AMBIVALENCE IN SHAKESPEARE

—MAINLY ON THE PROBLEM OF ORDER AND TUDOR POLITICAL DOCTRINE—*

Thus we are left at last with an idea showing two sides or aspects which we can neither separate nor reconcile. (A. C. Bradley)

HIROSHI EBIHARA

It is a commonplace of literary history to regard Order or Degree as one of the major preoccupations in English thought in Elizabethan times. The political application of the conception with the theory of absolute non-resistance as its core—Tudor Political Doctrine—is found most notably in the 1571 homily, An Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion, which represents the official voice of the Tudor government. A perusal of Shakespeare’s plays leaves us in no doubt that he was thoroughly familiar with the doctrine. Indeed, one can go so far as to say that he took considerable pleasure in using popular ideas—the loss and recovery of order, non-resistance, the sacrosanctity of the king—in his plays, especially in his history plays. Numerous references to them in Shakespeare seem to be the main cause of the common supposition that the dramatist is a leading exponent of this doctrine. This is a Shakespeare who is in complete agreement with the orthodox view of the Tudor government. On closer examination, however, there is something more subtle and complicated in his treatment of the orthodox view than is commonly supposed. In other words, there is another Shakespeare at the same time—a Shakespeare who treats the Tudor doctrine sometimes with lurking suspicion, sometimes with penetrating criticism, sometimes even with a touch of satire. Thus he leaves the latent possibility of a double interpretation here and there in his plays, thereby suggesting that there is ample

* This is a revised version of the paper read in Japanese at the 39th Annual Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, at Tohoku Gakuin University, on May 27, 1967.

1 For fuller accounts, see Irving Ribner, “A Note on Tudor Political Doctrine”, The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare, Methuen, 1965, pp. 305–12.
room for criticism of this doctrine. By showing subtle problems which inevitably arise from the application of the doctrine—its negative as well as its positive side—in various human situations, he points out the impossibility of a simple treatment of complex human nature. Not satisfied with simple answers to complex problems, he does not offer any simple solutions or any rigid value-judgments; instead, he sets problems in such a way that they are often capable of value-judgments of a contradictory nature. This double vision of life I call ambivalence. In the following pages an attempt is made to show how the dramatist works out his methods of presenting the idea.

I

In order to make my point clear I propose to take up Falstaff who affords perhaps the best example in trying to explain what is here meant by ambivalence.¹ There has been endless argument among scholars about the interpretation of this comic character. The representative view is a theory advanced by J. Dover Wilson² (and more or less followed by E. M. W. Tillyard and others) who explains him in terms of the Order-Disorder relation after the Morality fashion, Falstaff typifying Disorder (Vanity, Riot, Vice, etc.) which Prince Hal has to discard for Order (Government, Law, Chivalry, Justice, etc.) on his accession. Indeed, Falstaff is witty and humorous, but he is after all the Vice of the old morality plays, with the result that the coexistence of Prince Hal and Falstaff in the same sphere becomes impossible after the Prince has returned to the world of order and law which is represented by the Lord Chief Justice. The rejection of the fat knight, therefore, is an inevitable and legitimate conclusion of the Henry IV plays. This view is no doubt correct and seems to have found great favour with critics.

On a careful reading, however, we come to see that the matter is not just so simple as that. Shakespeare is too much of an artist to describe Falstaff as simply evil and representative of the disorder-force. He is, as it were, an ingenious mixture of almost every characteristic


of human nature. He is indeed incongruity itself. One will never come up with a satisfactory explanation of the sort of feeling one is made to have in the rejection scene so long as one sticks to the popular black-or-white type of character interpretation. Falstaff defies this sort of interpretation. He is black and white; lovable and hateful; faithful and false; humane and malevolent. According to A. P. Rossiter, he is "serious and farcical"; "pathetic and absurd"; "abominable and laughable".¹ These qualities are all there in the fat knight. This doubleness of implicit values which are apparently incompatible with each other is, I think, the key to a true understanding of this complex character and the Hal-Falstaff relationship.

True, the rejection of Falstaff is right and inevitable on Hal’s part, but a simple formulation of Falstaff on a Morality pattern does not solve the serious problem of sacrificed humanity which the rejection admittedly implies and which the more discerning part of Shakespeare’s audience or reading public would have sensed without fail. In other words, Falstaff represents not only Disorder but also something valuable in human life; he has more of humanity in him than Prince Hal or the Lord Chief Justice. In rejecting Falstaff at the end Shakespeare does not reject him in toto; he does not reject humanity in the character of the old knight. On the contrary, he resents a serious lack of it in royal personages. He knew, it seems to me, that the rejection would cause an uneasy or even an unpleasant feeling among his audience, his intention being, I take it, to show that order does not always go together with humanity in the Elizabethan political world. We are thus made to have an ambivalent feeling towards Falstaff. This double possibility of seemingly incompatible feelings with which we are left at the end of the Henry IV plays is one of the most subtle of Shakespearian dramatic artifices.

This is then what, following A. P. Rossiter, I call ambivalence—in that "two opposed value-judgements are subsumed, and that both are valid... The whole is only fully experienced when both opposites are held and included in a 'two-eyed' view; and all 'one-eyed' simplifications are not only falsifications; they amount to a denial of some part of the mystery of things".²

¹ Angel With Horns, p. 54.
² Ibid., p. 51.
II

A similar attitude is taken by Shakespeare towards Prince Hal. When he rejects the fat knight, he is no longer the Prince, but the King of England. As enough has been said of this rejection, I have no intention of repeating here what has been said except a few words from the standpoint of the Prince.

His policy of moral disguise has led him into an awkward position: a position difficult to get away from, not that he has been unable to do so, but that the world would not have believed him even if he had done so; hence the necessity of a public reformation. Hal’s ‘reformation’ is not a reformation in the normal sense of the word. He is a man of purpose with full awareness of what he is about. With the death of his father and his accession the time has come at last when he must reform himself publicly, that is, he must show the ‘incredulous world’ to what extent it has misjudged the future king,¹ the rejection of Falstaff and his followers being the means to achieve this purpose.

The main effect on us of the rejection speech, however, is to confirm our claim that his moral sense is publicly and politically conceived. Public virtues are not always compatible with private virtues. In achieving a political success Hal is forced to sacrifice some of his private and essentially more human virtues. The public and open rejection is the demonstration necessary for making ‘the world perceive, That I have turn’d away my former self’. As a public and political man, therefore, the Prince chooses the most effective—perhaps the only possible—way of achieving his purpose.

Thus considered, there is nothing wrong in his rejection of Falstaff, his conduct being in perfect accordance with the doctrine of order in Elizabethan England. Yet one cannot fail to discern Shakespeare’s dual attitude towards the new King as well as towards the old knight, which has already been discussed in the preceding section. Even the treacherous victory of Prince John over the Archbishop of York and his rebellious followers can be justified from the point of view of Tudor Political Doctrine with its weighty assertion of absolute non-resistance. Yet Shakespeare is obviously critical about what Prince John has done.

Ambivalence in Shakespeare

Interpretation along this line can further be given to the hero-king in *Henry V*. With the Chorus singing his praises, brave and pious Henry V is acclaimed an ideal king, “the mirror of all Christian kings”, who arouses passionate patriotism in his subjects. No doubt the Elizabethan audience would have shared it with him whole-heartedly. Yet when Shakespeare makes one of the common soldiers, Williams, insist bluntly upon the moral responsibility of the king, it is significant to realize that the scene takes on a graver tone than just “A little touch of Harry in the night”. For if the dramatist had really wanted to sing the praises of an ideal king without qualifications, he would not have inserted an episode of this kind. There is obviously something more in it than a simple glorification of a heroic ruler. In other words, I cannot help thinking that Shakespeare is behind Williams when he says:

But if the cause be not good, the king himself hath a heavy reckoning to make; when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle, shall join together at the latter day, and cry all, “We died at such a place”; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afear’d there are few die well that die in a battle; for how can they charitably dispose of any thing when blood is their argument? Now, if these men do not die well, it will be a black matter for the king that led them to it, who to disobey were against all proportion of subjection. (IV. i. 135ff.)

The complexities that surround the guarantor of a necessary order make themselves deeply felt when Henry finds himself in a dilemma implicit in the nature of his office. On the surface he seems to satisfy the popular concept of an ideal king with ardent patriotism and piety, but under the surface is a graver matter: a real dilemma admitting of no simple solution.¹ This is perhaps, I suggest, the kind of dilemma in which Shakespeare would have found himself when delineating the idol of his countrymen, with the result that the general effect of the play is “rather to bring out certain contradictions, moral and human, inherent in the notion of a successful king”.² True, it would be wrong if one placed too much emphasis upon this particular aspect of the play,

² Traversi, *op. cit.*, p. 177.
but the presence of duality—this double vision of kingship—cannot be denied and ambivalence is definitely there.

Richard II provides us with another example of Shakespeare’s ambivalence. In spite of the numerous references to the sacrosanctity of the king, absolute non-resistance or any of its implications, Richard is ousted and Bolingbroke seizes the throne. The problem being very complex, Shakespeare’s attitude is also far from simple, or rather, one might say, deliberately ambiguous. The actual situation which becomes the immediate cause for Bolingbroke’s seizure of the crown is described in such a way that it would not be quite correct to call him simply a ‘usurper’ in the strict sense of the word. It is rather inconsistent and even surprising, therefore, that, repentant for his past injustice, he should say, “God knows, my son, / By what by-paths and indirect crook’d ways / I met this crown, and I myself know well / How troublesome it sat upon my head” (Henry IV, Pt. II, IV. v. 183–6). The latter half of the quotation is quite true and is one of the most important themes in Shakespeare’s history plays, but it should be remembered that in Richard II he does not really use any “indirect crook’d” means to ascend the throne, unless this refers to the murder of Richard to assure his possession of the crown or to the schemes of Bolingbroke who, while pretending to demand only his possessions, has a larger plot up his sleeve—that is, to seize the throne—right from the time of his return from banishment. But this is certainly not the case with Bolingbroke. True, he is a politician, but not such a villain.

It must next be noticed that the first thing Richard does upon hearing of the death of John of Gaunt is to seize the whole property, land and all, of his late uncle which belongs by hereditary right to his son, Bolingbroke. By so doing, Richard, perhaps unwittingly, breaks the established order according to which, as the Duke of York points out, he is now the King of England. This does not, however, justify Bolingbroke’s resistance to God’s anointed, no matter how obvious his injustice may be. In other words, the deposition and murder of

---

1 Take Herford’s rights away, and take from time
   His charters, and his customary rights;
   Let not to-morrow then ensue to-day:
   Be not thyself. For how art thou a king
   But by fair sequence and succession? (II.i.195–9) (italics mine)
Richard by Bolingbroke are directly against the doctrine of order and can by no means be justified. It is natural, therefore, that he should be punished, not directly, but at least indirectly through his intense moral suffering and his constant annoyance by rebellion during the rest of his life as king, which, as has already been pointed out, is one of the most notable themes of the Henry IV plays. Although his son, who is also conscious of his father's sin, enjoys a brief period of victory and glory after his death, his grandson, Henry VI, is undeservedly to suffer for the sin which Bolingbroke committed. One never fails to observe the thematic and consistent pattern running through these history plays.

Looked at in this way, as is usually done, it is not without reason that Shakespeare makes the Bishop of Carlisle prophesy that if Bolingbroke is crowned "the blood of English shall manure the ground,/And future ages groan for this foul act" (IV. i. 137-8). But of greater interest and significance is the way in which Shakespeare, while critical of the deposition of Richard, delineates Bolingbroke's situation rather favourably. He brings out in sharp contrast the difference in character between Bolingbroke and Richard; the former is robust, manly and politically strong, while the latter is capricious, arbitrary and even unmanly. It is thus obvious that Richard is not suitable as a king. Wide-spread anxiety is expressed for the welfare and safety of the country under the reign of the capricious king who, hopelessly swayed by his flatterers, is unable to meet the wishes of his people. If one can say that Bolingbroke almost 'saves' his country from corruption by coming to power, Shakespeare seems to give his tacit consent to the deposition, though he is undeniably sympathetic to the deposed king. Phrased in more detail, the arbitrary conduct of Richard and the wrong he does his cousin lead us to feel sympathy towards Bolingbroke who behaves with restraint and dignity, but after Richard's abdication of the crown, or to put it more precisely, after Bolingbroke's declaration "In God's name, I'll ascend the regal throne" (IV. i. 113), the new hero begins to lose some of our admiration and sympathy while Richard begins to gain our pity and becomes more and more interesting as he gives up his power and rights.¹ Shakespeare interprets Richard's "surrender, abdication and death in terms of

pathos and melancholy lyricism”,¹ thereby devising a means of gaining our sympathy for the fallen hero.

Interpreted in this light, the gradual change in the dramatist’s treat-
ment of the two antagonists is quite intentional and deserves our attention. As is often the case, however, Shakespeare leaves his final judgment deliberately ambiguous, thereby presenting problems rather than solutions regarding the serious matter of deposition in a given situation. It seems possible to take his ambivalent attitude towards the deposition of Richard as an indication that he is not wholly on the side of the doctrine of order which demands without reservation of any kind the absolute non-resistance of subjects in the name of the sacrosanctity of the king, even when the monarch, as has been shown above, is not suitable as the supreme head of the country. Thus considered, Richard II is Shakespeare’s first history play in which he begins with great subtlety and ingenuity to question the orthodox theory of absolute non-resistance; for the conventional concepts of order and its implications have not been challenged in the early history plays. As he dramatizes the reign of Richard, however, “a purposeful artistic ambiguity that would not only juxtapose but also fuse opposites seems to be at work”,² and his attitude towards the application of the order-doctrine becomes ambivalent and, with his artistry working upon us, we also experience an ambivalent feeling towards Richard and Bolingbroke.

In this connection it is extremely interesting to compare Richard II with Woodstock, which many believe is one of Shakespeare’s sources. In this anonymous play Richard and his minions (Bagot, Bushy, Greene, Scroope and Tresillian) are so fantastically wild and arbitrary that it comes closer to a comedy than to a history; so much so that, no matter what may happen to Richard, we can feel no sympathy for him. Indeed, it seems that, unlike Shakespeare, the anonymous author even justifies rebellion against the king, which goes counter to the Tudor contention that no rebellion is justified even if the king is evil or incompetent. Of this An Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion has much to say:

But what if the prince be undiscreet and evil indeed, and it also evident

¹ Ibid.
to all men's eyes that he so is? I ask again, what if it be long of the wickedness of the subjects that the prince is undiscreet or evil? Shall the subjects both by their wickedness provoke God for their deserved punishment to give them an undiscreet or evil prince, and also rebel against him, and withal against God, who for the punishment of their sins did give them such a prince? Will you hear the Scriptures concerning this point? God, say the holy Scriptures, maketh a wicked man to reign for the sins of the people. Again, God giveth a prince in his anger, meaning an evil one, and taketh away a prince in his displeasure, meaning specially when he taketh away a good prince for the sins of the people, as in our memory he took away our good Josias, King Edward, in his young and good years for our wickedness. And contrarily the Scriptures do teach, that God giveth wisdom unto princes, and maketh a wise and good king to reign over that people whom he loveth, and who loveth him.

It is true that good and plain Woodstock will never rise up against his king and expresses a very orthodox view:

His youth is led by flatterers much astray.
But he's our king, and God's great deputy;
And if ye hunt to have me second ye
In any rash attempt against his state,
Afore my God, I'll ne'er consent unto it.
I ever yet was just and true to him,
And so will still remain; what's now amiss
Our sins have caused, and we must bide heaven's will.

(IV. ii)

But when the nobles find Richard responsible for the murder of Woodstock, they no longer stand idly by. John of Gaunt, utterly upset, does not hesitate to declare:

We will revenge our noble brother's wrongs;
And force that wanton tyrant to reveal
The death of his dear uncle, harmless Woodstock,
So traitorously betrayed.

If he be dead, by good King Edward's soul

---

2 Quotations are taken from Woodstock in Elizabethan History Plays, ed. W. A. Armstrong, Oxford, 1965.
We'll call King Richard to a strict account
For that and for his realm's misgovernment.
You peers of England, raised in righteous arms
Here to re-edify our country's ruin,
Join all your hearts and hands never to cease
Till with our swords we work fair England's peace.

(V. iii)

It is interesting to observe that his open challenge to the orthodox theory of passive obedience presents a striking contrast to the unquestioning submission of the same John of Gaunt in Richard II who says:

God's is the quarrel—for God's substitute,
His deputy anointed in His sight,
Hath caus'd his death; the which if wrongfully,
Let heaven revenge, for I may never lift
An angry arm against His minister.  

(I. ii. 37-41)

These two contradictory remarks of the same person in Woodstock and Richard II point to the ultimate difference in the two dramatists' attitudes towards the same problem of resistance against the king. As far as the two plays are concerned, Shakespeare is more orthodox than the author of Woodstock—but, of course, with a subtle difference which is the thesis of this paper.

III

In view of the nature of what has been discussed in the preceding sections, it would be appropriate to indicate that, strong as was the orthodox view, there was also in Elizabethan times argument in favour of deposition if necessary. In his Conference about the Next Succession to the Crowne of Ingland, for instance, Robert Parsons argues that if the king does not govern religiously, equitably and lawfully he ought to be deposed for the salvation of the commonwealth.¹ Be that as it may, it cannot be denied that the Tudor doctrine of absolutism was still the most influential current of political thought when Shakespeare

---

was engaged in writing.

Needless to say, one of the most important documents concerning the doctrine is *Certayne Sermons, or Homilies* (1547) which was sent to every parish to be read, the preaching of all other sermons being prohibited except under special licence.\footnote{1} Especially interesting and relevant to students of Shakespeare's histories is the tenth homily entitled "An Exhortation concerning good Order and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates" in which the Tudor concepts of order and degree are put forward in full detail. According to the *Short Title Catalogue*, the *Homilies* went into as many as twenty-one editions between 1547 and 1595, except during the five years of Mary's reign, and exerted, one might imagine, a great influence upon the public over a long period of years. Even more important than the homily on Order and Obedience is *An Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion* published independently in 1571 (?) and later (1574) included in the *Homilies*, which repeatedly emphasizes the doctrine of absolute non-resistance with the help of numerous scriptural quotations meant to work upon the sentiment of the public rather than upon the intellect. The authorities were well aware of the enormous power the Bible had over churchgoers.

Behind this incessant insistence upon the doctrine was a definite need for strong monarchy. The doctrine of non-resistance was extremely useful for it and became the political slogan of the government in favour of the *status quo* throughout the Tudor era.\footnote{2} Indeed, it was a kind of propaganda of the Tudor government which felt it necessary to inculcate on the masses the duties of subjects and the necessity of national unity for defence against foreign attacks.

With the establishment of national power, however, and safety from continental invaders—presumably after 1588—Englishmen could afford to be sceptical about the cult of authority.\footnote{3} It may be stated with reasonable certainty that some scepticism was beginning to assert itself after 1590 when Shakespeare started his career as a young dramatist. What the dramatist really thought about the doctrine will never be known, but judging from the way he treats of the subject in his works it is certain that he, though fundamentally a believer in the

theory, often questions the validity of the doctrine when it is too dogmatically applied to various human relationships, thereby pointing out the complexity of human beings with individual will and reason. Like other great writers of the world, he makes his audience and readers think about the problems he presents.

Much eloquent comment has been written in an attempt to show Shakespeare's 'intentions' and 'theories' in his works. It is impossible, however, to believe that he cherished all the 'intentions' and 'theories' that critics have ascribed to him. Be that as it may, one cannot fail to discern an apparent pattern of development in his attitude towards the dilemmas and contradictions of human existence throughout his history plays. Shakespeare's ambivalence is, I suggest, a product of his final reflections on them with respect to the doctrine of order.

* All Shakespearian references are to the new Arden editions of the plays.