

JOHN D. COX

Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power



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*SHAKESPEARE AND THE DRAMATURGY
OF POWER*

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DRAMATURGY OF POWER

 JOHN D. COX

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For Karen, Anna-Lisa, Jonathan, and Amelia

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PREFACE POWER AND THEORY

The primary task of this book is to reexamine Shakespeare's plays in the context of his medieval dramatic heritage. While my discussion of Shakespeare is therefore organized according to the dramatic genres that have come to be recognized in his work—comedy, history, tragedy, and romance—my purpose in dealing with each genre is to examine it anew in light of what Shakespeare inherited from his immediate predecessors on the English stage. The book does not pretend to be comprehensive: I discuss those plays that I think are best illuminated by the particular approach I have chosen. *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure* are thus given a chapter apiece, while the tragedies are dealt with in a single chapter, because this book is not about a particular dramatic genre but about how Shakespeare adapted and shaped the tradition that I believe adapted and shaped him most profoundly.

What distinguishes this study from other studies of Shakespeare against his medieval background is my secondary purpose and my primary debt. For this book approaches Shakespeare's medieval dramatic heritage for the first time in a new way—according to the methodology that has come to be called New Historicism. In all frankness, without the benefit particularly of work by Jonathan Dollimore, Stephen Greenblatt, Louis A. Montrose, and Frank Whigham, this book would not exist.¹ Its argument is informed throughout by the New Historicist insight that literature is a cultural artifact—"the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped," as Greenblatt puts it (*Self-Fashioning*, p. 4)—and that literature therefore perpetuates specific cultural values—values of class, wealth, power, gender, and indeed of literacy itself. In some abstract sense, this book could in fact be said to deal with the effects of literacy as an emerging criterion for social advancement in the sixteenth century. For literacy has not always had the privileged position it enjoys today: even during the European Middle Ages, which are often thought of as the age of the book, literacy had less to do with social standing than it has today in any of the so-called emerging nations, and literacy only has such status now because it is a principal criterion for "emergence." I do not mean that the rising prestige of literacy in early modern England is always and everywhere the subject of my argument. The issue is ad-

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dressed explicitly for the first time only in chapter 3 and then referred to occasionally thereafter. But it is assumed throughout as the context in which I interpret Shakespeare's debt to his medieval predecessors.

In spite of my debt to New Historicism, I need to emphasize from the outset that this book also entails a sustained critique of New Historicist assumptions. Put in the simplest terms, my argument is that New Historicists are right, but for inadequate reasons. In making this case, I have benefited greatly from Raymond Williams's ideas about cultural change.² His suggestion that culturally dominant ideas are always in dialectical relationship with both residual and emergent ideas is an insight that I have found fruitful as a way of approaching English Renaissance drama, particularly as it developed out of the religious drama of the Middle Ages and as it gave rise, in turn, to the neoclassical preoccupations of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These changes are not merely esthetic or intellectual; they are deeply involved, as I hope to show, with social and political changes between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Since Raymond Williams is also a formative figure in New Historicism (see especially Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy*), my claim to be using his ideas as a means of qualifying New Historicist assumptions clearly demands explanation. What I have learned from Williams is the tripartite dialectic I have just mentioned; where I differ from him and the New Historicists he has inspired, however, is in the application of that dialectic to the Renaissance. A paradigmatic example (which Dollimore in fact represents in many details) takes Christian idealism in this period as dominant: it is manifest in the theological discourse of Reformer and Counter Reformer alike, and in Christian defenses of monarchical absolutism in the emerging nation states. In this view, what is residual is the materialism of popular culture, which Christian idealists and royal absolutists regard as subversive and attempt in various ways to suppress and contain. What is emergent is philosophical materialism—implicit in the cosmology of Copernicus and Galileo, more or less explicit in the political theory of Machiavelli and Hobbes (who was inspired by Galileo's theories of mechanical motion), and in the ontology, physics, and psychology of Descartes. Like the residual materialism of popular culture, emerging philosophical materialism is also regarded as subversive and is also the object of attempts to suppress and contain it. One could cite, for example, the English response to Machiavelli in the sixteenth century and the Counter Reformation response to Galileo in the seventeenth.

What I offer in the following pages is quite a different version of Williams's tripartite conception. I agree that philosophical materialism is in some sense emerging in the Renaissance, but I think to *call* it materialism in this period is a question-begging oversimplification that col-

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lapses the past into the future. Hobbes is the period's prize exhibit of explicit materialist thinking, but his ideas cannot be confused with modern cultural materialism, since they took him in the direction of royal absolutism, not political radicalism. It would be more accurate to say that what is emergent in the Renaissance is philosophical rationalism, in which the seeds of a full-blown materialism in the nineteenth-century sense can sometimes be found, but not very often. The most important point I have to make vis-à-vis the New Historicism, however, is that emergent rationalism is often very difficult to distinguish from what I would argue is truly residual—not popular materialism but what I propose to call Christian political realism. As I point out in chapter 1, this complex view of the human social and political situation is formulated most impressively in Augustine's *City of God*, a work that seeks to articulate a distinctively Christian response to the centralized power of ancient Rome. Augustine's is a minority opinion when he first enunciates it, and it never becomes culturally dominant in the Middle Ages, let alone any later age. But as I argue in chapter 2, Augustine's political realism is formative in medieval religious drama: indeed, the politics of that drama cannot be understood apart from Augustine.

In my understanding of Williams's historico-cultural analysis, what is dominant in the Renaissance is misleadingly described as Christian idealism and more accurately as neopagan political idealism, which gains strength in pace with the rapid centralization of power. By using "neopagan" I do not mean to deny that what becomes culturally dominant in the Renaissance is described and defended in the language of Christian belief; what I mean is that to construe that language as authentically Christian is misleading, because the ideas it clothes originate not in Judeo-Christian tradition but in Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and Hellenistic ideas of kingship. It was this same package of classical ideas about human political and social order that Augustine came to oppose, and I shall argue in chapter 3 that the rapid reascendancy of these ideas in the sixteenth century decisively eclipsed not only Christian political realism but a distinctively Augustinian rhetorical conception that was its counterpart. Rhetorical, stylistic, and dramaturgical transformations are thus constituent elements of contemporaneous political and social transformation. This book aims to explore how Shakespearean drama at once contributes to these changes and yet opposes them in the specific way it embodies power relations.

To borrow someone's ideas (in this case, Raymond Williams's) and at the same time to redefine them as thoroughly as I propose to do may seem capricious and arbitrary, and I should therefore explain why I am doing it. Williams insists that if human beings make anything it is their history, and he sees little hint of this insight before the advent of eighteenth-century "Universal History," which "was the crucial step beyond

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the relatively static ('timeless') conception of history which had depended on religious or metaphysical assumptions" (*Marxism and Literature*, p. 13). Part of the history human beings have made, in other words, is the Enlightenment recognition that they make their own history. My reservations about this claim are both practical and theoretical. My practical reservation is that the insight Williams identifies with eighteenth-century Universal History in fact informs Shakespeare's history plays in the late sixteenth century, as I argue in chapters 5 and 6. For it is the secular character of these plays as history that distinguishes them from the only model for staging history that Shakespeare knew, that is, the medieval biblical cycles. Virtually everything about Shakespeare's history plays indicates that the human knowledge of history is limited to what we ourselves make of it and does not include history's being made for us (as it is made in medieval religious drama) through decisive divine undertaking with implicit eschatological significance.

This practical reservation leads naturally to my theoretical reservations about Williams's claim (and it is an implicit New Historicist claim as well) that human thinking about history evolved in a radical new way in the nineteenth century. For the practical reservation I have just cited can be met with the rejoinder that Shakespeare's histories anticipate eighteenth-century Universal History because historical empiricism is emergent in Shakespeare: he merely foreshadows the promise revealed faintly in Gibbon and Hume and fully in Marx. But my response to this objection is that it is impossible to establish unambiguously, because Shakespeare's secular history not only looks forward to the Enlightenment but also backward to the residual political realism of Augustine. As R. A. Markus argues, Augustine's conception of the *Civitas Terrena* is that it is a *secular* "city": human political and social life is distinguished not only by the structural failure of *caritas* (which is the cohesive principle of the *Civitas Dei*) but by the absence of the definitive prophetic insight that shapes sacred history.³ Augustine's understanding of the Earthly City and its history thus has an empirical bent, as his survey of Roman history in books 2 to 4 of *The City of God* demonstrates, and it is this empiricism that Shakespeare's history plays look back to. My point is not that Shakespeare can be collapsed back into Augustine—much less that he should be—but that the attempt to make Shakespeare look forward is inevitably complicated by a residual tradition that antedates Shakespeare himself by more than a thousand years.

Because Jonathan Dollimore's recent and influential book focuses on Shakespeare, I have given primary attention to Dollimore in the following pages. Any book that makes New Historicist claims must be indebted to Stephen Greenblatt as well, however, and I should therefore clarify briefly how my qualifications of New Historicism relate to his work too. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* sets out to explicate a changing

sense of self in the changing political and social climate of the Renaissance. The notion that the self could be fashioned is an innovation—or at least a new emphasis—Greenblatt claims, and in support of his claim he cites evidence from early modern English (the new use of “fashion” in relation to the self) and the evidence of intellectual history, exemplified in Augustine’s warning, “Hands off yourself. Try to build up yourself and you build a ruin” (*Self-Fashioning*, p. 2).

In brief, my reservations about this claim are again practical and theoretical. In practical terms, Greenblatt’s citing of Augustine is a historical blunder, because Augustine’s sense of self is extraordinarily complex and subtle—enough so, certainly, to encompass what Greenblatt is thinking of as self-fashioning.⁴ Even a cursory reading of *The Confessions* is enough to dispel the idea that the one sentence Greenblatt quotes from Augustine can do justice to Augustine’s sense of self. Considered rhetorically, *The Confessions* can in fact be described as an extended exercise in self-fashioning of a particular kind, and because of this exercise we know more about Augustine as an individualized human personality than about anyone else in the ancient world. With *The Confessions* in mind, Greenblatt’s assertion that the ancient elite understood self-fashioning, while Christianity was suspicious of it (p. 2), is difficult to credit. Again, then, my practical reservation is that what Greenblatt points to as a Renaissance innovation is in fact preceded by a residual tradition originating in Augustine.

My theoretical reservation about Greenblatt’s argument is that it takes the same implicit form as Williams’s and Dollimore’s: something innovative that emerges in the Renaissance only achieves its perfection in the nineteenth century. For Greenblatt could hardly see what he sees in the Renaissance were it not for Marx and Freud, two members of the triumvirate that Paul Ricoeur calls the “school of suspicion” in the nineteenth century (the third being Nietzsche).⁵ “Suspicion” certainly fits Greenblatt’s idea of Renaissance self-fashioning, as I argue in chapter 4: one so frequently makes and remakes one’s self in theatrical response to the threatening challenge of changing power relations that identity is immersed in layers of ambiguity and self-deception. Edward Pechter has characterized Greenblatt’s implicit view of the world with the statement, “It’s a jungle out there,” but this summary misses Greenblatt’s point about the Renaissance self: one knew it was a jungle out there because one knew oneself to be a ravaging beast.⁶

While this grim epistemology of self and society achieves its most penetrating expression in the nineteenth century, we cannot conclude with certainty that it is newly emergent in the Renaissance because it is residual in biblical and patristic tradition. That human beings devour one another like monsters of the deep is a patristic commonplace “culled from rabbinic tradition,” and it underlies Augustine’s thinking

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about human social and political life.⁷ This is a point that Max Weber understood. In opposing the premise that political good follows from political good and evil from evil, Weber points to the early Christians, who "knew full well the world is governed by demons and that he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers, and for his action it is *not* true that good can follow only from good and evil only from evil, but that often the opposite is true. Anyone who fails to see this is, indeed, a political infant."⁸ The counterpart to this sense of political life is what Augustine recognizes about the self in *The Confessions*: that our fundamental instinct is to hide what we know about ourselves even from ourselves, and the divinely unaided quest for self-knowledge is a delusion.

In summary, my reservations about Greenblatt derive from a historical skepticism that also informs my reservations about New Historicism in general. This book should not be construed as an argument that Shakespearean drama is an allegorization of Augustinian theology, but I do take Augustine as a point of departure in questioning the implicit teleology of New Historicism. Unlike most New Historicists, I am not committed to finding that either cultural poetics or cultural materialism is the ripening paradisaical fruit on the intellectual tree planted by early modern rationalism. Williams's assertion that we make our own history is fine as a description of secular history but inadmissible as a historicist claim, that is, as a claim that we (and especially we New Historicists or Cultural Materialists) are the purpose toward which history has been moving and continues to move. Behind that implicit teleology is the habit of mind that transforms historical change into moral change—"what is" into "what ought to be"—and in comparison my conception of historical change is indeed "relatively static." Remarkable changes have certainly occurred since the seventeenth century, and they have sometimes enriched and complicated our moral understanding. Moreover, they frequently have antedecedents in the Renaissance. I am not persuaded, however, that as imperatives to human action (that is, as moral signifiers) the mere facts of modern history are radical advances over the past. Nor do they provide grounds, I think, for concluding either that the human race only began to be seriously aware of injustice, oppression, exploitation, greed, and self-deception in the sixteenth century or that we have successfully determined how to eradicate any of those sad and dismal aspects of our lives.

I HAVE MADE a conscious effort in the following pages to use inclusive language wherever possible, including quotations. I have thus silently emended the generic "man" or "mankind" to "humankind" or "human beings," even in modern translations of ancient texts. I am well aware that such emendation falsifies subtleties of Latin meaning, but at this

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point in human history and in a book that is not about ancient linguistics, the connotations for modern readers are more important than niceties of Latin distinction. In early modern vernacular texts, emendation to achieve inclusive language is more difficult, particularly in poetry, but I have found little need for it in such contexts anyway. I have consistently modernized archaic orthography and punctuation in early modern texts in English, primarily because my quotations from Shakespeare are modernized in this way, and I see no virtue in inconsistency on this front. I have used the glosses and translations provided by David Bevington in his anthology called *Medieval Drama*, and when quoting passages not in his anthology, I have used his method of transcribing Middle English and supplied glosses like his, on the assumption that this book will be read mostly by those who will find such an apparatus helpful. Biblical quotations are from the Geneva Bible, edited by Lloyd Berry (Wisconsin, 1969), because it is the most important translation for Shakespeare. Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (Scott, Foresman, 1980).

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I have also been treated generously by the organizers of academic conferences who have invited me to present portions of this book. These include the Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, the Iowa Shakespeare Symposium, the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, the Michigan College English Association, the Midwest Modern Language Association, the Modern Language Association, the Shakespeare Association of America, and the 1986 World Shakespeare Congress in Berlin. Individuals too numerous to mention have been helpful and stimulating in their responses to my work in these conferences. Particularly memorable is David Bergeron's caveat about Perdita's flowers in

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*SHAKESPEARE AND THE DRAMATURGY
OF POWER*

**CHAPTER 1 🐉 CENTRALIZED POWER AND
CHRISTIAN POLITICAL REALISM: FIFTH
CENTURY AND SIXTEENTH**

Politically and socially the most momentous change in the Renaissance is the growth of centralized power. Even in countries where this growth was not very successful, as in Italy and Germany, people acted as if it were. Machiavelli's penetrating analysis of power in action is based on what he saw of Medici control in Florence, even though the Medicis ruled only a small territory and Italy would not become a unified nation for another four centuries. Machiavelli's realism contrasts with the cultivated neo-Platonic idealism of the Medici court, but both are direct reflections of an emerging political model that emulated ancient Rome because of its impressive achievements in successful hegemony. The expansion of Rome was also the putative model for the unprecedented territorial expansion of European regimes, so that the innovative marvels of the New World were assimilated to an ancient pattern. An entire Brazilian forest (including imported Indians) greeted Henri II in 1550 when he made his neo-Roman triumphal entry into Rouen: the new and the old alike were pressed into the service of centralized power.¹ In European countries like England, where this power was a reality and not merely a coveted aspiration, the changes it produced were enduring and profound.

Inevitably these changes were resisted, and resistance took many forms. Most obvious was the resistance of provincial power centers that were directly threatened by the gathering of the reins into royal hands. Another kind of resistance was produced by the Reformation, when the explosive foment of religious conscience within the church ignited hope of social change on a broad scale. Yet religious conflict became increasingly difficult to distinguish from conflicts of political survival or ambition, and Luther took the side of the princes against peasants while Calvin set up a centralized theocratic regime in Geneva.² The self-styled imperial expansion of European power in the New World met with the resistance of sheer bewilderment and outraged injustice, whose only rec-

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ord is preserved for us in the annals of the destroyers. The Eskimo couple who were imported to England in 1577 by Martin Frobisher and invited to set up housekeeping on the banks of the Thames must have lived in a state of nearly constant shock, which is probably what killed them after only a few months of English hospitality.³ Such mute resistance to the expansion of European power was a matter of curiosity to Europeans. Yet New World opposition to Old World hegemony is not uniformly dumb: even in a context like the Spanish colonial settlements before the Reformation, one finds striking conscientious resistance to the neoimperial claims of the conquistadors.

Consider, for example, the case of Bartolomé de las Casas, the first secular priest to be ordained in the New World. A wealthy landowner and possessor (like all his fellow Spaniards) of enslaved Indians, Las Casas suddenly decided to emancipate his slaves in 1514. He narrates the incident in his own words:

The cleric Bartolomé de las Casas . . . was going about preoccupied with his enterprises. Like the others, he was sending Indians of his *repartimiento* [encomienda] to the mines to extract gold, and to the fields to sow, and he was profiting by them as much as he could, although he always took care to support them as well as possible, to treat them gently, and to sympathize with their miseries. But he gave no more consideration than the others to remembering that they were pagan men and to the duty he had to provide them with religious instruction and bring them within the pale of Christ's Church.

Diego Valázquez . . . left the port of Xagua to establish a town of Spaniards in the province, where one called Espíritu Santo was founded. And since, except for one in the town of Baracoa, there was not a cleric or friar in the whole island but the said Bartolomé de las Casas, when Pentecost came [Las Casas] decided to leave his house on the river Arimao . . . where he had his estate and go say Mass and preach that Pentecost in Espíritu Santo.

Studying the sermons he had preached last Pentecost, or other sermons for that time, he began to turn over in his mind certain texts of the Holy Scripture. And if I have not forgotten, the principal one was from Ecclesiasticus, Chapter 34: "Tainted his gifts who offers in sacrifice ill-gotten goods; mock presents from the lawless win not God's favor. The Lord is the salvation of those sustaining themselves in the way of truth and justice. The Most High approves not the gifts of the godless, nor does he have regard for the offerings of the wicked; nor for their many sacrifices does he forgive their sins. Like the man who slays his neighbor is he who offers sacrifice from

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the possessions of the poor. He who sheds blood and he who defrauds his servant are brothers."

He began, I say, to reflect on the misery and servitude that those peoples suffered. In this connection, what he had heard and experienced in this island of Hispaniola benefited him—the preaching of the Dominicans that Spaniards could not in good conscience possess Indians, and that the Dominicans did not wish to confess and absolve those who held Indians, which the said cleric did not accept.

And once, while he possessed Indians in this island of Hispaniola, as thoughtlessly and ignorantly as later in the island of Cuba, he wanted to confess to a Dominican whom he found in a certain place. But the Dominican did not wish to confess him. When he asked why not and was given a reason, the cleric refuted it with frivolous arguments and vain solutions, although with a certain seeming probability, so that the Dominican said to him: "I have concluded, father, that truth always encounters much opposition and a lie has many helpers."

The cleric then yielded, because of the reverence and honor he owed the religious, who was a venerable and very learned person, much more learned than the father cleric. But as for giving up his Indians, the cleric didn't care for his opinion.

So it was worth a great deal to him to remember that dispute of his, and even the declaration he had made to the religious, in order to attain a better view of the ignorance and danger he was in, holding Indians like the others and not hesitating to confess those who possessed them or intended to possess them. . . .

After he had spent a few days with these thoughts and had each day become more and more sure, from what he read of [natural and divine] law, and from the events he witnessed—applying the first to the second—he decided for himself, convinced by truth, that everything done to the Indians in these Indies was unjust and tyrannical. He found that all he read tended to confirm this, and he was accustomed to assert that, from the first hour when he began to dispel the darkness of that ignorance, he never read a book in Latin or Spanish—and there were an infinite number in forty-four years—in which he did not find either an argument or a text to prove and corroborate the justice of these Indian peoples and to condemn the injustices, wrongs, and injuries done them.

Finally, he decided to preach that. And in order to freely condemn the *repartimientos* or *encomiendas* as unjust and tyrannical, and because if he retained his Indians he would then have in his hand a reproof of his sermons, he decided to give up his Indians and surrender them into the hands of the governor, Diego Velázquez. Not that they would be better off in Velázquez's power, for the cleric treated

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them with more compassion . . . and he knew that if he relinquished them they must be given to an oppressor. . . . But as . . . he would never escape defamations like "After all, he has Indians; why doesn't he give them up since he asserts it is tyrannical to hold them?" he decided to surrender them completely.

For all this to be better understood, it is well to recall here the partnership and close friendship between this father and one Pedro de Rentería, a prudent man and a very good Christian. . . . As they were not only friends but partners in their estate, and both had their repartimientos of Indians combined, they agreed between themselves that Pedro de la Rentería should go to the island of Jamaica, where he had a brother, to bring back swine to raise and maize to sow, and other things they did not have in Cuba. . . . And for this journey they chartered one of the king's caravels for 2,000 castellanos.

Now as Pedro de la Rentería was absent and the father cleric had decided to give up his Indians and preach what he felt he ought to . . . , he went one day to the governor, Diego Velázquez, and told him what he felt about his own condition, the governor's, and that of the others. He declared that they could not be saved in that state, and that to escape from the danger and do his duty by his office, he intended to preach this. Therefore, he had decided to surrender his Indians to him. . . . So Velázquez could consider them unclaimed and do with them what he would.

But the cleric asked him as a favor to keep that a secret and not to give the Indians to someone else until Rentería returned from his stay on the island of Jamaica. For the Indians and the estate, which both held indivisibly, would suffer loss if someone to whom Velázquez gave the father's Indians should undertake them and the estate before Rentería came.

The governor was perfectly astounded at hearing such a novel and, as it were, monstrous matter. First, because the cleric . . . was of the opinion of the Dominican friars, who had first brought up that business, and that he should dare proclaim it. Second, that he should so justify it and should have such contempt for temporal wealth when he was so well prepared to become rich shortly. . . . And the governor said to him: "Reflect on what you are doing, father, lest you repent. For by God I would wish to see you rich and prosperous, and therefore I do not accept your relinquishing your Indians. And that you may think better of it, I give you fifteen days to consider it carefully, after which you may return to tell me what you decide."

The father cleric replied: "Sir, I receive great honor from your desiring my prosperity, along with the other kindnesses that your

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honor does me. But count the fifteen days past. And please God, if I repent of this purpose that I have made known to you, and wish to possess Indians, and if you because of your love for me want to entrust or to give them to me anew . . . , may it be God who will severely punish you and not forgive you this sin. I only ask your honor that all this may be secret and that you do not give the Indians to anyone until Rentería comes, so that his estate will not be damaged."

So Velázquez promised him that and kept his promise. And from then on he had much more respect for the said cleric. . . . And all the others in the island began to hold a new concept of him, different from what they had held before, as soon as they knew that he had given up his Indians—something considered, then and always, as the strongest possible evidence of saintliness. So great was, and is, the ignorance of those who have come to these parts.

This secret was revealed in this way. The said cleric preached on the day of the Assumption of Our Lady, in that aforementioned place Espiritú Santo, and discussed the active and contemplative lives, the subject of the gospel for that day, touching on the spiritual and temporal acts of charity. It was then necessary for him to show them their duty to carry out and perform these acts among those people, by whom they were so cruelly profiting, and to reprove their neglect and omission of these acts. For this, it became pertinent to reveal the secret agreement that he had made with the governor, and he said: "Sir, I give you license to tell everyone you want to what we agreed on in secret. And I will permit myself to tell it to those who are present."

Having said this, he began to declare their ignorance, and the injustices, tyrannies, and cruelties they were committing among those gentle, innocent peoples; how they could not be saved while holding the Indians in *encomiendas*, nor could the one who distributed them; the obligation to restitution by which they were bound; and that he, from understanding the danger in which he lived, had given up his Indians—and many other things on the subject.

All were astonished, and even frightened, at what he told them. Some were repentant, others behaved as if they were dreaming—hearing something so novel as a declaration that they could not, without being considered sinners, possess Indians. They did not believe it, as if it were said that they could not make use of the beasts of the field.⁴

Las Casas repeatedly describes what he is resisting as "tyranny," yet very little in his account seems political in the modern sense, and his motives resist the kind of analysis we are accustomed to bringing to hu-

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man behavior. Writing in the first person about himself as if he were a third person ("the cleric"), he attaches such importance to an event we would now think of as private and subjective that he makes it central in his history of the first seventy-five years of Spanish colonization in the New World. This is anything, in short, but an objective or impersonal account, and this is not what we normally think of as written history. Yet, on the other hand, it is not how we usually think of autobiography either—written in the third person, with total disregard for the affective life, as if the subject were an intelligent machine for whom a momentous and materially ruinous life decision is a matter of detached intellectual analysis. As a historian, Las Casas includes too much, making his own experience the center of a vast, heterogeneous, and complex series of events; as an autobiographer he includes too little, depicting himself as motivated purely by the weight of reason in resolving what was, by any reckoning, the major crisis of his life. That event, moreover, while being clearly a religious event of a life-changing order, occurs in the experience of a man and a culture already steeped in religious belief and practice. As a conversion, it involves a change not from unbelief to faith but from one order of faith to another within the same religious context. This is what Las Casas' auditors found so unsettling when he preached to them on Pentecost, 1514. Their astonishment and fear, their disorientation—"as if they were dreaming"—derives from his persuading them that what had always given them cosmic assurance, direction, and meaning was in fact the source of doubt, misdirection, and moral chaos in their lives, "that they could not, without being considered sinners, possess Indians."

Yet for all its religious motivation, Las Casas' experience is undeniably social and political in its impact. In many ways his change of direction closely resembles the much better known experience of Martin Luther, which was happening at almost exactly the same time: both are highly cognitive; both take their impetus from careful study of authoritative sacred texts; both involve a change in the quality of faith rather than a change from unbelief to faith; both resolve agonies of conscience in the convertite's life; despite their order as highly cognitive experiences, both conversions strike us in retrospect as deeply involved with the affective life of the individual; both result in immediate and extreme action that runs directly counter to almost everything the convertites had stood for prior to their conversion. The difference for Las Casas, however, is that his conversion results not in new cognitive formulations, as Luther's does, but in social action that has the potential to destroy the social order he has known and by means of which he has prospered. It is almost as if Luther had been converted to the social equality of the German peasant, in addition to justification by faith. In 1516, the same year Thomas More published his *Utopia*, Las Casas drew up ex-

haustive and far-sighted proposals for political and social reform in the Spanish colonies. In 1520, he sought to put his proposals into practice at Cumaná, a colony on the coast of what is now Venezuela; in 1537, he demonstrated the success of his proposals regarding the peaceful (as opposed to forcible) conversion of as yet uncolonized Indians in Tuzulutlan; in 1543, he accepted royal appointment as the bishop of Chiapa, where he again attempted the radical reform of the colonizers' treatment of native peoples. Returning to Spain in 1547, at the age of seventy-three, Las Casas embarked on a vigorous life of disputation and publication on behalf of the people he had actively championed in the New World. His public debate with the humanist Juan de Sepulveda, in 1550, is a model of Thomistic theology being used to oppose a neo-Aristotelian defense of slavery as a natural institution.⁵ Las Casas' *Most Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (written in 1542, published without license ten years later) is a highly polemical but widely influential indictment of Spanish exploitation in the New World. Translated into six other European languages by 1626 (English in 1583), it became the single most important source of information about colonial barbarity in the New World. Because of it, Spain still retains a reputation for unrivalled cruelty in her colonies, whereas if other European nations had had a Las Casas, they would all stand under the same indictment, or worse.

The similarities between Las Casas' conversion and Luther's can be explained in part against the background of late medieval culture in which each occurred: a profound crisis in their lives took the shape that they expected a crisis to take, yet was no less a crisis for all that. In neither case is the incident characteristic of midlife crises with expected shapes in modern experience, including their predominantly affective emphasis and low cognitive content. Rather, for both Luther and Las Casas (who was forty at the time of his conversion), the focus is interior and moral—on one's life stance toward ideas and practices that define one's culture as the very thing it is. For Las Casas, centering a history of the Spanish New World on himself is analogous to the medieval *mappa mundi*, which seeks not to symbolize the world with mathematical precision in two dimensions but to reveal the sacred orientation of the world—with Jerusalem in the east, for example, not because Jerusalem "is there" but for the same reason that church altars are in the east: that is a sacred direction. Las Casas' conversion in 1514 was, for him, the primary indicator of sacred direction in the course of events in the New World. Formally, Las Casas' *Historia* thus bears comparison with Dante's *Commedia*, which also puts its author's experience (a conversion described in the journey of a fictitious pilgrim) at the center of a universal history that constructs a symbolic cosmos. Both Luther and Las Casas (Dante too, for that matter) show the strong impression of late medieval scholasticism as well. Las Casas' meticulous account of how

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he deduced principles from natural and divine law and applied them to events he witnessed is a succinct description of scholastic deductive procedure, which also helps to account for his somewhat dry intellectualism. Again, the fact that both Luther and Las Casas were deeply impressed by Saint Augustine helps to explain the similarity of their experiences. Augustine's dramatic *conversio* in *Confessions* 8 has many of the features we have seen in Las Casas, including the intellectualism, the meditation on sacred texts, and the translation of what is perceived to be a sacred encounter into life-reorienting action with unstoppable momentum.

Yet when all the relevant cultural factors have been considered, Las Casas' conversion remains somehow irreducible. An event whose consequences are so contrary to cultural continuity is *ipso facto* difficult to explain entirely in terms of cultural continuity. In any case, Las Casas' resistance clearly does not fit the dominant cultural paradigm of imperial expansion and control. His attempts at practical reform in 1520 and 1543 met with complete failure and left him deeply discouraged, not merely because the reforms were inadequate or ill conceived but because he was struggling against such overwhelming opposition. However radical the reorientation of his own life may have been, Las Casas was unable to persuade others that they should reorient theirs in the same way. Material interests, social structure, and an ideology backed with formidable learning in defense of both proved to be an unbeatable combination. This is not to say that Las Casas was deficient in learning himself, for he was an accomplished scholar who read widely, thought incisively, and conducted himself with effective political acumen as the officially appointed protector of the Indians during the last two decades of his life. His public debate with Sepulveda in 1550 (when Las Casas was seventy-six) reveals an intelligent, alert, and learned mind. Indeed, Las Casas was sufficiently forceful that a royal order was issued forbidding the publication or sale of Sepulveda's book in the New World. Yet this did little to assist the people Las Casas had ably defended. As Lewis Hanke remarks, Las Casas' ideas were simply too radical: the Spanish crown could not promulgate them "without provoking a revolution in America."⁶ The age of revolution was still more than two centuries away.

No matter how radical Las Casas may appear to be, however, he is an unlikely herald of emergent rationalism.⁷ The title of Hanke's book, *All Mankind Is One*, is a quotation from Las Casas, and the idea looks promising for liberal humanitarianism—that is why Hanke chose it. But Las Casas actually had a very deficient sense of human equality, no sense of progress, and an uncritical acceptance of royal power in Spain. Moreover, he had no material motive for his conversion: as a member of the upper class in the New World he was wealthy and powerful, and as a member of the intelligentsia, he was steeped in the ideology that per-

petuated the system he worked untiringly to dismantle throughout the second half of his life. He was not racially, economically, or politically marginalized; on the contrary, the decision he came to regarding native peoples was a direct threat to the prosperity and privilege he enjoyed, as Velázquez sternly warned him. Las Casas' perception of astonishment and fear in his auditors when he first preached his radical ideas suggests that he might have understood Marx's famous dictum about religion being the drug of the people, yet Las Casas' change of heart was profoundly religious itself, as we have seen. Moreover, he was slow to realize the implications of his own ideas. His 1516 proposals for political reform in the New World provided for every Spanish colonist to own black slaves, as Spaniards had done in the Old World since the defeat of the Moors. Only much later did Las Casas recognize the inconsistency of liberating Indians and providing for the continued enslavement of blacks. His slowness to realize this point highlights his relative myopia regarding the Old World. No matter how radical his proposals were for New Spain, they had no carryover to Spain itself. Las Casas' effectiveness in the latter part of his life derived from his loyalty to the crown and ability to work within a system that he had no thought of changing. He would not have been at home in the age of revolution anyway.

What I want to suggest in this book is that Las Casas' ambiguous resistance to centralized power is not unique in the Renaissance; rather, it represents an important residual tradition in European culture. Indeed, Las Casas' experience is a paradigm for a particular kind of experience that we can also find on the Elizabethan scene, especially in Shakespeare, and especially when Shakespeare's heritage in medieval religious drama is given serious attention. I am not proposing that Shakespeare is a religious playwright, as Las Casas is clearly a religiously motivated reformer. Rather, I am proposing that the paradigm Las Casas represents is a more credible explanation for political power in Shakespearean drama than the model that regards this period as the gestation of emergent materialism. Shakespeare's relation to medieval religious drama is important, as I shall argue, because the dramatic enactment of political power and social privilege by Shakespeare's predecessors manifests many of the same anomalies that we have seen in Las Casas and that are still at work in a poet like John Milton. Shakespeare's sensibility is very different from that of his predecessors, of course, and it is very different from Milton's, but what I am attempting to elucidate in the following pages are not so much the differences that are apparent to everyone but a shared continuity that has not been adequately recognized or understood.

The sources and motives of cultural resistance are complex and varied in any period, and this includes the Renaissance, but for Las Casas the most important direct source is Saint Augustine, who is indirectly

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the most important source for Shakespeare as well. We noticed that Augustine's conversion was a formative precedent to those of Luther and Las Casas, but Augustine also serves to reveal profound differences between the two reformers. For Las Casas took from Augustine practically his whole motive for translating religious experience into social and political action, whereas Luther was largely blind to this dimension of Augustine.⁸ (Among European reformers, Calvin comes closest to Las Casas in this regard.)⁹ To be sure, Augustine's staunch advocacy of imperial coercion in ecclesiastical affairs has earned him the reputation of a proto-Inquisitor, which makes him seem an unlikely source of inspiration for resistance to imperial expansion in the Renaissance.¹⁰ There is no denying this dismal aspect of his episcopal administration in North Africa: it was a policy he adopted with increasing vigor over the course of time and maintained with undiminished certitude until his death. Indeed, his late *Retractiones* include a rejection of his earlier claim that Christ did nothing by force but only by persuading and admonishing; on the contrary, the old bishop asserts: Christ drove the money changers from the temple, and in a parable about the kingdom of God, Christ said, "Compel them to come in" (Brown, "Religious Coercion," p. 108).

To focus exclusively on Augustine's use and defense of coercion, however, is to ignore other aspects of Augustine that inspired Las Casas as he resisted the enslavement of Indians in the New World. From the privileged position of historical hindsight (which always carries a degree of moral hindsight with it), neither writer is wholly satisfactory, but whether their cups are half full or half empty is a matter of emphasis. Despite his advocacy of coercion, Augustine's mature political position in *The City of God* is anything but an idealization of imperial ambition. He is virtually unique in the ancient world in arriving at a generic sense of social and political order as defined by the struggle for power: "The city of this world . . . aims at domination, which holds nations in enslavement, but is itself dominated by that very lust of domination."¹¹ This conception can certainly be faulted for its lack of an ameliorative principle in political life, but that lack must be understood in context. Augustine defines the Earthly City in the way he does because he is concerned to refute the classical conception of social and political life as the source of human perfectibility.¹² Such a conception dominates Plato's *Republic*, informs Aristotle's definition of the human being as "a political animal" (i.e., an animal who is designed to realize its full potential in the *polis*), and explains Cicero's definition of *res publica* in terms of justice (following Plato). Augustine's rejection of this conception explains his eloquent sarcasm in *The City of God* 4.4:

Remove justice, and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms? A gang is