

The Value of Literature:

II—Shakespeare and the Tudor Homilies

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'Similitude of manners', wrote Sir Thomas More in his *Life of John Picus*, 'is a cause of love and friendship: a likeness of conditions is (as Appollonius saith) an affinity'.¹ In the first of these articles looking at the uncertain place of literature within our modern culture, and within a Christian cultivation of the virtues, I tried to show how Chaucer's art restores friendships which have been rent by our denial of common human weakness, a likeness of conditions in frailty and sin. I suggested that Chaucer invites his readers to overcome a desire to pass sentence on their neighbours in two ways: firstly he allows us to hear our sentences on the lips of his characters, and to see the violence such dismissive voices call into being; secondly he asks us to give voice to others' sins and, in giving voice to them, hear ourselves and our own weakness. Chaucer thus creates a language of communal forgiveness as he trains our ear, and in the laughter he raises that language effects what it signifies. In that sense we can agree with David Jones that art is sacramental, and add that literature imparts an ethics of speech.²

Here I shall be pursuing this view of art as contributing to an ethics of speech, something sadly neglected by most of today's Catholic moral theologians. Apparently mesmerized by the bits and pieces of human anatomy below the belt, they remain uninspired by our vocal chords. The past tells a different story. Chaucer's parson, detailing the 'synnes that comen of the tonge', explained: 'Let us thanne speken of chidyng and reproche, whiche been ful grete woundes in mannes herte, for they unsowen the semes of frendshipe in mannes herte'.³ But does the human voice matter that much? Don't we live in an age of reason characterized by the silence and objectivity of newsprint? Is not what really matters our access to the facts, freedom of information? Perhaps most would say so, and modern politicians would agree with Gradgrind that facts, not poetry, was the stuff of education. Yet that is surely an odd picture of how the mind works, a Cartesian computer processing the data; for we are in fact profoundly under the sway of strange and powerful voices commanding the stage of politics, of law, and of war. As a generation, we are heirs to the radio broadcasts of Churchill and of King George VI, and as we waged war in the Falklands the clipped tones of the Ministry of Defence, with the stirring rhetoric of the Prime Minister, sought legitimation as they echoed those earlier speeches. And they proved to be voices holding great authority over us, and we were

charmed and hypnotised.⁴ In this article I would like to suggest that in Shakespeare's History Plays art liberates us from these voices that attempt to charm, as they attempt to silence moral reflection and disquiet. Where Orwell believed all art to be propaganda, I hope to show how in Shakespeare at least art enables us to take the measure of propaganda, to expose lies, and teach us where to hunt out their hiding-place in similes and metaphors.

Deprived of two of the most important modern means of mass-communication, radio and the daily papers, the resourceful propagandists of the Tudors had instead to communicate their message in the mass. Unable to seize the radio station, they seized the only national broadcasting corporation that they could, they seized the Church; and they sought control over what presses there were through the Stationer's Office. From the English Church's network of pulpits they determined what a weekly audience would hear when they came to pray for their daily bread, and they published what are known as the Tudor Homilies. As the preface of 1562 declared,

the Queen's most excellent Majesty, tendering the souls' health of her loving subjects, and the quieting of their consciences ... commandeth and straitly chargeth all Parsons, Vicars, Curates, and all others having spiritual cure, every Sunday and Holy-day in the year ... to read and declare to their parishioners plainly and distinctly one of the said Homilies, in such order as they stand in the book, except there be a Sermon, according as it is enjoined in the book of her Highness' Injunctions; and then for that cause only, and for none other, the reading of the said Homily to be deferred unto the next Sunday or Holy-Day following. And when the foresaid Book of Homilies is read over, her Majesty's pleasure is, that the same be repeated and read again ...'⁵

Elizabeth's pleasure was due not least to the stress these homilies put upon the evil of rebellion and disaffection. In 1571 this was further strengthened by the addition of the long treatise, 'Against Disobedience and wilful Rebellion', in which were expounded and intertwined the two evils of disobedience to the monarch and adherence to the Roman Catholic Faith.

The voice of the Tudor Homilist is suasive, and, like the present government, it attempts to clothe itself in scriptural quotations and to assume with its audience a common defence of the Bible. Its vehicle is a rhetorically charged prose that employs latinate diction to capture the high intellectual ground, but speaks abusively and with earthy scorn of its opponents: 'Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by man's imagination, for our justification and salvation.'⁶ Time and again we are told that 'it shall be declared unto you' as argument and controversy is presented as unassailable fact, as law, where

saying so thus legislates: 'And concerning the usurped power of the bishop of Rome, which he most wrongfully challengeth as the successor of Christ and Peter, we may easily perceive how false, feigned, and forged it is, not only in that it hath no sufficient ground in holy Scripture, but also by the fruits and doctrine thereof.'⁷ While in Coverdale's St Luke Christ brings not peace but 'debate', the Homilist so condemns civil strife, upholds law and order, that we cannot ask whether he defends a just order, a true faith: 'This day, good Christian people, shall be declared unto you the unprofitableness and shameful dishonesty of contention, strife, and debate; to the intent that, when you shall see, as it were in a table painted before your eyes, the evilfavouredness and deformity of this most detestable vice, your stomachs may be moved to rise against it, and to detest and abhor that sin, which is so much to be hated, and so pernicious and hurtful to all men.'⁸ Any opposition can thus be assimilated to violence, and the reaction expected of the audience is set in place. In these sermons the words of Christ are spoken by the voice of civil Majesty.

Such a voice could win hearts as well as turn stomachs. It apparently won the heart and mind of E.M. Tillyard, as he described the Homilies in *Shakespeare's History Plays*:

The Tudor age was still intensely religious, and the religious feeling that had found its expression in the complexities of the medieval faith and ritual was not fully absorbed by the simplified Protestant order. The surplus of the spirit of worship had to be accommodated; and if a part found its home in the new veneration of the Scriptures, a part too went to intensify the feelings of the common people towards their rulers and especially their prince ... it ... made the adoration of the queen an active power in men's minds and kept it from the obvious danger of absurdity. She was the head of the church not by mere formality but in the hearts of most Englishmen.⁹

But Tillyard was himself writing a book to fire the hearts of good Englishmen in troubled days and his book was first published in 1944. Present voices that spoke for liberty in the face of threatened invasion found their Tudor counterparts, while past victory raised current hopes. Yet what Tillyard fondly believed a reflection of devotion and its 'accommodation' (how very considerate!) was as much an attempt to redirect devotion and language evicted from its traditional home. Robert Southwell, writing for the persecuted recusants, warned their oppressors: 'We have read your books. We find them full of wilful corruptions, both of Scriptures and Fathers, purposely wrested from their true meaning.'¹⁰

But what of Shakespeare? Tillyard, under the sway of the voice and with a touching faith in the unity of an 'Elizabethan world order', thought that Shakespeare found in the Homilies an inspiration, and that he shared the hatred found there for rebellion. He concluded his study of the History

Plays by stating that ‘in the total sequence ... he expressed successfully a universally held and still comprehensible scheme of history: a scheme fundamentally religious, by which events evolve under a law of justice and under the ruling of God’s Providence, and of which Elizabeth’s England was the acknowledged outcome.’¹¹ But what the critic failed to hear was the way in which these early plays persistently concern themselves with allusion and quotation, with what happens when the words and writings of one person and place are taken up by the voice of another. The Elizabethan regime had of course taken steps to silence open criticism of its policies: although it lacked the finesse of the Official Secrets Act, the 1559 Act of Uniformity sought to protect alterations within the Prayer Book by setting penalties ‘if any person or persons whatsoever ... shall in any interludes, plays, songs, rhymes, or by other open words, declare or speak anything in the derogation, depraving or despising of the same book ...’¹² Shakespeare, however, knew well enough how to make words tell more than they showed openly. What will be outlined here is, firstly, how his characters abuse Bible tags, so that we learn to hear the meaning and intent expressed in the voices that delight in bandying such ‘holy saws’; and, secondly, how characters attempt to legitimate their deeds by classical allusion, with the different treatment this receives as the sequence of plays progresses.

Henry VI Part One looks and sounds very much like Tudor propaganda. The evil machinations of the dastardly French are orchestrated by Joan of Arc as she conjures up the fiends of hell, but claims the protection of the blessed Virgin. Cardinals and indulgences are the hateful workings of a Pope who is a ‘wolf in sheep’s array’ (I/iii/55), one of the most frequent clichés of the age. Rebellion is born here of noble ambition and faction. Shakespeare presents a picture and views that were familiar to his audience from the chronicles. Edward Hall, in *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York* (1548), despised Joan as ‘a beggers brat: whiche blindyng the wittes of the French nacion, by revelations, dreames & phantasticall visions, made them beleve thynges not to be supposed, and to geve faithe to thynges impossible’.¹³ Yet if we are asked to take this at face value, as Shakespeare’s audience would have done, *Henry VI Part Two* and *Part Three* work over the same material in a new fashion. For a maid in France, we are shown an English duchess. She attempts to conjure up the spirits to her own nefarious advantage, but is actually a victim and dupe of political intrigue. Here she is greeted by the double-agent who is to betray her:

Hume: Jesu preserve your royal Majesty!

Duchess: What say’st thou? Majesty! I am but Grace.

Hume: But by the grace of God and Hume’s advice,
Your Grace’s title shall be multiplied

(2 *Henry VI*, Act I, scene ii, 11.70–73)

Hume’s flattery, and temptation, plays on 1 Peter 1.2 (‘May grace and peace

be multiplied to you' RSV), so that the word of God has become the source of metaphorical coin in a political game. It is a display of wit, silently twisting the sense of Scripture so as to intimate a willingness to depart from Scripture's ethic and law. Hume's greeting in the first line is of course exactly what should be said in the presence of the monarch, and we are required to attend not to the statement's content, but its application to the duchess. What we must hear is how the rising leer in that additional 'by the grace of God, and Hume's advice' is on the surface a conjunction of mens' words to those of God, but in fact betrays God's word and detracts from it. The phrase is given lip-service. And what is thus pointed out is the mechanism at work in the Tudor Homilies (though there it is the title of monarchy itself which seeks the multiplication of its powers). What is so elegant is the way in which the duchess' reply to Hume's greeting can pretend to a humility in what is said, but imply in tone of voice, and glance, a readiness to plot with this man whose words she so readily echoes. Their words in this short exchange echo each other as though embracing a common meaning, but Hume expands as he borrows (I am but Grace./ But by the grace of God ...) in such a way that they both enjoy the shifts and twists of sense. In so doing, these manipulators of God's word are themselves silently judged by their misuse of the Gospel.

Time and again the pattern repeats itself; but here we will take one further example, from the quarrelling of Suffolk, the Queen, Gloucester, and the Cardinal:

Glou.: Why, Suffolk, England knows thine insolence.

Queen: And thy ambition, Gloucester.

King: I prithee, peace,

Good Queen, and whet not on these furious peers;

For blessed are the peacemakers on earth.

Card.: Let me be blessed for the piece I make

Against this proud Protector with my sword!

Glou.: (Aside to Card.) Faith, holy uncle, would 'twere come to that!

Card.: (Aside to Glou.) Marry, when thou darest.

(2 *Henry VI*, Act II, sc i, 11.31—38.)

The King steps in to restore peace and amity in this exchange, and he does so by completing the Queen's line. He would put a stop to her wrangling by filling the gap within the verse. But he fails, as his own words fail to close that line within the pentameter, so that 'peace' falls unstressed and weak, and his voice runs on until it can regain a measure of control in the following line. He then hopes to cap his words by quotation from the Gospel. For the words of Christ cannot be gainsaid. Instead, the Cardinal sets his wit to accept the words and to subvert them, to find a subsequent allusion ('I come not to bring peace but the sword') which he can then pun upon to score a point over his opponent Gloucester. What were once expressions of courtesy

redolent with reverence are now whispered expletives (Faith, marry), and the allusion to the Gospels which should have put an end to strife has become the occasion of a duel.

Like the Cardinal, the Queen is an expert wit, as shown here at *2 Henry VI*, Act I/iii/50—64, in her complaint about Henry:

I tell thee, Pole, when in the city Tours
Thou ran'st a tilt in honour of my love,
And stol'st away the ladies' hearts of France,
I thought King Henry had resembled thee
In courage, courtship, and proportion:
But all his mind is bent to holiness,
To number Ave-Maries on his beads;
His champions are the prophets and apostles,
His weapons holy saws of sacred wit,
His study is his tilt-yard, and his loves
Are brazen images of canoniz'd saints.
I would the college of Cardinals
Would choose him Pope, and carry him to Rome,
And set the triple crown upon his head:
That were a state fit for his Holiness.

Such wit is bawdy, as the queen laments the effeminacy of her husband, taking her cue from Pole's name to imply his sexual attraction and her desire, punning further on Henry's 'brazen' loves. But what here is to be made of her disgust with a king counting Ave-Maries and reverencing the saints? The attitude of the audience will be mixed and confused, partly in sympathy with the Queen at this point in the play and enjoying the bawdy undertone. But her contempt is also her own condemnation, and the audience that without reflection might have enjoyed the anti-catholic lines of *Henry VI Part One* is now caught out by the place such opinions have in the characterisation of this second play. The sharp wit that enables the Queen to fit and intend both senses of 'his Holiness' (title and virtue), sneers at both also; but the audience will be unable to follow her. For they will be unwilling to deny the genuine holiness of Henry, are caught out when this has been tied to the hateful papal see. Repelled by her hatred of her husband, they will find it harder to delight in her hatred of Rome, and unhappily find their own scorn in the mouth of such a vicious woman.

It is evident that the Queen does not believe that 'holy saws of sacred wit' can be weapons at all. She stands rather in the position of someone who has not yet seen the power that may be seized in Scripture's name, the letter filled with the spirit of someone else's breath; and yet Scripture outwits her. The editor of the Arden Shakespeare notes of this speech that the general metaphor behind it (of the armour of faith), comes from the letter to the Ephesians (2.20, and 6.11—17). Yet it could not be said with certainty that the queen alludes to the letter. It is at best unclear, for any audience as for

any editor. It looks as though, rather, we shall hear an echo unintended by the speaker, and one which silently judges her profane wit by its own. Shakespeare has taught us well how saws of sacred wit are weapons for good or ill, and in so doing has begun to reveal the workings of the voice of Tudor propaganda. Later in the play, when Gloucester is arrested on trumped-up treason charges, Buckingham calls for him to stop his defense: 'He'll wrest the sense and hold us here all day' (III/i/186). It was the trick of which Robert Southwell accused the 'heretics ... who change the faith of God's Church into the fables of their own fantasy and seek to set forth their follies with the authority of God's word, wrested by their perverse spirits against its true meaning in order more easily to blind the simple.'¹⁴ Shakespeare employs the fantasy of his play to shed light.

In the *Henry VI* plays this theme is tied to a much broader one of how the faith that men profess sits to the politics they practise. Andrew Cairncross, who accepted Tillyard's grand vision of the History Plays, would have Shakespeare present a unity of faith and politics, of Church and State, beloved of the Tudor Homilist who taught 'that similitude that is between the heavenly monarchy and earthly kingdoms'.¹⁵ This Shakespeare 'set himself, and achieved, the ambitious task of staging, in his country's finest hour, its quasi-Biblical story, from the original sin of Henry IV to the grand redemption of the Tudors'.¹⁶ But a faith proclaiming the mercy of God is also seen on the battlefield where revenge drives home the sword. And the power of such politics is assessed against that abused faith. For the evil men and women, who pay but lip service to the Gospels and have no faith in its power, destroy not only the saintly king but themselves. Their plans come in part to fruition (the good die, to contradict the psalmist), but the wicked themselves swiftly come to nothing. When the King and courtiers witness the despair of the Cardinal on his deathbed, Henry says this:

Forbear to judge, for we are sinners all.
Close up his eyes, and draw the curtain close;
And let us all to meditation.

(2 *Henry VI*, Act III, scene iii, 11.31–33).

What the Arden editor then notes is that 'meditation' is 'an early and Biblical usage. The conclusion is characteristically *religious and ineffectual*.'¹⁷ The conjunction which I have italicised betrays in Cairncross the kind of assumption that Shakespeare portrays in the noble warriors of the drama, political realists of their day, but the reality shown by the plays is one where they engender their own death. If the assumption of the editor is here added to his faith above in the working of God's grace in Her Majesty's Government, you end up with an odd conclusion indeed: that God puts down the lowly and exalts the powerful. It is a belief attractive to many; but it is not that of Shakespeare. In this article, however, we must stay close to Shakespeare's concern with the voice of the Tudor Homilies. To do this we shall attend to how in 2 *Henry IV* Shakespeare employs a classical allusion.

The Homilies state, with the Majesty of State, that ‘where most rebellions and rebels be, there is the express similitude of hell, and the rebels themselves are the very figures of fiends and devils, and their captain the ungracious pattern of Lucifer and Satan, the prince of darkness’.¹⁸ But what is to be made of such a notion as ‘express similitude’ after the following speech of Northumberland?

Even such a man, so faint, so spiritless,
So dull, so dead in look, so woe-begone,
Drew Priam’s curtain in the dead of night,
And would have told him half his Troy was burnt:
But Priam found the fire ere he his tongue,
And I my Percy’s death ere thou report’st it.

(2 *Henry IV*, Act I, scene i, 11.70–75).

Northumberland, looking into the face of Morton and fearing his son’s untimely death in battle, pre-emptively reports so that he may face the facts, put a brave face upon the loss of a dear son. He does so by means of literary allusion and comparison. He turns to the fall of Troy, and the literary forms enshrining that fall, those ruins, in the grandeur of *The Fall of Troy*. He does so to invest the ruins of his noble house, a family’s fall from high estate, with epic dignity. He thus acts, so that in some measure, as with measured breath, he may confront the breathless messenger, his dispiriting news. He keeps a measure of self-possession. Northumberland must endure the kind of suffering that will stretch out endlessly, and he consoles himself with the sound of his own voice, rhythms, the rise and fall of his own voice so patterned as to transform mere duration into succession, failure and loss into the fulfilment of expectation. And he cheats. He allows himself to face some of the facts, by an allusion that hides facts far more painful. For Northumberland was not like Priam so old, so frail. The plays hint that, unlike Priam, he may have deserted his son, while ‘crafty-sick’ (2 *Henry IV*, Induction, 1.37). Northumberland does not turn up with his men at the battle in which Hotspur dies. ‘Even as’, he would have us believe, and the voice is a seductive one, manipulating those who hear it to offer sympathy as it assuages a guilty conscience. Shakespeare thus shows us the duplicity that may lurk within similes and metaphors, a duplicity he found in the Homilies. In the opening scenes of *I Henry VI* classical allusions pepper the speeches of the nobility, who take phrases in particular from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. As that play begins, such tags seem to indicate learning and wisdom; but as the drama progresses then Shakespeare would point out the difference between pagan rhetoric and Christian virtue.

It has often been noted by critics, in particular Emrys Jones, how in these History Plays the dramatic form and characterization has been influenced, patterned, by earlier drama and the conventions of the Mystery and Miracle Plays. In *Henry VI Part Three* York is buffeted by the victors as Christ is buffeted in the old passion play. In *Henry IV* the bloated figure

of Falstaff resembles the traditional figure of the Vice. What is often omitted from discussion is the way in which such patterning challenges the Tudor patterns, because in each case the resemblances are partial and shocking. York is no saintly hero, and Falstaff is all too friendly, too much fun! To look at the complexities beneath the surface in just the first case, Shakespeare found the tragi-comic story of York's buffeting, while stood upon a molehill, in the chronicle written by Holinshed. But one act later he has King Henry sit upon a molehill amid the fury of battle. A man comes in with the body of an opponent whom he has slain. The man discovers it was his father. Moments later another man comes, also bearing the body of an opponent he has just slain. This man discovers he has killed his own son. The Tudor Homilist preached just such a result to rebellion: 'the brother to seek and often to work the death of his brother, the son of the father; the father to seek or procure the death of his sons'¹⁹. But it matters that one says that he and his father were both pressed into service, both of them victims. To detest rebellion is not, necessarily, to detest the rebel. And it matters that Shakespeare gives to each survivor an allusion, one from Scripture, one from the Classics. A son says: 'Pardon me, God, I knew not what I did:/And pardon, father, for I knew not thee.' (II, v, 69—70). A father says:

And so obsequious will thy father be,
Even for the loss of thee, having no more,
As Priam was for all his valiant sons.

(II, v, 118—120).

Just what title one has to play upon the words of Christ is not clear. Does one claim thus one's own absolution? Though God may hear his prayers, the conjunction strains across the line-end as he would talk also to a father who cannot hear him. Just what is the resemblance between Priam and a man who admits he has murdered his own son? God has in the words of the Homilist 'exalted us, as touching our soul, unto his own similitude and likeness'²⁰. Shakespeare, in the course of his dramatic investigations, would, as he wrote in *King Lear*, teach us 'differences', differences between our own similes and the realities they attempt to circumscribe. What is taught is a certain scepticism for the black-and-white categories that the Homilist employed and enjoined. Amid the muddled claims for the English throne, the nobility and the pride, folly and sorrow, of its actors, the drama holds in the background images of the Last Judgement. And the Tudors had tampered with that image to obliterate the hope of purgatory. All must fit in heaven or in hell. The new picture is measured against an understanding of history and found wanting (which is not, of course, to say that Shakespeare was a propagandist in opposition to the Tudors, as *Richard III* should indicate).

Shakespeare offered a liberation from the voice that thus commanded the stage of politics with words of God. John Bossy has written 'that the

“word” of the sixteenth century was to a large extent the devocalised and desocialised medium whose emergence has been argued for by the transatlantic media-theorists in the wake of Marshall McLuhan²¹. In England it is rather that the voice of the state used the printed word to appropriate words to which it had no right. Shakespeare teaches a lesson that will alert us to the wiles of those in power who preach lessons from the Gospels.

Here endeth today’s reading.

- 1 St Thomas More, *The Life of John Picus* in *The English Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. W.E. Campbell, London, 1931, vol 1, p.359.
- 2 David Jones, in *Epoch and Artist*, Faber 1959, esp. pp.143—185.
- 3 *The Canterbury Tales*, X 621 and 652.
- 4 Although the voice has a much longer pedigree, Mrs Humphrey Ward, in 1916, defended the title of her book on the War, *England’s Effort*, by reminding readers of how the name of England rolled off the tongue!
- 5 From the 1562 Preface to the Homilies and Canons, republished in *Certain Sermons and Homilies*, London, 1864, p.4.
- 6 *Ibid*, p.2.
- 7 in ‘Of Obedience’, *ibid*, p. 119.
- 8 in ‘Against Contention and Brawling’, *ibid*, p. 141.
- 9 E.M. Tillyard, in *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, London, 1944, pp.66—67.
- 10 Robert Southwell, *An Epistle of Comfort*, ed. Margaret Waugh, London, 1966, p.238.
- 11 E.M. Tillyard, *op. cit.*, pp.320—321.
- 12 in *Statutes and Constitutional Documents 1558—1625*, ed. G.W. Prothero, 2nd edition, 1898, p.16.
- 13 in A. Cairncross, *Henry VI Part I*, Arden edition, p.152.
- 14 Robert Southwell, *op. cit.*, p.79.
- 15 in *Certain Sermons and Homilies*, *op. cit.*, p. 592.
- 16 A. Cairncross, *op. cit.*, p.xli.
- 17 *Ibid*, p.99.
- 18 in ‘Against Strife and Contention’, *Certain Homilies*, *op. cit.* p.626.
- 19 in ‘Against Disobedience’, *ibid*, p.615.
- 20 in ‘Of Salvation’, *ibid*, p.31.
- 21 John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400—1700*, OUP 1985, pp. 98—99.