Review by John Ford

Alexander, Catherine M. S., ed. *Shakespeare and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004. 276 pages.

The last quarter of the twentieth century witnessed a revolutionary turn in Shakespearean studies as text-centered criticism increasingly came to be included in—and sometimes eclipsed by—context-centered criticism. Nowhere was that shift more keenly felt than in the study of Shakespeare's relationship with history, especially with politics. With the speed of a *coup d' etat*, more traditional studies of Shakespeare's treatment of political ideology gave way to postmodern studies of political uses of Shakespeare, or even political *inventions* of Shakespeare, or, to be precise, "Shakespeare," the quotation marks denoting not the author of plays but a cultural phenomenon "authored" by political and historical forces. In the last few years, there has been something of a confluence of text and context, as the work of critics such as Russ McDonald and R. S. White has shown. Edited by Catherine Alexander, *Shakespeare and Politics* in gathering sixteen essays from *Shakespeare Survey* from 1975 to 2001, has effectively mapped out that revolution of our times.

The articles, which include source studies, historicist studies new and old, close readings, performance studies, and feminist studies, look at different kinds of relationships between Shakespeare and politics: (1) Shakespeare's study of political figures and forces; (2) investigations into Shakespeare's politics and the political uses of his plays; and (3) the politics of reading/viewing Shakespeare. After a helpful introduction by John J. Joughin that usefully organizes these essays into thematic and strategic categories, Blair Worden's essay, "Shakespeare and Politics," poses a riddling question that all the essays will in some way address: How is it that, in an age when "literature and politics had an intimacy which the modern world has lost" (22), Shakespeare's plays remained, and remain, so resistant to critical interrogation?

Shakespeare, of course, was always interested in politics; a number of these essays test the nature and the limits of that interest. Pierre Sahel distinguishes between different kinds of political resistance which evoked different responses in Shakespeare. Peter Rudnytsky argues that Shakespeare's political questioning of Henry VIII is sharper and more dangerous, more of a "deconstruction of history" (48), if the play is interpreted as a history play rather than a romance. Anne Barton and David George, by calling attention to sources of *Coriolanus* beyond Plutarch, open that play to a more skeptical assessment of Coriolanus's failure to grasp the political realities articulated by Machiavelli, while Sam Schoenbaum uses these same Machiavellian principles to create a revisionist study of *Richard II*, one that revisits Richard's political behavior, not as "vacillation and caprice" but as evidence of an astute political manipulator, "brilliantly demonstrat[ing] his political skill under conditions of grave disadvantage" (105). William C. Carroll and Margot Heinemann also see in Shakespeare's plays a much sharper critique of social injustice than is often acknowledged. Carroll convincingly presents evidence of Shakespeare's invention and deployment of a language that "not only reveals his sensitivity to the discourse of poverty in his day" but also reveals "his awareness of the political realities [and causes] of their condition" (142). Mark Matheson also discovers in the language of *Othello*, particularly in the republican and economic discourses of Venice, a tool that measures a surprising, though limited, degree of autonomy and power in female voices, especially when defined against the feudal languages of Othello and Brabantio.

Other essays explore a historicist appropriation and refashioning of Shakespeare either by the forces of political and cultural authority or by the transgressive voices of resistance. That appropriation and resistance is especially evident in performance. Gunter Walch, citing a discrepancy between what the Chorus describes in *Henry V* and what the audience actually sees and hears, discovers evidence of Shakespeare's establishment of two antithetical discourses of history. John Drakakis discovers in *Julius Caesar*, a play written for the opening of the Globe theater *and* a play in which its own characters are consumed with the political power of theatrical representation, the establishment of an "open" space for "the production of contradictory cultural meanings" (209). The result of such a theatrical contest "does not *express* meaning; rather, in its readings of Roman history it *produces* meanings" (215). Essays by Paul Franssen, E. Pearlman and especially Barbara Hodgdon both extend and decenter the political conflict implicit in performance by looking at novelistic and film *adaptations* of Shakespeare's plays. Barbara Hodgdon looks not only at Baz Lurhmann's simultaneous attempts to appropriate and dismantle Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* but also finds competing discourses of critical response to Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* by contrasting the "interpretive modes" practiced by critics and scholars—"literary 'landowners'"—and the more democratic web sites, which "offer a space for activity and agency where participants can immerse themselves in the film's world, scribble in its margins and create their own texts" (251).

Finally, in a witty and lucid analysis, Terence Hawkes historicizes historicism and other postmodern modes of resistant discourse by looking at an argument among Ludwig Wittgenstein, F. R. Leavis, and (the absent) William Empson about the failure of critical language to uncover the meaning of a play (*Measure for Measure*) or a poem (Empson's "Legal Fiction"). Hawkes then traces that argument to its historical source: a failure of critical language to discover a coherent meaning in the collapse of capitalistic faith in 1929-30, as well as in the language that continued to support that faith. Almost as an afterthought, Hawkes remembers that in that same year, 1929-30, language recorded yet another truth. "In that same year, in the French colony of Algeria, the wife of the local rabbi gave birth to a son. He was to be called Jacques, and his family name was Derrida" (235).

This collection represents a range of insightful studies into the relationship between Shakespeare and politics, essays that employ widely different assumptions about politics, performance, criticism and "Shakespeare." One might question the self-limiting idea of assembling an anthology of criticism all from one journal. However, the decision by Cambridge University Press offers an interesting and compressed theatrical representation of its own. Reading these essays composed between 1975 and 2001 creates its own theater of interpretive and theoretical struggle. That performance is by no means over.

John Ford