1

Shakespeare and the "Element" he Lived in

David Scott Kastan

No doubt the most familiar of the clichés of Shakespeare studies is that he is our contemporary. Certainly there is some sense in which the claim is true and worth reiterating. If it is no longer quite the case (if indeed it ever was) that, as Edmund says in *Mansfield Park*, "we all talk Shakespeare," Shakespeare, along with Jane Austen, has at the very least recently emerged as our favorite middle-brow screenwriter, and, quill in hand, he serves us, via advertising, as a readily identifiable icon of both taste and value. And, of course, Shakespeare stands at the still point of the ever-changing English curriculum in both secondary schools and universities. Nonetheless, we often forget that Shakespeare's currency flows only one way. He may conceivably be our contemporary; but we are not his. Like every age that does what is necessary to stay in contact with him, we drag him forward into our present, ignoring how much he is a stranger in it.

This is not, of course, to suggest that the proper goal of our engagement with Shakespeare is to sequester him safely back in his own time, to confront him only as a matter of a pious antiquarianism. It couldn't in fact be done. Shakespeare is now one of our playwrights, exactly as in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries he was one of theirs. Any search of the theatrical repertory would prove this point. But there is a danger in too quickly and too easily collapsing the distance between us. Not to respect that distance is to risk Shakespeare becoming of merely notional significance, an expensive mirror reflecting our own values, anxieties, and dreams. Too often, we eagerly appropriate his cultural prestige but ignore the authority of his own voice – though it should be noted at once that if one major objective of this book is to allow that voice to be heard, it is to do so by insisting on how fractured "his own voice" is; "Shakespeare," as a proper noun, not only names the playwright from Stratford but is a convenient synecdoche for the multiple collaborations necessary to produce his voice.

Yet, as both historical agent and trope, Shakespeare existed in circumstances markedly different from those of our own world, and, though continuities can be

sensed between our ages (there is something to be said for the currently fashionable period marker, "early modern"), the differences must be insisted upon. Indeed, any intrinsic value that Shakespeare may have for us – that is, any value accruing before we register the "value added" of his massive cultural authority – must at least begin with the recognition of his distance from us rather than with an assumption of his essential contemporaneity. When we disregard that distance, the static of our desire to claim him as our contemporary disrupts his voice, as we listen less to his concerns than to his anticipations of our own. It is one thing to "talk Shakespeare," quite another to hear him talk.

We can, however, attend to the distinctiveness of his voice and still marvel at its enduring appeal. Shakespeare is no doubt the closest thing we have to an "EVER-LIVING POET," as the title page of the 1609 edition of the sonnets terms him. Though clearly he does live in ways that his contemporaries do not, thriving in a rich history of determined engagement and appropriation by later ages, it is not, I think, because he is in any meaningful sense "timeless," speaking some otherwise unknown, universal idiom. He is ever-living, paradoxically, because he is so intensely of his own time and place. As Jonson recognized in his commendatory poem in the 1623 folio, Shakespeare is the "Soule of the Age" both before, and as the condition of, his being "for all time."

Unwittingly forced to serve as our contemporary, however, he not infrequently becomes something of an embarrassment; too much needs to be ignored or explained away. (Think of eighteenth-century efforts to render him contemporary by "improving" the supposed infelicities of his art.) But as a voice from the past he is irresistible. His engagement with his own world is the most vital record we have of that world's struggle for meaning and value, allowing each age that reaches out to him to see what it has been and also, in measuring its distance from that world, what it has become. To read Shakespeare historically, then, is not least to discover the possibility of change, or, put differently, to discover ourselves as historical beings; and that discovery is not the least of our debts to him.

It is, therefore, our distance from Shakespeare that this book attempts to survey and bridge. It seeks to provide an authoritative account of the historical world in which Shakespeare worked, of the imaginative and institutional conditions that enabled and, in some cases, inhibited his art, insisting that we see his artistry in its own, originating terms without prematurely filtering it through our own. (The emphasis here, I should note, is on "prematurely"; I assume that such filtering will, and indeed should, take place in both scholarship and performance.) The riches of his extraordinary artistic achievement, like Antony's "delights," may well raise themselves "dolphin-like . . . above / The element they lived in" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, v. ii. 89–90), but they can never fully escape it; even the acrobatic dolphin is dependent upon its natural element for life and can never safely be removed from it for any length of time.

To see Shakespeare working within the historical circumstances that stimulated and challenged his imagination, then, is not to evade or diminish his remarkable artistry; rather, to see him thus is crucial if we are properly to understand or even adequately to

admire his achievement. Art is not, of course, reducible to its historical determinants, but it is neither useful nor realistic to pretend that it erupts into being independent of them. However seductive is a romantic notion of artistic genius, solitary and sovereign, untouched by the world, all artists work within a web of engagements with the world, work always and only within the set of imaginative, material, and institutional possibilities that are available to them. Great artists may transcend these, but they cannot ignore them. Their own talents and temperaments individualize their work, insist that they are not simply products of the historical moment; but if they are always more than their history, they are still always of that history. There is no pure art uncontaminated by contingency. Thus, to see art whole, as humanist critics have long urged, must be to see it clearly as it has emerged from the generative conditions of its making, rather than envisioning it as some radical epiphany with no plausible principle of realization.

This is, as I have indicated, a principal goal of this collection of essays: to see Shakespeare's art as it develops in response to the particular imaginative challenges and provocations that existed for him, as well as to the specific institutional contexts of his playmaking. In other words, this book explores the networks of dependency that are indispensably part of what we have come to call "Shakespeare." With regard to a dramatist, of course, such a commitment should not be controversial (and for virtually any dramatist other than Shakespeare it would not be). Drama is self-evidently a collaborative activity, depending not merely on the dramatist's access to a treasury of linguistic and cultural resources, but, more materially, on the interactions of the playwright with those other theater artists and technicians needed to put a play onstage, as well as with the various practitioners of the book trade, necessary to get a playbook into a reader's hands.

Indeed, all intellectual and artistic activity is dependent in similarly imaginative and material ways; it is necessarily social. None takes place in isolation or is self-contained. In this regard, Shakespeare's is certainly not the exception, though the enormous cultural investment in the idea of his unique genius (a concept virtually invented for him) has often made us reluctant to acknowledge the multiple agencies necessary for his plays to be produced. This *Companion*, by contrast, seeks to make visible the sustaining collaborations of his art. The twenty-eight essays that follow – two on the figure of Shakespeare, first as man and then as myth, bracketing five sections that attempt to define the conditions of possibility in which he wrote – represent the best of modern scholarship. Individually, each stands as a definitive account of its subject; collectively, they form a detailed and arresting mosaic of Shakespeare's artistic environment, of the cultural and material mediations that permitted the plays to be written, performed, printed, and read.

It should go without saying that to focus on the enabling conditions of Shakespeare's art is not to detract from the plays they enable, nor is it to elevate the circumstances of playmaking above the intelligence, intentions, or, should we merely say, *will* of the playwright; though it is perhaps worth remarking that this will becomes manifest only in the context of other wills, other intelligences and intentions

that are necessary to produce the plays onstage or as playbooks. Even so, recovery of the matrix of indebtedness in which Shakespeare worked obviously cannot substitute for a full engagement with the plays themselves. It is at best a necessary precondition for such an engagement. The essays in this volume are what (or at least some of what) we ideally should know as we read or see Shakespeare. The plays themselves, however, demand to be encountered with as much alertness, intelligence, and imaginative sympathy as we can bring to bear upon them. Nonetheless, this *Companion to Shakespeare* should make it easier to understand what it is that we encounter, reinstating the plays in their own dynamic, complicating history, if only so that they may live vitally in our own.