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## Is Renaissance Shakespeare Medieval or Modern?

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### I

I hope that you agree with me that my title is puzzling; I must admit that I meant it so, to be provoking. If Shakespeare is a Renaissance writer, how can he be a medieval or a modern writer? Obviously, I begin by bandying these terms—"Renaissance," "medieval," and "modern"—about in their broadest senses; I want to avoid stultifying detail or stupefying quibbles. As we know, all three are inadequate as terms of criticism. Where do we delimit the periods and how do we characterize them—or vice versa? The diverse literature written in a period of transition like the Renaissance does not do us the good service of conveniently sequencing itself, with older kinds waning and newer kinds waxing. Instead, we have what appears in retrospect to be quaint revivals interspersed with inevitable trends. Ah, hindsight. But, at the time, who knew? Our trends may have been their ephemera. Some older kinds enjoying Indian summers reflected nostalgia far less than a revitalized knowledge of the past still thought useful as a goal, if not a guide, for the present. So these terms are imprecise and their use problematic.

If Shakespeare were a writer of the Renaissance, then he presumably looked back from its break with the recent past to the remote past for inspiration or insight; if modern, he purportedly looked forward to the future, our moment, and shared our interests. But, with due allowance for their particularities, both Renaissance and modern periods share a penchant for tidiness and simplification. By contrast, the medieval period struggled with, even against, the messiness, complexity, and inter-connectedness of each and all, but it never really rejected them. The Gothic style is the antithesis of either the humanist quest for purity of expression or the modernist quest for a point. As modern inheritors of the humanistic tradition, scholars are prone to see Shakespeare as either a Renaissance or modern writer, to neatly group his plays by period and genre, and dispose themselves to

discount or disregard bibliographical, historical, and literary data which might encourage a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of them in their present.

So I am going to make bold to argue that Shakespeare is perhaps more medieval than Renaissance or modern. Shakespeare? Medieval? In this setting, the very idea invites skepticism because it challenges acquired critical propensities. Of course, the larger setting is the context of contemporary criticism, which designates Shakespeare's plays—I omit his poetry—less those of a Renaissance and more those of an early modern dramatist.

I said “more medieval”; I am not going to argue that Shakespeare is all “medieval.” If I did, I would merely replicate the sin of over-simplification. Instead, I stress what and how much I believe to be medieval about his plays not only to suggest greater complexity in appreciating them, but also to issue anew an old warning about labels, the truth of which is not to be entirely trusted.<sup>[1]</sup>

Whether Shakespeare is “medieval” or “Renaissance” has never been a question of more than academic interest. But “modern”? The question divides those practicing scholarship in the service of history and criticism, and those, in its name and under its colors, pursuing politics in the service of various non-literary causes. In the train of the civil rights and feminist movements, race and gender have become parameters of literary history and criticism. Many retroject current concerns—the word is “anxieties”—into, and then discover them in, Shakespeare's plays and thereby make them “early modern.”

Typical of scholarship focused by such concerns is Virginia Vaughan's erudite *Othello: A Contextual History*. It enriches our knowledge about the play's “discourses” on race, gender, and the military, and the representation of these matters in the play's theatrical history. But I do not think that they are what matters. Unless we accept disparaging stereotypes or impute them to others, these contexts tell little or nothing about the causes and credibility of Othello's jealousy or its meaning. Also typical is the context missing, but not much missed lately, namely, literary and dramatic sources and influences. This context may be the one to tell.

Consider Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Overlook its odd title: neither play nor protagonist exists in that middle place. Observe instead a prefatory remark which comes ungracious from Greenblatt of all people: "my profession has become so oddly diffident and even phobic about literary power, so suspicious and tense, that it risks losing sight of—or at least failing to articulate—the whole reason anyone bothers with the enterprise in the first place" (4). Having promoted the conditions for diffidence and phobia, he eludes his responsibility in disavowing the results of his doing. He then builds his argument for the play's power by turning to generations-old Catholic and reform literature on Purgatory, most of it medieval. He urges that Shakespeare exploited what this literature represents to give the ghost sharp definition and dramatic power. It does not matter that Greenblatt's claim is dubious. Neither this by-then obsolete religious doctrine and its observances nor its by-then obscure literature was likely known to Shakespeare or his audiences, and much less likely prone to trigger latent tensions or atavistic reactions.<sup>[2]</sup> But it does matter that, since Purgatory does not address our anxieties, we apparently have Greenblatt's permission to approach Shakespeare in the light of earlier literature instead of, or in addition to, later interests.

I would have needed forgiveness in writing my dissertation<sup>[3]</sup> and, a quarter century later, revising it as a book<sup>[4]</sup> on *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*—plays which I read in the light of the tradition of English medieval chivalric romances. I assumed that a large corpus of chivalric romances, if it continued into, and remained current beyond, Shakespeare's professional lifetime, would have influenced his plays not only through specific works, but also through associated materials, motifs, and meanings. I did not rest on the assumption that such a corpus existed but explored the bibliographical record to confirm or refute the basis of my hypothesis. I read the *Short-Title Catalogue* in its card-file format, the *Annals of the English Drama*, and Arber's transcript of the Stationers' Registers—all through 1616. What I found was that chivalric romances, readily and rightly taken as representative of medieval literature, remained the predominant and most popular literature throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth century (Hays, *Shakespearean Tragedy* 27-65).

These facts are little known, and their implications not fully appreciated. Even the few scholars aware that Shakespeare and his contemporaries read chivalric romances seem unaware of their place in the culture. Humanist deprecations of them as artless or immoral, and modern dismissals of them as escapist literature of bourgeois aspiration or aristocratic anxiety do not account for the historical conditions of the fluctuations in their continued popularity. Minimally, they constituted a convenient means of communication between author and audience, and an appealing resource for writers.<sup>[5]</sup> Perforce, Shakespeare wrote in terms readily intelligible to his playhouse peers and, through them, to his audiences, with few, if any, coded messages or occult meanings, and those of little import for the whole. In resorting to chivalric romances, he regarded their interests and revealed some of his, their relative importance, and their likely significance—all of which set some limits on our interpretations of his plays and cast some doubt on the idea that Shakespeare was a man of the Renaissance or of it only.

Furthermore, since the tradition characteristic of medieval literature remained current in Renaissance literature, the dividing line between their respective periods is blurred, and any understanding of the later period must, if it be honest, account for continuity from the earlier one. Saying so does not imply, even with regard to chivalric romances, that Shakespeare is uniformly medieval in his plays. He is not. The influence of these romances is far from being “the key” to Shakespeare’s plays, but I do not deny that it may be “a key” to some of them. And I affirm that considering them in its light pushes the door open to considering other medieval influences on them.

That Shakespeare resorted to the chivalric romance tradition does not imply anything like stagnation or straightjacket. It implies that he operated in the rhetorical tradition which viewed creativity as more a matter of *dispositio* than *inventio*, although, in the event, the distinction can blur (cf. Cole). It thus implies that, writing in circumstances partly conditioned by playhouse censorship and royal patronage, he would be careful and incremental in anything which we might regard as advances on contemporary thought. So it seems sensible to view with suspicion imputed anticipations of later thinking on subjects notoriously interesting to us as we

understand them. This consideration makes it difficult to assume or postulate Shakespeare as an instance of early modern man.

## II

Many medieval sources and influences operated on Shakespeare's plays. Among them were different kinds of romances. And among them were English medieval chivalric romances, important in some, but not most, of his plays. I survey his canon because we need to understand what differences mean for the meaning of his plays.<sup>16</sup>

I begin by noting those plays which are almost entirely free of any source in, or influence by, romance. With few and incidental exceptions, romance is alien to the Roman plays: the Plautine *The Comedy of Errors* and the Plutarchan tragedies—*Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Timon of Athens*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*—with their emphasis on the acquisition or preservation of power without regard to the ethics of power.<sup>17</sup> *Merry Wives of Windsor* seems more farcical fabliaux than romance.

Chivalric romances, though preceding hybrid romances, only occasionally make their presence felt by mediation. Translated and usually adapted from continental sources, hybrid romances concern themselves mainly with emotional states and social conduct. They underlie most of Shakespeare's amatory comedies, light or dark, in Elizabeth's reign and his miraculous romances in James's. *Romeo and Juliet* is, of course, just such a hybrid romance turned to tragedy. *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Two Noble Kinsman* mix both courtly and chivalric romance, one to tragic, the other to comic, endings.

The contrast between Shakespeare's Roman tragedies and his English histories divides concerns about power sought, possessed, or lost by the merely or mainly strong or clever, or by the variably legitimate or qualified. A case in point is the second Henriad. Bolingbroke's usurpation of Richard on flimsy grounds creates the moral and political dilemma which Hal resolves. In the last three plays, Hal emerges as the legitimate and, by the romance materials, motifs, and meanings clustering about him, the qualified successor to his father. In *1 Henry IV*, Hal's chivalry in offering single combat with Hotspur and his prowess in defeating him define the manner in which Hal scuttles the insurrection, ends

factional strife, and secures political order. Many see Hal's tavern life and his repudiation of it as dramatizing the Prodigal Son motif. At least as appropriate is another, that of the Fair Unknown. Hal speaks, calculatingly, not of a return home, but of a revelation of himself to his father as he truly is. In *2 Henry IV*, Hal proves his worth by repudiating Falstaff and the threat which he poses to justice and the social order; in *Henry V*, he proves his worth in siege warfare by triumphing over France to restore lands rightly England's. The concerns of this historical tetralogy and, differently, his earlier one as well as *King John* and *Henry VIII*—succession, legitimacy, qualifications, and governance—are those of English medieval chivalric romances, which concern themselves with political, military, and religious issues and public action.

The remaining plays are those known as Shakespeare's major tragedies. With few exceptions, scholars have seen little or nothing of chivalric romance in them. Their judgment reflects historical and critical biases. Received opinion believes that, at this late date, chivalric romance was an ill-adapted, endangered species largely displaced by hybrid kinds of romance. I have said enough about this bias and hope that you accept my say-so that it is false to the facts. Conventional wisdom, guided by a neo-classical, or humanist, principle of genre purity, regards romance and tragedy as immiscible or, if miscible, only so in making the idealism of romance a foil defeated by the realism of tragedy. But the best-known English medieval chivalric romance, Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, shows both a moral order which encompasses the protagonist's death and gives assurance that a worthy political order, though temporarily in abeyance, survives for a future restoration. All in all, however, in interpreting these four plays, most scholars think the traces of chivalric romance so few and far between as to be ornamental, outmoded throwaways to little or no purpose.

Frankly, I am flabbergasted in a most unscholarly way by this long-held view. Take *King Lear*. No one makes anything of the conflict between Edgar and Edmund in its last scene. But the play prepares for it and details the attire in armor, the ceremony of the combat, the challenges and defiances before the fight, the fight itself, and the outcome. No one makes anything of Edgar as a chivalric knight or of this entire action, namely, single combat, indeed, judicial combat, decisive to the righting of wrongs, the

recovery of the country from usurpers, and the restoration of order. So no one considers that how he appears here manifests what he is elsewhere or that justice done here has something to do with justice damaged, debased, or doubted elsewhere. No one makes anything of Lear's claim to have slain Cordelia's killer and his pride in recalling that, in a bygone day, he would have slain him in style—and thereby discloses his youth as a chivalric knight. So no one has made the military, social, moral, and religious—yea, Christian—connection between Lear and Edgar, with portentous implications, not only for the double plot, but also for the ending of the play: Edgar is Lear's godson now become the man Lear was.

More. Some liken the opening scene to a fairytale start leading to perverse reversals in a most un-fairytale-like ending—a comparison without correspondences. No one has likened it to romance, with a demonstrable debt to the tradition of courtly love, in its court of love, demand d'amour, and rivalry of suitors to win a maid—perverse as they all may be in this scene. So no one has seen that debt elsewhere, as in Edgar's disguise as a debased courtly lover which proleptically mocks Edmund and hints the intrigues ultimately fatal to him, Goneril, and Regan. No one understands that his realization of their love, which courtly love postulates as ennobling, prompts him to attempt good before he dies.

Still more, and more tartly. What is there about a nearly direct quote from *Bevis of Hampton* spoken by Edgar in the middle of the play which makes it invisible to scholars and thus unnoted and uninterpreted by them? I find these oversights evidence that scholars squint at the play through distorting lenses and see only what they wish to see.

Once we accept the possibility of the contemporary appeal of chivalric romance and its co-existence with tragedy, we may begin to view these plays as less personal than political. In them, after conflict and catastrophe, the rightful ruler assumes his proper place and restores order. Their word is: the king is dead, long live the king. And the timing of their word is appropriate; their interests—succession, legitimacy, qualifications, and governance—are those dominant during Shakespeare's lifetime, perhaps most acute at the end of Elizabeth's reign and the start of James's. These plays reflect the most characteristically medieval yet still dominant literary tradition because Shakespeare found it replete

with the means best suited to dramatize these interests at this time.

These matters of substance suggest that Shakespeare is at least as medieval as renaissance. There is also the question of style, and I think that the answer also favors the medieval. A casual look at frontispieces or at decorations in civic pageants shows hodge-podges of the chivalric, Christian, and classical juxtaposed with no sense of incongruity. The diverse tales in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* mix these assorted and unassimilated materials, motifs, and meanings, which conflict or co-exist to serve. In 1586, Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy* decries the mix of kings and clowns in Elizabethan drama. Yet two decades later, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare mixed them; and another half-decade later, in *The Tempest*, he still mixed them, high and low, Ariel and Caliban.

Nevertheless, in the end, most scholars make Shakespeare at his end a humanist, a Renaissance man. They observe that *The Tempest* observes the unities of time and place; they omit to observe that he resolved the action by relying on his background narrative, with its precipitating political events about one brother's usurpation of another twelve years before in the Duchy of Milan. Prospero realizes and accepts the need, and proves his readiness, for political action over recondite studies. This dichotomy reflects the medieval topos opposing active and contemplative lives, and rejects the humanist mantra merging education and governance. The play shows him earning the end of his exile and deserving his return—a common chivalric romance motif, limned almost imperceptibly to us but likely intuited by his audiences and shaping their perception of the play. All of which tells me that humanist prejudices had not eradicated romance or that humanist principles had not superseded the Gothic style in representing reality as chivalric romance represented it.

### III

A word or two about what a decision to regard Shakespeare's plays as medieval in some, perhaps large, part might mean to Shakespeare studies and to our students. At a time when we are and shall likely long be preoccupied with the "other," we should embrace Shakespeare's plays as "other." They are, and thus should be seen as, of another time and place; and to see them as they

are—not only medieval, not only renaissance, and certainly not modern—reinforces this point. Ironically, making them only one or another distorts, obscures, or obliterates some or all of the context—in particular, the literary and theatrical context—in which the writer worked. If we let Shakespeare be Shakespeare—in a period variably mixing what we think of as medieval and renaissance—we place his plays in their present and demonstrate ways to respect what is “other.” We thereby let their perspectives on, and insights into, the human condition and its concerns speak to our time as they have spoken to all times, not by agreeing with our views, but by augmenting our understanding, sensibilities, and sympathies. This old-fashioned way of talking about Shakespeare’s plays seems suitable to a writer who so often turned to the old-fashioned and re-fashioned it to remain up-to-date as old-fashioned. Such was his disposition. Perhaps it should be ours.

#### Notes

[1.](#) Most studies of Shakespeare as “medieval” focus on his plays in the light of works by, among others, Chaucer and Gower, regarded as sources or influences. But adaptations of earlier works do not ensure that later works are “medieval” in nature. Otherwise, T. H. White’s adaptation of Malory’s masterpiece would identify *The Once and Future King* as “medieval” as well.

[2.](#) I do not deny a residual knowledge of Purgatory. Shakespeare expected his audience to expect that Hamlet, identified as a student attending Wittenberg, a center of Protestantism, would know that a figure claiming to come from Purgatory but seeking, not prayers or other rites to relieve or shorten its processes of purification, but revenge, was a fraud of devilish nature and intent. The disparity between the audience’s knowledge and Hamlet’s dismissal of that knowledge in response to a demonic presence and petition indicates the ghost’s power. If knowledge of evil cannot protect against evil, how imperiled we are.

[3.](#) Hays (1974).

[4.](#) Hays (2003).

[5.](#) I relied on the most widely known of English medieval chivalric romances—*Bevis of Hampton* and *Guy of Warwick*—as indicating lexicon and syntax, as it were, of the communication of romance materials, motifs, and meanings. I did not avoid any additional ideas about source or influence when they seemed appropriate. Thus, I develop the old, out-of-the-way suggestion that *Bevis* influenced *Hamlet* and argue that Robert Greene’s *Orlando Furioso* influenced *Othello*. But I think that neither source directly answers any important questions about either of Shakespeare’s plays.

[6.](#) Pettet, now nearly 60 years old, is the one and only book-length survey of the subject.

[7.](#) For example, Antony’s challenge to Octavius, to single combat, which he dismisses as childish, is a chivalric motif with classical precedents.

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