemne a thing for false, and impossible, is to assume unto himselfe the advantage, to have the bounds and limits of God's will, and of the power of our common mother Nature tied to his sleeve: And that there is no greater folly in the world than to reduce them to the measure of our capacitie, and bounds of our suifciencie.

The passage is as good an illustration as one can find in Montaigne's *Essays* of the character of his skepticism, which regards all things doubtfully, and even applies doubt to the act of doubting, because so many things cannot be known.

There is evidence that Shakespeare knew these essays directly. He could have been reading them in the French editions published in the 1580s, but we *know* that he read John Florio's translation— from which I have been quoting— published in 1603, because no later than 1605 or 1606 Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*, in which a number of passages echo Florio. In *King Lear*, besides, more than one hundred words have been counted that Shakespeare never used in his previous writing but which are shared with Florio. Of course, every play of Shakespeare's contains words he had not previously used but had picked up somewhere, perhaps just out of current talk. But the assimilation of Florio suggested by this degree of lin-

guistic relation is striking. It has even been claimed that Shakespeare may have seen Florio's Montaigne before it got into print but after it had been entered into the Stationer's Rolls in 1600. The general trade in manuscripts, it is now believed, had not yet been displaced by the sale of printed books. And Montaigne was the kind of new stuff—the latest thing around—that might have been talked about and passed about in manuscript among young men just down from the universities, Inns of Court men studying the law but fascinated by the theater, writers and theater people and intellectual young aristocrats often to be caught, like Prince Hamlet, with a book in hand, but often eagerly reading a new work even before the printer got it. It is likely that Shakespeare got at Montaigne that way—a common process by which the thoughts of a dangerous, almost interdicted writer were diffused.

In the same way, in the sixteenth century, Machiavelli's disregard of old beliefs about the sacredness of princely authority might have put off a cautious printer when *The Prince* got to be talked about—more talked about than read or understood—by the English. Machiavelli, like Montaigne, always professed belief in God, but he challenged the view that politics was an expression of heavenly purpose—a skepticism that more and more fitted the modus of the Tudor politician, however much such a thought seemed nearly atheistic. Fear of the Florentine's practical counsel to ambitious men was expressed popularly on the stage in the stock figure of the scheming "Machiavel," although publication of an English edition of *The Prince* did not take place until 1636. But handwritten copies of inaccurate translations traveled from reader to reader before any were published. There is no way of knowing if Shakespeare read Machiavelli directly as Francis Bacon and Walter Raleigh did, but he would have absorbed a Machiavelli influence from the currents of the air he breathed as he wrote his plays and created a wicked Richard III or a Claudius, an Iago, an Edmund, or a Mac-

beth, in all of whom Machiavelli's ideas about politic conduct and the way to power are reflected.

One can hardly doubt that Shakespeare heard speculative discussions in London stimulated by a new interest in the recently re-discovered writings of classical skepticism, which had already been assimilated by Montaigne. Those meetings at the Mermaid Tavern in which Shakespeare lifted a tankard with Ben Jonson and others, including Raleigh, may be only legend, but Shakespeare could have seen Raleigh's translation of the *Hypotyposes* of Sextus Empiricus. It was circulating—also in manuscript—as early as 1591, when one of the “university wits” Shakespeare undoubtedly knew, Thomas Nashe, read it. The clever young men who caught the latest word on the wind would have been eager to get a look at Montaigne—a writer who knew Sextus but went beyond him in brilliance and daring—as soon as the translation was heard of. Florio himself was in the entourage of the Earl of Southampton; he had been the young lord's Italian tutor. And Shakespeare had dedicated his first published poem, *Venus and Adonis*, and then *Lucrece*, to this same patron who was, possibly, also the “Mr. W.H” to whom the poet dedicated his *Sonnets*. The alternate candidate for the honor of the *Sonnets* dedication has been, of course, another youthful aristocrat with literary interests, the Earl of Pembroke, to whom Shakespeare's theater colleagues, Heminges and Condell, dedicated their posthumous Folio edition of his works. Pembroke, as well, might have connected Shakespeare to Florio. The poet-playwright Samuel Daniel was, as it happens, one of those who had the chance to study Florio's translation in manuscript, for the London printer of the *Essayes* included in the published book a blurb by Daniel, a fulsome poem of praise addressed to his “deere friend John Florio.” Daniel had been Pembroke's tutor and remained his friend as he grew older. But even without a connection through this lord, Shakespeare certainly knew Daniel, who would become

licenser of the Children of the Queen's Revels, rivals of Shakespeare's own company, the King's Men. Daniel's *Cleopatra*, based on Plutarch, had been published in 1594, and Shakespeare took hints from it when he wrote his *Antony and Cleopatra* in 1606; Daniel then promptly revived and improved his own older play by reciprocal imitation of Shakespeare.

One way or another, we have grounds for supposing that Shakespeare knew Florio's translation before writing *Hamlet*, on stage a year before the book was out and for sale. *Hamlet* adds more words to Shakespeare's known vocabulary that also are in Florio—even a slightly greater number than is the case with *King Lear*. In Ben Jonson's *Volpone* (1605), someone reports that “all our English writers” are ready to “steal” from “Montaignie.” If Shakespeare is included in this reference, his interest in Montaigne was already noticed by his contemporaries—or, at least by so perceptive a friendly rival as this fellow-dramatist. But there seems not to have been any more specific notice of the relation of Shakespeare and Montaigne until the eighteenth century, when the editor Edward Capell drew attention to the way *The Tempest* seems almost to put into verse parts of Florio's version of the essay “Of the Caniballes.” A Montaigne “influence” has, ever since, been a standard assumption by scholars, who have drawn up tables of close or not-so-close parallel passages purporting to show similarities between ideas expressed in Shakespeare and in other essays in Montaigne's collection. There is even a copy of Florio in the British Museum which contains a Shakespeare signature some think genuine.

But I do not want to insist too hard that Montaigne was what is loosely called a “source.” Many of the parallels that have been pointed out are stock proverbial statements or could have come from writers other than Montaigne, and can be lined up in another list of parallels with someone else. The possibility of such gleanings

of words or passages is less important than the fact that Shakespeare would have encountered in Montaigne a dissident mind to which his was profoundly responsive as much as or more than to Machiavelli's. It is more important to say that Shakespeare and Montaigne were co-inhabitants of a particular sphere that swung through the space of human life at the time of the birth of the modern world. Others rode with them. Though the *Tempest* connection seems almost certain, it is really more important to notice the common interest Shakespeare and Montaigne had in the theme of the "natural" versus the "civilized," expressed in both the "Caniballes" essay and *The Tempest*—and the cultural relativism the comparison suggested. It was an interest that must have been shared by many in the age of European discovery of the rest of the globe and its peoples. And a relation to Montaigne may be greatest where there are fewest direct traces of specific transfer. *Othello*, written in 1603 or 1604, does not so strongly exhibit those verbal markers of Shakespeare's fingering of Florio to be noted in *Lear* or *Hamlet*, and no specific transmission need be inferred from my argument that Montaigne's unease about the presumption that truth is deducible from appearances is the same unease expressed in *Othello*. But in the "apologie of Raymond Sebond" Montaigne repeats examples given by early skeptics like Cornelius Agrippa and Sextus that a flat painting can appear three-dimensional, that sweet wine tastes bitter to a sick person, and numerous other instances when our senses deceive us. He asks whether the qualities we think we discern in objects are real—and moves from this to a general skepticism about the validity of our perceptions. In a philosophically related way, jealousy, as Shakespeare presents it in this play, is a crisis of epistemological confidence that brings everything into doubt. Of the four plays I consider as Shakespeare's tragic core, *Macbeth* is farthest from Montaigne's cheerfully stoic mood—yet this dark and mysterious work, as I shall try to show, may be an outcome of Montaigne's

skepticism—and of Machiavelli’s correlative cynicism—pushed to an excruciating intensity that annihilates in particular the linkage of cause and effect, human selfhood and act. It is because I want to identify such companionships of mind belonging to the last years of the sixteenth century and the early years of the seventeenth that I will refer occasionally to Montaigne’s essays in particular as a way of pointing up some of Shakespeare’s meanings. The demonstration of Shakespeare’s skepticism must, in any case, rest on what one can discover directly in the dramatized dilemmas of these plays that arrived in the London theater in such an astounding burst of splendor between 1600 and 1606.

My discussion will go against the grain of much past criticism by concentrating on evidences of what might seem the great artist’s bumbles or omissions, his inattentiveness to traditional dramatic requirements. It is a fact that Shakespeare’s chief personages often seem to lack clearly defined and consistent characters and motives. The sequence of events in the plays sometimes fails to compose a logical story in which one thing leads to another. Yet criticism, as one knows, often rewrites, failing to see what it is not prepared to see—and these greatest of the master playwright’s plays are most often discussed as though the opposite were true. Some few, of course, have faulted Shakespeare for lapses that meaner talents never have had trouble avoiding. The eighteenth-century novelist Charlotte Lennox wrote a book called *Shakespear Illustrated: or the Novels and Histories, on Which the plays of Shakespear are Founded*, stating her actual preference for the way the writers who had given Shakespeare suggestions for his plots had made matters easier to understand than the great playwright had done. The same critique and the same preference were declared by Tolstoy, when he wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century that Shakespeare had “weakened and spoiled” his original stories by leaving his characters without motive. Hamlet’s delay in executing revenge; Othello’s

exaggerated vulnerability to suggestion and Iago's malice; Lear's foolish decision to renounce power and his throne, and Cordelia's refusal to indulge a father who loved her best; Macbeth's unforeseeable disloyalty and murderousness—all these receive more explanation in Shakespeare's sources, Tolstoy complained, than Shakespeare deigned to include in his plays.

But how can one agree with such an elevation of realist sense-making in plays that sometimes lack it yet leave us wrung with grief and exaltation? Is it really a negative observation that the vastly inferior stories upon which each of these plays was based gave answers and explanations Shakespeare did not reach for? Shakespeare, it would seem, *liked to* reduce rather than fortify the circumstances that explain what his characters do, and he often refused to provide a basis for easy summary of what they are. To Lennox and Tolstoy we might respond that his indifference to such obvious coherence allowed him to express another view of life, a view we call skeptical though it might have seemed tragic to Aristotle, who did not believe that character made for fate. Shakespeare's major tragedies, the four that are the core of my discussion as well as the two Roman plays that "frame" them, sometimes seem like old fairy tales or myths—studies of human adjustment to an unforeseen destiny assigned by the immemorial tale that precedes the person who happens to inherit it. The gap between person and deed illustrates a classical idea of tragedy, the descent of fate, the destined catastrophe for which there has been *no* preparation or explanation.

Early-twentieth century critics, reading the plays like poems, as the Romantics had, declared that Shakespeare provided meaning by something vaguely called "atmosphere." His poetic language, particularly continuous patterns of imagery, tied things together. But Shakespeare does not discard the idea—basic to the way we strive to think about human life—that there are persons and there are events, and that the mind must *strive* to connect the two, how-

ever, at times, unsuccessfully. He compels us to share the *effort* toward connection and coherence his dramas still represent under duress, just as his chief characters themselves seek meaningfulness in their lives. Shakespeare works not only to promote the erasure of motive and destabilize character, to disconnect plot and make events inexplicable, and to deny the reliability of human impressions. He also lets us hold onto a sense of human individuality somehow independent of complete demonstration. In *Othello*, despite Iago's irresistible reasoning, the actual representation of personality in the play makes a shambles of his "likelihoods" concerning Desdemona. Iago is a manipulator of appearances; Othello should not have believed him. The narrative of the love of Othello and Desdemona survives Iago's assault. But doubt has been lodged in our minds—there is, to a lingering minor degree, the terrible possibility that there is some basis for Iago's charges. The alternative play written by this rival playwright within the play hovers over Shakespeare's *Othello*, and we experience the shudder that comes from the realization that absolute certainty is not possible. Hamlet, whose "inky cloak" of conventional mourning hides a seeming vacuum, and who seems to act out his revenge as though it has been a wearisome role in a stale play, remains the "sweet prince" whom Horatio blesses at the end. The character of Hamlet illustrates, as we shall see, the effect of a double view that contributes to the often-remarked richness of Shakespearean characterization; he has both a self to which he must be true and no self. Those other great characters of Shakespeare's I will be talking about, also—Lear and Macbeth—are always persons, however complicatedly inconsistent.

Harold Bloom has said recently that Shakespeare "invented" for literature the idea—later so important for the novel—of characters who develop rather than unfold, and who are, as Hegel said, "free artists of themselves." It is certainly true that we think Shake-

speare's characters "real" precisely because they are not easily confined to a cartoon outline. They contradict themselves and change. They refute definitions of themselves. The mostly formulaic summaries that seem to contain them also seem untrue to what we want to feel about them, and about ourselves—that we are somehow more than any of our conditions, more even than our acts, that ours is a potentiality which life will never completely exhaust. And yet this still leaves them—and us—vulnerable to the skeptical doubt, the terrifying sense that we are nothing in ourselves; only our deeds, however they came about, make us. That we believe in the unenacted possibilities of Shakespeare's characters—as we believe in our own—is one of those leaps of faith art and religion persuade us to make. If Shakespeare is a Renaissance skeptic, he is, like Montaigne, also a believer who sustains himself by faith alone.

But still—after acknowledging that Shakespeare allows chaos and mystification to get in where we are looking for order and explanation, am I not claiming a unifying intention in what may have been only inattention? Didn't Ben Jonson say that Shakespeare was careless? I anticipate that I may be accused of trying to discover artistic meaning where there is simply artistic defect—if so, guilty of a version of what used to be called "bardolatry." And how securely, anyway, can we argue for unifying intention from Shakespeare—who may not have valued consistency and total meaningfulness in what he wrote? These plays which have been so often searched for the author's single viewpoint may not even be the result of one man's will alone. Recent studies of the Elizabethan theater have described the complex collaboration of playwright, actors, theater producers, and audiences that is not made visible simply by the discovery that someone else wrote some part of the text, like the interpolated Hecate scene in *Macbeth*. These plays that are the product of one of the greatest of individual imaginations are less personal than we have supposed.

The master playwright was probably more accommodating to the ideas of others than we like to think. That Shakespeare's meanings are multiple and elusive and even compete with one another—that he is “myriad-minded”—may have an explanation the Romantics did not reach for in their exaltation of the unique vision of genius. I have said that the plays allow us to discover in them contending viewpoints. These may not have all been Shakespeare's own but those of other wills and tastes that merged with his unknown separateness, perhaps sharing his vision, perhaps arguing with it, but still accommodated by his own act of composition. That these accommodations were made in a spirit of active hospitality may be possible. What Shakespeare seems to have been persuaded to “leave out” or decided to leave out without prompting is often as significant as what he admitted into his writing. I shall be looking at this matter particularly in the case of *Macbeth*, whose discontinuities are sometimes attributed to supposed theater cuts in the only text we have of that play. But the argument for Shakespeare's preference for a certain indefiniteness may be made just as plausibly where we have more than one authoritative text, as in *Hamlet*. There, the least Shakespearean, though earliest, text seems to clarify matters made obscure in the two versions on which we mostly depend for the more authentic intention of the playwright, and the play appears to travel on to its final version toward not a more visible but a more obscured logic. In looking at these and other instances in which uncertainty occurs, I hope to discover, after all, that meaning often lurks just where it seems to break down. Stephen Orgel has observed recently that the instability of Shakespeare's texts seems to “release” his characters from our expectations of credibility and psychological consistency. The curious thing is that this very release seems to invite a skepticism that the playwright could have been willing to let us entertain. *Hamlet*, as I shall begin by showing, represents a mind that could

have resembled the playwright's own in its contesting engagement with received ideas of self and destiny. *Hamlet* gives us more insight than any other work of the age into a great artist's struggle to be impossibly free, and his subjection in the end to others' expectations—a struggle which is itself a mirror of the always-threatened human enterprise to discover a final and independent self and an interpretable life.

To the argument rounded out by my discussion of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, I have added an extra chapter. Somehow the door would not quite shut as I came to the end I had anticipated. I found that I wanted to look again at the “Roman plays” that enclose these four in the sequence of Shakespeare's production to see what relation they bear to the great tragedies. When *Hamlet* was first presented in 1599, *Julius Caesar*, written earlier in the year, was fresh in the theater public's mind. Horatio's description in the opening scene of the prodigies that had preceded Julius's assassination is a reference that the audience must have picked up right away to similar descriptions in the earlier play. When Polonius boasts that in a college production he “did enact Julius Caesar [and had been] killed i' th' capital,” there could have been a shudder of anticipation in seeing that this Polonius, soon to be killed by Hamlet, had been Caesar weeks before and that the leading actor vividly recalled as Brutus was now Hamlet. *Macbeth* was probably written about the same time as the later Roman play. Though their atmosphere is very different, there are passages that suggest that Shakespeare was thinking of both at once, as when Macbeth says that he fears Banquo, and observes, “My genius is rebuked, as it is said, / Mark Antony's was by Caesar” —referring to a remark in *Antony and Cleopatra*. This play may have been completed shortly after *Macbeth*; it bears signs of Shakespeare's retrospect of all the previous tragedies, including *Julius Caesar*, which had not only pro-

duced a Roman sequel but had also forecast *Macbeth* as a play about political assassination.

That *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* were different from the famous four was obvious. Tragic they were, but not tragic in the same way as the others. Yet still, the issues of personal destiny emerge more profoundly in this pair than in either Shakespeare's previous history plays or the plays of his final period after 1607. It is probably significant that their chief source is the greatest he ever drew upon—the historian Plutarch. It was in Plutarch that Shakespeare found the hint that Cassius was an Epicurean—a follower, that is, of a classic skeptic, some of whose ideas reappear in Montaigne—and this helps us to understand how Cassius came to stand as a model for the development of Iago. But above all, I think, it was Plutarch's struggles to rationalize the accidents of Roman history and the contradictions of historical record that inspired Shakespeare. As in Plutarch, the relation of social power to self-definition seems already unresolvable in *Julius Caesar* and continues to be a difficult issue in what he wrote during the next few years. It is an issue that receives its most ironic treatment in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The dispersed viewpoint that is almost a structural difficulty when Shakespeare seems unable to take the perspective either of Caesar or of Brutus is continued in the relativity that makes for skepticism in all the later plays, and most extravagantly in *Antony and Cleopatra*. And so, the Roman plays frame the four that are my central subject in this book.