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REVIEW ARTICLES

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM EARLY MODERN DRAMA?

Shakespeare and early modern political thought. Edited by David Armitage, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xii+289. ISBN 9780521768680865. £62·00.

Ben Jonson, Volpone *and the Gunpowder Plot*. By Richard Dutton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xiii+178. ISBN 9780521879545. £61·00.

Shakespeare, love and service. By David Schalkwyk. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. x+317. ISBN 9780521886390. £61·00.

Shakespeare and tolerance. By B. J. Sokol. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xvi+244. ISBN 9780521182867. £20·99.

When Shakespeare used the word 'and' in the title of a play (*Romeo and Juliet, Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra*), it invariably presaged a story of doomed love. The highly diverse studies considered here all make bold with that baleful conjunction in their effort to link an early modern playwright with something else – a historical event (the Gunpowder Plot), a body of theory (political thought), an attitude (tolerance), or a congeries of emotion and social practice (love and service). Each testifies to the difficulty of forging such connections, thanks both to the elusiveness of the dramatic medium and the complexity of the proposed contexts. But if the relationships that these books delineate sometimes feel imperilled, the encounter is almost always an absorbing one. For readers of this journal, all four studies offer an opportunity to reflect on the state of the relationship between the disciplines of Literary Studies and History now that the 'New Historicism' is a distant (if for some a piquant) memory.

The most ambitiously interdisciplinary of the volumes under review is the co-edited essay collection *Shakespeare and early modern political thought*. Bringing together literary scholars and intellectual historians, this project recalls the New Historicism in its ambition to cut both ways. The essays, we are told at the outset, 'address the significance of Shakespeare's texts for our understanding of the history of political thought … as much as they concern the significance of political thought for our understanding of his texts' (p. 20). This is easily said but not easily done. The difficulty the contributors confront is that of bridging the gap between a genre of treatises and manifestos, the authors of which (as Quentin Skinner puts it in the volume's 'Afterword') usually 'meant what they

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said and said what they meant' (p. 271) and plays which are offered as fictions, and often heavily ironized fictions at that. People do sometimes mean what they say in Shakespeare, but they rarely do so in a way that allows us to take their statements as authoritative pronouncements on the unfolding dramas in which their words resonate. Here, of course, we have the difficulty and the glory of Shakespeare, famously characterized by Keats as the poet of 'negative capability', the capability 'of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'. As A. D. Nuttall put it at the beginning of his *Shakespeare the thinker*, 'we have no idea what Shakespeare thought, finally, about any major question'.[1]

As a playwright, Shakespeare is under no obligation to produce any political thought at all, let alone a coherent body of such thought, and it is tellingly difficult to extract general principles from his work. Stephen Greenblatt's contribution to the volume devotes considerable energy to the task, but its conclusions are hedged and tentative. 'If Shakespeare treated the mystical accounts of kingship with relentless irony, he did not endorse any general principle of resistance' (p. 66). 'If Shakespeare was deeply drawn to those who want to walk away from positions of authority, he was at the same time convinced that the attempt is doomed' (p. 69). 'Shakespeare did not think that one's good actions are necessarily or even usually rewarded, but he seems to have been convinced that one's wicked actions always return upon one's head, with interest' (p. 72). Even if we warm to generalizations like these, it is not clear that they derive from theoretical thinking rather than from the dramatist's desire to sculpt a gripping narrative.

Other essays in the book might make us wonder how much political thought a good play can bear. The editors inform us that 'Shakespeare's Richard III was not excessively Machiavellian – rather, he was not Machiavellian enough. He understood how to seize a state without appreciating how to maintain it' (p. 18). But would successful state-building (however Machiavellian) have pulled in the crowds? Susan James reads *Macbeth* as a study in the dangers of superstitious fear when it affects those in high political office, offering an expert analysis of the blending of political thought and moral philosophy in the works of numerous early modern writers. But, reading her essay, it would be easy to forget the fact that Macbeth is a murderer who commits a series of grave offences against a moral and metaphysical order. There is a sense that he is just another usurper who should pull himself together and start consolidating his power with the help of *The prince*. Andrew Fitzmaurice's trenchant account of *Hamlet* and political corruption sets the play alongside the *Discours de la servitude volontaire* of Étienne de la Boétie and makes the curious claim that 'Hamlet has not been subjected by others but by his own will' (p. 152). He has enslaved himself to a tyrant when a simple refusal of consent might have enfranchised him. Yet Hamlet is not any old member of a political community who, finding himself

[1] A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the thinker* (New Haven, CT, 2007), p. 1.

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living under a tyranny, elects to take 'the Senecan path' (p. 153) and withdraw into contemplation. He is an individual called upon by a dead father and an outmoded genre to enact the suicidal, self-cancelling violence of the revenge hero. At one point in her essay on princely education in Elsinore and *Henry IV*'s Eastcheap, Aysha Pollnitz asks 'whether Shakespeare considered revenge to be a princely act', and suggests that 'a brisker avenger than Hamlet would have preserved both his dynastic line and the independence of Denmark from Norway (admittedly at the expense of the play)' (p. 136). All too often, the attempt to introduce philosophical abstractions into the discussion threatens to extinguish the energies of theatrical narrative.

When *Shakespeare and early modern political thought* succeeds in making the leap from the seeming stasis of theory to the mobility of drama, it does by successfully resisting the terms of that dichotomy, and insisting (just as a New Historicist might have done) on the instability of early modern thinking about politics. The introduction works Shakespeare into a narrative of transition; his was a world which was rapidly abandoning naive Ciceronian beliefs – that the good orator must also be a good man, and that a commonwealth might be engineered to maximize human virtue – and moving towards a Machiavellian/Tacitean view of politics as cynical, corrupt, and self-interested. This narrative licenses an interest in processes rather than propositions. 'Thought' is materialized in the clash of political idioms, the back-and-forth of debate on both sides of a question, the entanglement of flattery and counsel.

Thus, in the opening essay, David Armitage wonders why Shakespeare failed to follow his father's example by spending some part of his life in public office, speculating that he may have made 'a strategic choice to withdraw from a corrupted political realm'. But he concludes that the plays were a kind of informal civic office, 'staging debate and proffering counsel' (p. 43) and so allowing the polity to reflect upon itself. Cathy Curtis explores the debate over the active and contemplative lives in Shakespeare, concluding that the dramatist served as 'a rhetorician and unofficial counsellor' (p. 61) to the commonwealth, rather than as an advocate of one position or another. Cathy Shrank reads Shakespeare's 'procreation sonnets' as counsel to the scion of an aristocratic family, and in that sense akin to fatherly advice-books and country-house poems – but with the crucial difference that the *Sonnets* allow us to witness the breakdown of counsel. 'Both poet and addressee have failed in their duty: the one to persuade, the other to listen' (p. 118). David Colclough finds *Julius Caesar* to be relentlessly sceptical about vital political processes, subjecting advice-giving and petitioning to 'a dark irony' (p. 224). And Markku Peltonen sees in *Coriolanus* a war between two versions of rhetoric, as a potent instrument of social control in the hands of the aristocracy and as a potent instrument of political upheaval in the hands of the people or their representatives. At the end of the play, needless to say, 'no real consensus is reached' (p. 252). The emphasis on indeterminacy is at its most developed in Conal Condren's analysis of *Measure for measure* in its presumed early Jacobean context. Condren invokes

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the *argumentum in utramque partem*, traditions of paradox, pyrhonnian scepticism, prudence, equity, casuistry, equivocation – numerous interconnected forms of slipperiness which bear on the play's unfolding of 'the properties of government' for a new monarch.

Eric Nelson caps these essays off by arguing that Shakespeare's depictions of Rome evince no preference for republican or monarchic government: 'his fundamental conviction is that the pursuit of personal ambition, and the preparedness to use all means necessary to preserve the power we have amassed, is a great human constant'. If we seem here to have arrived back at Shakespeare's 'fundamental conviction', Nelson quickly retreats from that claim: 'for every Tamora in Shakespeare's world there is a Lucrece; for every Tarquin there is a Menenius' (p. 269). But he contends (pace Andrew Hadfield, whose work is a common reference-point in this volume) that for this dramatist, republics and monarchies are as bad as each other.[2] To locate a Shakespeare who is more sanguine about politics, one has to travel to the outer reaches of the canon – to *Henry VIII*, in which Jennifer Richards finds a sustained meditation on Ciceronian *honestas*, meaning the modesty, decency, and decorum that might make one a temperate and prudent politician rather than a hot-headed satirist; or to *The merry wives of Windsor*, which for Phil Withington celebrates 'female citizenship' by depicting women who are the embodiments of *honestas*, here meaning 'discretion, wisdom, honesty, decorum, and an awareness of and responsibility towards the public good' (p. 203).

While Armitage, Condren, and Fitzmaurice strive to open a new front in interdisciplinary literary/historical work, B. J. Sokol's mission is to undo some of the misrepresentations that he finds in earlier versions of the joint endeavour. *Shakespeare and tolerance* is dedicated to unsettling the perceived miserabilism of recent critical modes, with their emphasis on 'early modern patriarchy, racism, bigotry, exploitation, hegemonic relations, oppression of "outsiders", and "containment" of human difference' (p. x). This loosely sketched bundle of preoccupations represents the 'intolerance' which Sokol aims to banish through his exploration of 'tolerance', which he defines as 'a person's willed or chosen extension of goodwill or sympathy towards a person, practice, behaviour, or belief that lies outside their usual experience – even towards someone or something shockingly or frighteningly strange' (p. xi). His claims are made both on behalf of Shakespeare and of Shakespeare's culture: 'certain allegations made concerning some types of Elizabethan intolerance are anachronistic' (p. xii). Accordingly, Sokol makes no concerted effort to argue that Shakespeare is extraordinary in his tolerance, or that he is exceptionally prescient, prophesying the way we do things in modern 'liberal' societies. Nonetheless the reader might infer that Sokol hopes to resurrect an older version of Shakespeare – perhaps that of Coleridge, who is quoted approvingly referring to 'the fine humanity of Shakespeare' (p. 6). This Shakespeare

[2] Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and republicanism* (Cambridge, 2005).

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is 'forward-looking' (p. 100); he anticipates the sensibilities of today's enlightened readers.

Sokol's sense of how 'intolerance' works is rather etiolated from the start. We should, in his view, be cheered to learn (from the work of Ian Maclean) that the proposition that 'woman is not a human being' was not a widely held opinion, but was instead a 'Renaissance intellectual joke' used to 'reinforce the contrary position' (pp. 28–9). Another critic might have paused to reflect on the way in which misogyny propagates itself through jokes, and might wonder whether the unthinkability of this particular joke today reveals something significant about the early modern period. Another example: on his dust-jacket, Sokol reproduces a striking painting of the African princess who married John Henderson of Fordel during his youthful travels in the 1610s and 1620s, with 'her black maid'; in the body of the book readers are invited 'to judge if any fear of pollutiveness is expressed' (p. 122) in the picture. Yet, the author massages the visual evidence by calling the princess 'olive-skinned'; in fact, and especially as contrasted with her maid, the unnamed African princess appears (surprisingly enough) to be white. Perhaps fear of 'pollutiveness' is, after all, expressed in this painting. While Sokol is clearly right (and in some respects uncontroversial) to point out that the early modern period could be fluid in its thinking about matters of race and gender in ways that later ages were not, he seems not to recognize the force of such prejudices as did exist.

In Sokol's hands, Shakespeare's plays become a series of liberal-humanist morality tales. 'What we will meet in Shakespeare's portrayal of tolerance is the celebration of those who can transcend rancour arising from human differences, and the tragic disasters of those who are misguidedly or pathetically unable to do so' (p. xiv). The critic ranges widely across the canon to find plays that might fit his paradigm. Some prove relatively compliant; the account here of *Cymbeline*, for example, in which the gender-blending combination of tough and tender in Imogen radiates outwards to transform a world crippled by sexual suspicion, is almost persuasive. Others require a lot of work. A section on tolerance in *The taming of the shrew* argues that Shakespeare borrows a dichotomy of the 'forward' ('the grasping, ambitious, or greedy') and the 'froward' ('the baulky, contrary, or perverse' (p. 29)) from Spenser's *Faerie queene*, and that he shapes from the violent clash of Petruchio and Katherina an ideal transcendence of these extremes. Some of the over-ingenuity of this reading may be prompted by the mistaken notion that 'froward' is an 'unusual word' (p. 31); in fact it was fairly common, *Early English books online* currently finding more than 2,300 usages before 1590. Tackling *Othello*, Sokol struggles to displace any 'racism' in the play on to Iago, so that *his* intolerance can be read as the wellspring of the tragedy. Desdemona's father Brabantio is exonerated through a tortuous exploration of the law of wardship, and through the claim that his disparaging references to Othello's 'sooty bosom' and his 'country' have little to do with 'colour' (pp. 130–1). Aaron, the vicious Moor of the early collaborative play *Titus Andronicus*, is no stereotype; he 'acts to promote violence, but is not

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violent himself', since his cutting-off of Titus's hand and his murder of Tamora's nurse 'are relatively mild acts' in the context of the play (p. 126). Here and elsewhere, Sokol's readings strain to support his argument. Furthermore, they end up producing sanitized versions of the plays, in which dangers are localized rather than contagious.

Predictably enough, it is *The merchant of Venice* that proves the most serious obstacle to the resuscitation of a tolerant Shakespeare. Sokol revisits the play several times during the course of the book, finally turning the tables on 'sentimental' readings by arguing that Shylock is, by the end of the play, meant to be understood as 'a very bad Jew, sacrilegious and cruel' (p. 154). He thus contrasts sharply (as the admirably tolerant Elizabethan audience would have realized) with the general run of Jews. Meanwhile Portia's courtroom drama, rather than being a means for producing a brutally comic denouement at Shylock's expense, would have been seen as a nightmare parody of an international mercantile tribunal. Where the 'Law Merchant' which governed transactions between foreign traders worked to promote tolerance, Portia promotes intolerance (pp. 74–5). The effect of Sokol's contortions is to turn *The merchant of Venice* into the most problematic of problem comedies; it is hard to see how any kind of happy ending, however complex and shadowed, can flow from the violations of tolerance that we are here invited to perceive in the play's fourth act. Readers may prefer to stick with their 'sentimental' interpretation, in which the play (although clearly nuanced in its treatment of Shylock as it moves towards the climactic judicial encounter) relies on the intolerant excision of this threatening figure for its resolution.

Like Sokol's study, David Schalkwyk's *Shakespeare, love and service* might be said to be anti-miserabilist, although it is an altogether more assured critical performance. Avowedly influenced by his own experience of being brought up in a household with servants in apartheid South Africa, Schalkwyk aspires to offer an open-ended exploration of Shakespearean master–servant relations, an exploration attuned not merely to power and resentment but also to 'the personal and ethical intensities of self-denial and devotion' (p. 144). Just as formal or exploitative bonds can become bonds of affection or love, so conversely can affection and love dress themselves in the language of service or, at an extreme, of slavery; and Schalkwyk is keen to forestall the critical tendency to equate all love with 'desire', rather than to recognize the rich variety of forms that love and friendship can take. This broadening of the critical focus can lead to clotted writing; Schalkwyk sometimes struggles to impose discursive order on concepts that are 'constituted by multiple and varying conjunctions, like the fibres of a rope' (p. 2). It is symptomatic of its sometimes infuriating variousness that the book should lack a conclusion. But for the most part, this is a rewarding exploration of the structures of emotional and social life at a time when (as Peter Laslett put it) 'every relationship could be seen as a love-relationship'. It is also a defence of the value of plays as a historical source from which we can recover the texture of lived experience in a world we have otherwise lost.

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Schalkwyk's study begins rather in the style of books from the early days of literary historicism, making copious reference to the writings of Keith Wrightson and to 'conduct literature' – with some worrying slips, as when Stefano Guazzo's *Ciuile conuersation* is described as 'a dialogue between Guazzo and his female interlocutor, Annabella' (p. 35), whereas in fact the speakers are the author's brother, Guglielmo, and a doctor and philosopher named Annibale Magnocavalli. And by now we surely do not need to be reminded that 'it is inadvisable to read the representations of Shakespearean drama as if they were mere exemplifications of contemporary prose tracts' (p. 58). But Schalkwyk has already alerted us to the 'strangeness and dislocation' (p. 32) of the Shakespearean depiction of reality, and some of his most interesting analyses trace the ways in which love and service are reconceived and rediscovered in the bizarre situations that delighted early modern audiences. In *Twelfth Night*, Viola's cross-dressing allows her to initiate a relationship of male–male *philia* (loving friendship) with Orsino that can later flower into male–female *eros* (desire); the play thus answers back to Montaigne's strictures on the relationship between friendship and desire, offering 'a wholly unconventional combination of *eros* and *philia* as it may be embodied in a woman' (p. 126). In *The tempest* Miranda and Ferdinand reinvent the trope of love-as-service on an island where traditional structures of rule and dependency appear to be in meltdown. Plays such as *King Lear* and *The winter's tale* show how disobedience to a tyrannical master can turn into a kind of service which is also, in its uncalculating submission to the other, a form of love. Schalkwyk is moved by the devotion of Timon of Athens' steward Flavius, whose love for his master becomes 'the moral touchstone of the play' (p. 148); he is haunted by the permutations of abjection and devotion in the sonnets; and he is terrified by that ideal servant Iago, who is able 'to inhabit the forms of service so perfectly without in turn being inhabited by them' (p. 251), and who in his emptiness appears to push to its parodic extreme an ideology of service in which the humanity or agency of the servant counted for nothing. In many early modern accounts, service is a kind of performance, and Iago looks like a demonic culmination of the servant as consummate performer, or as player. Such metatheatrical points are by now perhaps predictable, but Schalkwyk's work is refreshing in its attentiveness to the servant-status of the players themselves, which intermittently breaks through the surface of the fictions, as in the depiction of shrews whose 'bravura defiance and insubordination . . . matches that of the irrepressible servant-player' (p. 62). The complexities of service register in a turn of phrase or a tone of voice.

While others are attempting to turn the historicist tide, or to explore aspects of experience that politically inflected criticism tended to ignore, Richard Dutton's *Ben Jonson,* Volpone *and the Gunpowder Plot* represents an increasingly prevalent kind of interdisciplinary synthesis, in which historical research and literary sensitivity are brought together in an effort to recast our

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understanding of a text, but without much methodological reflection or innovation. Jonson's play, one of the most popular in the early modern literary canon, introduces us to a Venetian Magnifico, Volpone, 'the great fox', and his parasite Mosca, 'the fly', who make their living by practising an elaborate con-trick on the crows and vultures of the not-so-serene republic. Volpone, who is apparently in the pink of health, feigns old age and sickness, while Mosca encourages a host of would-be heirs to come to his house with rich gifts, fawning over the dying Magnifico and cursing him to his face in equal measure. The comedy of this beautifully constructed play might seem timeless, but Dutton's study puts it firmly back in the context of its first performance in early 1606 and its first printing in the quarto of 1607.

The historical point around which the play coheres, for Dutton, is the Gunpowder Plot, never mentioned in the text itself but omnipresent for Jonson as a writer who was himself Catholic, who fraternized with alleged plotters in the immediate run-up to the fateful 5 November and who was presented to the consistory court of London as a recusant shortly after it. The political figure at the centre of the play, meanwhile, is Robert Cecil, the most prominent 'Fox' in Jacobean politics, who inherited the mantle from his father William (who had been attacked in precisely these terms in Edmund Spenser's banned poem *Prosopopoia, or Mother Hubbard's tale* back in 1591). Dutton infers that, as a recusant, Jonson would have shared the suspicion that Cecil had either fabricated the plot, or that he would use it to cement his own position as royal favourite and to ensure that even loyal Catholics continued to be persecuted. Hence *Volpone*, a revenge comedy which its 'initiate audience' would know how to read as anti-Cecilian satire.

Dutton's book is well written and tremendously resourceful, shedding light into many dark corners of the play and pulling numerous textual details into the ambit of its argument. The case for considering the play as *ad hominem* satire forces a reconsideration of (among other things) the play's 1607 paratexts, its recourse to beast fable, its representation of Venice, its supposedly excessive classicism and realism, and the relationship between its plot and its sub-plot (or, as Dutton wittily calls them, alluding to early Jacobean terrorist atrocities, the 'Main' plot and the 'Bye' Plot). Nonetheless, Dutton's study has its work cut out for it – and is perhaps doomed to failure from the start – because if Jonson did set out to write an anti-Cecil play, this aspect of it would have had to be very subtly encoded and easily deniable. 'I have no smoking gun,' the author confesses as his study draws to a close (p. 133). While some of Dutton's arguments are admirably subtle and push towards plausibility, many feel strained, as if an excess of scholarly ingenuity is being applied in pursuit of a preconceived goal. In *Volpone*, Jonson explicitly evokes and defuses contemporary paranoia about 'plots' through his depiction of the idiotic Sir Politic Would-Be, who talks of spies sending messages in cabbages and Colchester oysters. As Dutton is all too aware, any interpreter who wishes to decipher Jonson's plots risks looking equally paranoid.

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None of this would be such a problem if Dutton's case did not run counter to what I would hazard is the average reader's or spectator's perception of *Volpone*, which is that we sympathize with the conmen rather than their dupes. Volpone and Mosca delight in their crimes and they make us delight in them too; perversely, they become the play's moralists, providing the lazy sensualists of the city with a length of rope in which to hang themselves. So it is that at the end of the play Volpone returns to the stage to beg the audience's applause, saying: 'Though the Fox be punished by the laws, / He yet doth hope there is no suffering due / For any fact which he hath done 'gainst you' (v.xii.153–5). Had the recusants in the audience identified Volpone with Cecil, they would have had to withhold their applause at this point. But the play has brought us a feast of mirth on the back of its criminal exploits, so we clap. Dutton's failure to engage with the structure of sympathy in the play seems to me the deepest flaw of what is in many respects an absorbing critical study.

Dutton's book plays down contemporary parallels, but it nonetheless reads like an effort to make Ben Jonson over for a modern world overcome by terrorism, religious intolerance, and political paranoia. This might alert us to the extent to which we continue to project our own situations into the textures of the plays that we study, even when we might seem to be practising a literary historicism more scrupulous and demanding than any that has preceded it. One might also see Dutton's Catholic Jonson, standing outside the power-structures of his society and reflecting them all the more powerfully in his art, as a close neighbour of the Catholic Shakespeare, whose ghost flits through these studies without ever being fully acknowledged (or laid to rest). In the cases of both writers, an uncertain or buried confessional identity helps to open the gap through which a 'modern', tolerant, liberal identity can issue.

One might go further and argue that, for all the sophisticated historical work that they do, these studies testify to a desire to revive the idea of authors who can teach us things, offering wisdom that might have some practical utility in our daily lives. The new historicists and cultural materialists of the 1980s debunked the idea of the writer-as-teacher, arguing that literature was often involved in promulgating repressive ideologies; and the result of this was to drive a wedge between 'academic' accounts of the literary and those which circulated in schools, newspapers, and publishers' catalogues. Now the wise author threatens to come back with a vengeance. David Bevington's study *Shakespeare's ideas*, for example, concludes with a 'Credo' in which the author offers a playful outline of Shakespeare's likely beliefs.[3] 'Be generous', the ventriloquist's dummy tells us; 'learn to forgive the unforgivable'. 'Church-going is generally a good thing', we learn, but 'both drama and religion … are poetry'. 'Towards non-Christian faiths and ethical systems one must try also to be tolerant and understanding,

[3] David Bevington, *Shakespeare's ideas: more things in heaven and earth* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 213–16.

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even if there are limits.' 'In political matters we are well advised not to go against the state.'

Needless to say, this Shakespeare is also 'deeply humane', his plays 'surely invit[ing] us to deplore murder and senseless bloodshed, [and] to applaud charitable generosity'. Although it is prefaced by the rueful admission that 'it probably says more about me than anything else', Bevington's coda is nonetheless rather shocking in its desire to have Shakespeare mouth a series of vacuous secular pieties. Ben Jonson once wrote that he loved Shakespeare, and honoured his memory '(on this side Idolatry) as much as any'. We post-historicists – as we struggle, in the UK at least, to meet with the absurd terms of the government's 'impact agenda' for research – must be wary of crossing that line, and of turning our writers back into graven images who mouth platitudes to serve our immediate needs.

GONVILLE AND CAIUS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE JASON SCOTT-WARREN

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