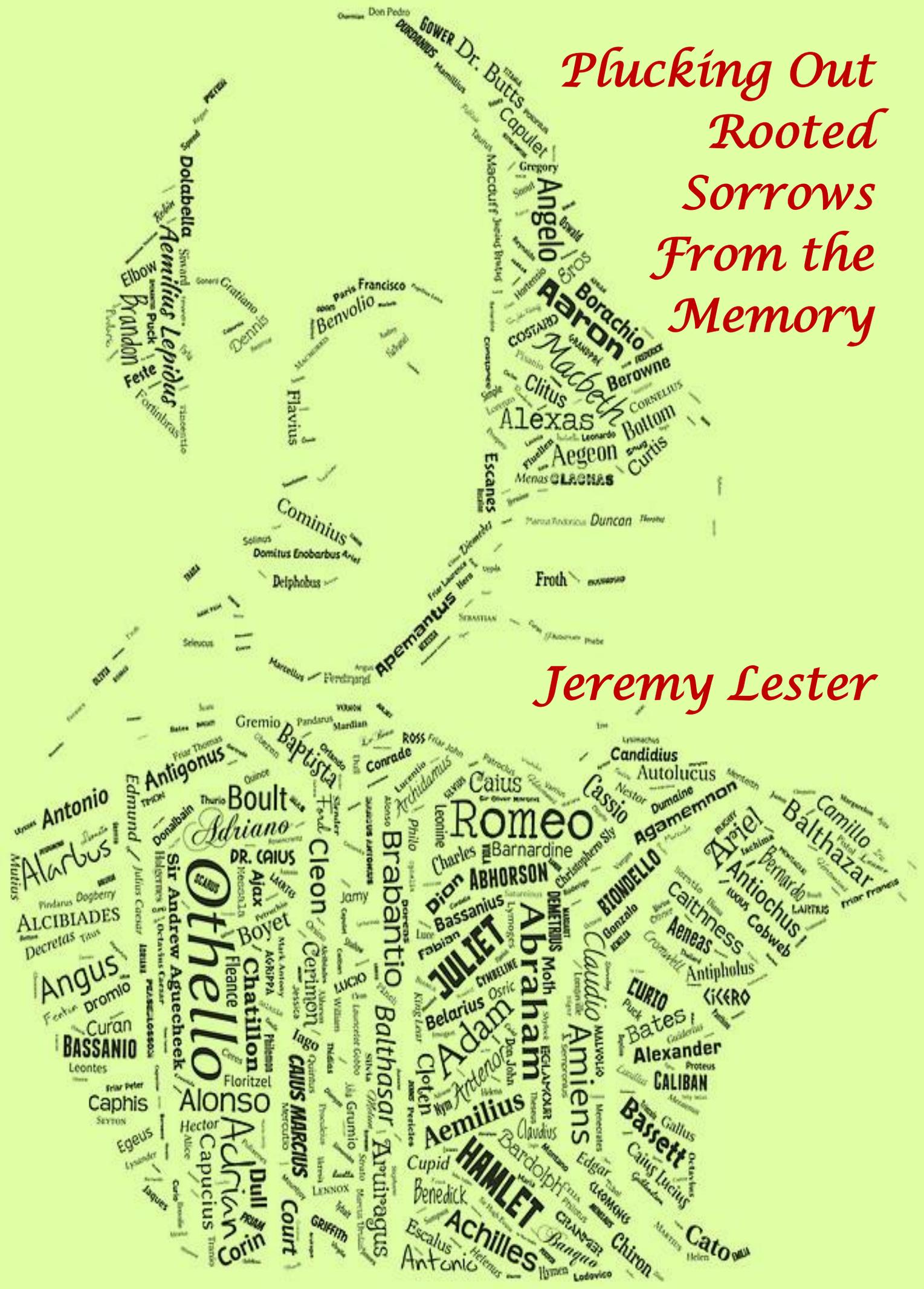


*Plucking Out
Rooted
Sorrows
From the
Memory*

Jeremy Lester





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Plucking Out Rooted Sorrows from the Memory

O God! O God! That it were possible
To undo things done; to call back yesterday!
That time could turn up her
Swift and sandy glass
To untell days, and to redeem these hours.

— Thomas Heywood, *Frankford's Soliloquy*

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff,
Which weighs upon the heart?

— William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

* * *

Scene 1

Hello everyone and welcome. Or, as they would have said in the English of Shakespeare's day, 'Good morrow to thee all and well met' to this talk that has been scheduled by *Il Centro Asteria* as part of the programme *L'Albero del Bene e del Male*. My name is... (*hesitates*)... my name is ... (*goes to check on a piece of paper*) ... Jeremy Lester. I am a Professor of Philosophy in Paris and I also teach a couple of courses here in Italy at the University of Roma 3 and at Ca' Foscari in Venice. Principally these days, however, I consider myself more a writer than a University Professor.

(*Laughs to himself*) I suppose you are wondering why I had to check and verify my own name. Well, you see, as strange as it might sound I often forget my own name. I don't know if any of you have read that wonderful story by Gianni Rodari — *C'era due volte il barone Lamberto*. If you have, you will no doubt recall that the rich and very old Baron is so afraid of forgetting his own name that he employs no less than six different people to repeat his name out loud over and over again, twenty-four hours a day. The principal reason for doing this, he says, dates back to an ancient belief that: « L'uomo il cui nome è pronunciato resta in vita ». Unfortunately, I am not rich enough to employ one person to constantly remind me of my name, let alone six, so I have to keep it written down somewhere to help me during those embarrassing moments when I forget it.

But there is something worse here. It is not just my name that I often forget. I am also often rather confused about exactly who I am. Some of my friends and family have started to panic that I am falling foul of that quite common disease these days — Alzheimer. It's a reasonable fear, I suppose, given my age. But no, I can assure you, it is not Alzheimer that I suffer from. But I do suffer at times from an identity crisis. At least that is what I think it is.

Let me briefly explain to you why this is. You see, for many years now I have been fascinated and intrigued by another man's identity. You no doubt have heard of him. He is William Shakespeare – the man from Stratford-Upon-Avon, who is considered by many to be arguably the world's greatest playwright. But was the man who wrote all those great plays and poems really the William Shakespeare from Stratford, or was it someone else? The fact is that like a great many others before me, I have always had strong doubts that the true author was the man from Stratford and instead was somebody else. Who that other person was – well, to be honest, nobody knows for sure; and this certainly includes me. Nevertheless, this has never stopped me being convinced that William Shakespeare was not the true author of the plays and poems that now bear his name.

Anyway, several years ago I happened to be at a Shakespeare conference in London, full of devoted Shakespeare scholars and (self-professed) experts. During the conference I met someone by the name of John Vere. Have you ever heard of him? No, well, consider yourself very lucky. Looking back I can honestly say that I wish now that I too had never met or heard of him. Why, you might ask, am I so hostile to this man? Well, you see it's like this. At the end of the conference proceedings on the first day, I got talking to John Vere over dinner. At the time, he seemed an interesting person, and of course for me just his very name was fascinating. Was it just by coincidence or was it fate that here was a man who bore the names of two men who have long been considered possible alternative candidates for being the true author of those plays and poems back at the end of the 16th/beginning of the 17th century? 'John', his Christian name, was also the Christian name of the famous linguist, translator and author John Florio; and 'Vere' was the surname of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, another contemporary of Shakespeare and a poet and dramatist in his own right, who nevertheless ceased from an early age to print his work under his name.

Anyway, as I say, he seemed an interesting person and so as soon as the formal conference dinner was over, the two of us went to a nearby pub in order to continue our discussions. As the evening drew on, I have to confess that both of us had rather a lot to drink. This is not to say that we were drunk or anything like that. Let's just say that thanks to the alcohol that we had consumed, the conversation started to move in a different direction.

With his own fair share of alcohol inside him, John Vere started to tell me that for quite a number of years he had been in possession of Shakespeare's memory. Yes, that's right – I couldn't believe it either. Okay, I have heard of people (slyly in some cases) losing their memory, but how is it possible to acquire someone else's memory just like that, especially when that someone lived over 400 years ago and is no less a celebrity than William Shakespeare? It just didn't seem possible. And yet for all that, John Vere was absolutely convinced and insistent that he did possess Shakespeare's memory; that he had acquired it many years ago from the memory's previous 'owner' (a man called Hermann Sörgel); who in turn had acquired it from someone before him ... and so on going back to the very first known owner of the memory (at least in modern times), which it turns out was a librarian from Buenos Aires in Argentina (of all places).

Moreover, not only was he, John Vere, convinced that he did possess Shakespeare's memory, but he was also convinced that to all intents and purposes, for most of the time, he actually was William Shakespeare far more than he was John Vere. After all, he said, being in possession of someone's memory is in effect being in possession of someone's mind, and this means that you effectively become that person. Your own original identity, meanwhile, is increasingly lost.

Well, as the night wore on and the drinks continued to flow, lo and behold he suddenly turned to me with a very serious look on his face and asked me point blank: 'Would you like to take over Shakespeare's memory from me?' As you can imagine, I laughed heartily at the thought and I was now convinced more than ever that the man was not just half-drunk, but half-crazy as well. But, no,

he was deadly serious. He assured me that it was possible to transfer Shakespeare's memory to me and that the procedure was very simple. Furthermore, as only one person at a time can obviously possess a single, unique memory, it wasn't something that he could share with me. Either he possessed Shakespeare's memory in full or someone else would have to possess it completely. And then he asked me again, now even more deadly serious than before: 'Jeremy, do you want to possess Shakespeare's memory? If you do, all you have to do is agree to two things. First, you must voluntarily and willingly say the words: « Yes, I, Jeremy Lester, do hereby accept to be in possession of Shakespeare's memory. » And second, you must keep the actual possession of his memory a firm secret from everybody you know. You must not reveal this secret to anybody else, not even to your wife. Only if and when you decide to give it away to someone else who you can likewise trust to keep the secret, will you be able to mention it at all. These, then, are the terms? If you truly want Shakespeare's memory, all you have to do is agree to them.'

Well, fool that I was, do you know what I replied? I replied: 'Yes, I, Jeremy Lester, do hereby voluntarily and willingly accept the gift of Shakespeare's memory.' After all, I thought, what have I got to lose? The whole story recounted by John Vere was surely a joke of some kind. And if it wasn't, well, just think of what I could gain by being in possession of Shakespeare's very own memory. First of all, I would hopefully, at long last, get the answers to all those questions and doubts about Shakespeare's real identity that I, and so many others, had for so long tried to discover. What easier way of getting these definitive answers could there be than by being in possession of his memory? And then there were other possible advantages and gains as well. After all, Shakespeare lived at a time and in an age of tremendous violence and chaos, or 'sound and fury' as he himself put it; a violence and chaos that pervaded every aspect of everyday life for everyone in society, no matter what their status. It was an age of profound uncertainty, when every aspect of life and authority seemed to be falling apart, disintegrating, breaking down. It was an age of mutation, of disorientation, which created an overwhelming and often unbearable sense of the time being 'out of joint'; a time of constant disequilibrium and re-equilibrium in ever new ways. It was a time of great discord; of wars everywhere, particularly wars of religion of course. It was a time of great social misery, injustice and threats to life from all kinds of different quarters, not least from the constant plagues that could suddenly wipe out whole populations. It was a time of considerable levels of migration to England (and of course to London in particular), which posed a great many challenges; ones which occasionally exploded into outright conflict between the indigenous population and those who were classified as 'strangers' or 'aliens'. Between 1580 and 1600 in fact London's population nearly doubled, undoubtedly causing a lot of social and economic strains and misery. Commentators of the day spoke and wrote of thousands of destitute poor people living cheek by jowl with a 'fabulously wealthy elite'. So bad and threatening were the disturbances that in 1593, for example, the then Mayor of London prohibited the playing of football or any other such unlawful assembly of people. And if anyone broke this law they risked severe punishment, including the possibility of execution. In effect, the city became ruled by martial law. Let's not forget as well that at the time many of the immigrants were originally of Italian origin. It was a time of assassinations, plots, terror (and terrorism); most notably of course associated with the infamous Gunpowder Plot of November 1605 and the attempt to blow up the House of Lords. It was a time when Time itself even ceased – albeit briefly – to exist; literally, not just metaphorically. In October 1582, when Shakespeare was eighteen years old, ten days were wiped out of existence in many countries by a decision by the then Pope, Gregory XIII, to change from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian one. Because of this, the fourth of October was not followed the day after by the fifth but by the fifteenth.* In short, then, nothing seemed to hold firm any more. All the ideas of the past – be they religious, political, social, and economic – were now subject to great challenge and change.

* England did not actually adopt the new calendar until 1752, but most European countries – including Italy, France, Spain, Portugal and Poland – did. The chaos and confusion of time, therefore, must have been enormous for anyone travelling between the different European countries.

As regards the latter, the economic changes, England at this time, one must remember, was reaching one of the decisive high points of its long-drawn out transition from an old-style feudal order to a new kind of socio-economic system that would eventually bear the recognised name of 'capitalism'. And here, on this front, Shakespeare is not just a witness to the transformations taking place, he is also a direct participant in them, for the one thing that we know for sure about the man 'Shakespeare' is that he went from very humble origins to go on and become an extremely wealthy man, owning not just vast amounts of land, but also investing huge sums of capital in property and shares; so much so that back in his home town of Stratford-Upon-Avon he would become renowned as one of the richest men of all.

Money, in the form of gold or paper currency, now started to have new outlets for 'entrepreneurial' use in the form of capital that almost lends it magical, alchemical, powers of transformation. To see this seemingly magical power at work, let's briefly remind ourselves of an incredibly evocative passage that he wrote in *Timon of Athens*:

...Thus much of this will make black, white; foul fair;
Wrong right; base, noble; old, young, coward, valiant ...
This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions; bless th'accursed;
Make the hoar leprosy adored; place thieves,
And give them title, knee, and approbation,
With senators on the bench. This is it,
That makes the wappered widow wed again.
She whom the spittle house and ulcerous sores
Would cast the gorge at, this embalms and spices
To th' April day again. Come, damnèd earth,
Thou common whore of mankind, that puts odds
Among the rout of nations, I will make thee
Do thy right nature...

thou visible god,
That sold'rest close impossibilities
And mak'st them kiss, that speak'st with every tongue,
To every purpose!
(Act 4, Scene 3)

This, then, was now the dominant spirit of the times he lived in. This was now the 'visible god' to whom all of us must seemingly pray at its altar. In the face of this god, one can either adjust and flourish or be left behind and perish. But at one point, Shakespeare seemed to have a strong inclination, a strong premonition, that the whole nature and working of this new expanded power was also held together, controlled, dominated and guided by an *invisible* force as well. And it was this invisible force that almost certainly represented the new emerging system's greatest strength and power. Consider, for example, the following brief passage from *Macbeth*:

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.
(Act 3, Scene 1)

The 'seeling night' here is the embodiment of a violent spirit conjured up by Macbeth to calm his conscience for the manner in which he ascended to the throne (the killing of Duncan), and for the new necessity of murdering Banquo. The 'invisible hand', meanwhile, is the force that controls the murder and which makes sure that it is carried out on Macbeth's behalf. A little more than a century separates Shakespeare from Adam Smith (the first recognised major theoretician of 'capitalism'), and it will not be until 1759 that the 'invisible hand' makes its first metaphorical appearance in Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and then somewhat later in the *Wealth of Nations*. In both cases, however, the meaning is pretty much the same. Somewhere out there, *in* the world, and not beyond it, is an 'invisible hand' that seems to exert control over all our destinies. What Shakespeare makes explicit in ways far clearer than Smith will do, however, is that the invisible hand comes stained with blood right from the outset.

As the collective social fabric of all the old ways of life seemed to be breaking down, then, so it was replaced by a new kind of autonomy for the individual, but one that often amounted to little more than uncontrollable egotism and downright greed. It was precisely these things that paved the way and provided the main impetus for the new great age of tragic theatre that Shakespeare and others, like Christopher Marlowe, would come to embody. On this matter, Albert Camus was absolutely right. Speculating on why there have only been two ages of great tragic theatre (the theatre of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in 5th century BC Athens) and the Renaissance theatre of Shakespeare, he has emphasised that 'great periods of tragic art occur in history only during centuries of crucial change, at moments when the lives of whole peoples are heavy both with glory and with menace, when the future is uncertain and the present dramatic.' In both ages the bare stage of the theatre could represent the whole domain of human action, human concerns, human anxieties, human doubts and above all human tragedies. Hamlet is perhaps Shakespeare's most eloquent spokesman for this sense of the significance of theatre when he insists that the purpose of the play (within the play) is to hold a mirror up to nature so as to reveal the very essence of the times they were living in.

Well, I thought, aren't we too, here today, in this first quarter of the 21st century, living in precisely the same kind of historical situation and circumstances as those that Shakespeare lived in? In all kinds of ways, then, doesn't this make Shakespeare our very own *contemporary*? And if this is the case, as I am convinced it is, who better than Shakespeare – and Shakespeare's memory – to shed light and meaning on this age of ours; to help us understand much better, and in much deeper ways, the dreadful times that we live in. Looking out at today's world, I am often reminded of that most powerful image and scene in *King Lear* when Gloucester says: 'T is the times' plague, when madmen lead the blind.' (Act 4, Scene 1). And the place he, the blindman, is sure that he is being led to is the precipice of a cliff; that is to say, to the very edge of life and death, to the very precipice of nothingness to come. My worst fear of all, meanwhile, is that at the end of the day mankind seems to be largely indifferent to its own destiny.

And there was one other reason, one other strong motivation, for acquiring Shakespeare's memory, if indeed it turned out to be a genuine possibility. Memory, and its workings, has always been a subject that has fascinated me. For a long time I have lived with the conviction that the only truly meaningful thing in life is memory. Here is the repository of everything we are. And yet, combined with this, I have equally been convinced that memory is nothing other than an artificial human invention. No, worse than that: it is the very source of all our self-deceptions. Might the possession of Shakespeare's memory, therefore, help me to resolve this seeming contradiction? Are we capable of rendering memory truly useful for humanity as a whole as well as for the individual, or is the very well-being of civilisation constructed on the alternative premise that it would be impossible to live at all without the ability to forget? I am reminded of a scene from Homer's epic poem where Ulysses

listens to the story of his own life, and it is only through the tears of remembrance that he finally reconciles himself with the reality of who and what he is. But is this moment of catharsis, as promised by Mnemosyne, possible in our own lives? Did Shakespeare personally ever experience such a moment? For sure, Shakespeare's works are often collectively celebrated as an ode to memory, a 'remembrance of things past' (Sonnet 30); almost a moral obligation to remember. And yet, from the little firm evidence that we possess, it seems that no one kept himself in the dark more than he did.

I repeat, then: by agreeing to this seemingly absurd and crazy proposition of taking over Shakespeare's memory, I seemed to have nothing to lose and many things to gain. I convinced myself that the benefits would be enormous. No one better than Shakespeare knew that the odour of humanity was oppressive; but likewise, no one knew better than he that it was only by becoming aware and conscious of our propensity and capacity for evil that we had the chance to liberate ourselves from the dark forces residing within us. Oh, how dreadfully naïve I was. And, oh, how I have paid the price for this naivety. As I have learned to my regret and to my cost, no man's memory is a summation; it is always a chaos of vague possibilities. St. Augustine was right. There are both palaces and caverns of memory, but in this instance it is the caverns that increasingly dominate and it was into those caverns that I descended. And they were caverns of real terror and oppression; of evil beyond most normal limits.

Thus ended my evening with John Vere. The next morning I went down to breakfast thinking that we would have a good laugh about our discussions of the night before and how we would swear that in future we would learn to limit the amount of alcohol that we consume. But, to my surprise, he – John Vere – had already left the conference hotel where we were staying. And although I asked many others where he had gone, and indeed where he lived, no one at all knew. In fact, no one could say that they knew the man at all.

For the rest of that day, apart from a bit of a headache, I felt fine. The conference ended on that second day and in the evening I went back home. As time went by, however, I did start to notice some considerable changes in my mind. It was as though my mind was gradually being taken over by somebody else and that I ... I ... Jeremy ... Jeremy ... ah, yes, Jeremy Lester, was beginning to lose more and more of my own memories and thoughts. I, Jeremy Lester, am still there in my mind, but my presence seems to be becoming forever weaker. In essence, the two memories are constantly struggling with each other for absolute control of my mind. They don't peacefully co-exist with each other. What's more, they are completely separate from each other. When my own memory is in control, I have no recollection of Shakespeare's memory. And when Shakespeare's memory takes over, I have no recollection of my own identity in the world I inhabit today, here, now. There are times when I ask myself, 'where am I?', and I realise I don't know. And the even worse times are those when I ask myself, 'who am I?', and for a good while I no longer recognise myself. It is at these moments — what I call my 'Jekyll and Hyde moments' — that my fears grow out of control and I feel that I am in a kind of inferno all of my own. When these moments occur, I get very faint and weak. Indeed, at such moments, I literally have to go and take a break and lie down. The mental strain of keeping any control of my mind becomes too powerful and too all-consuming. Just talking about it here, now, brings me out in a sweat. In fact, I do feel a small crisis coming on. Will you forgive me, then, if I go away for a brief moment in order to have a very brief rest so as to steady my nerves and to calm my mind down? I promise I won't be long. I'll be back very shortly...

As J.L. leaves the stage, the lights dim and a soft voice can be heard in the background reciting a sonnet. It is Shakespeare's sonnet number 27:

*Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
The dear repose for limbs with travel tired,
But then begins a journey in my head
To work my mind when body's work's expired.
For then my thoughts (from far where I abide)
Intend a zealous pilgrimage to thee,
And keep my drooping eyelids open wide,
Looking on darkness which the blind do see.
Save that my soul's imaginary sight
Presents thy shadow to my sightless view,
Which like a jewel (hung in ghastly night)
Makes black night beauteous, and her old face new.
Lo thus by day my limbs, by night my mind,
For thee, and for myself, no quiet find.*

As the recital of the sonnet comes to an end, music can be heard. It is the music of William Shakespeare's contemporary, William Byrd – one of his 'Lullabies'.

* * *

Scene 2

As the music begins to fade, the lights gradually increase and, to all physical appearances at least, J.L. has returned, although now he has a different personality altogether. He is also dressed differently, in the kind of costume that would have been worn by a respectable 'gentleman' from England in the early part of the 17th century. As he walks from the back of the stage to the front he recites to himself out loud from a manuscript that he holds in his hand.

*And can there be worse sickness, than to know
That we are never well, nor can be so? ...
So did the world from the first hour decay,
That evening was beginning of the day,
And now the springs and summers which we see,
Like sons of women after fifty be.
And new philosophy calls all in doubt,
The element of fire is quite put out;
The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
Can well direct him where to look for it.
And freely men confess that this world's spent ...*

(Sighing to himself) Ah, how I know well this sense of absolute pessimism in the world. It is a road I travelled down far and finding a way out of it was not very easy at all, I can tell you ...

(Freeing himself from his own thoughts and looking up from the manuscript, he is suddenly startled and surprised to see an audience sitting there in front of him)

Oh, my giddy goose! Where the flibbertigibberts did all of you suddenly come from? More to the point, where did *I* come from? I was in a (dream) world of my own. It's this verse that did it. In case you're wondering – no, it is not one of my own compositions. It was given to me to read by a friend of mine. It seems that the author – John Donne – has asked me for my opinion of it. Anyway, enough of that for now. *(He carefully folds the manuscript and puts it away)*

Where am I? For sure I am not at the Globe Theatre. I know that for certain because the Globe doesn't have a roof and doesn't contain all these seats. And not only doesn't it have a roof, but following the fire that broke out there a couple of weeks ago, it doesn't have anything at all. Burned to a cinder it was. What a pity. When I think of all the times I was there, and all the memories that are contained in that place. How sad it is to see it destroyed like that. Still, let's be thankful for small mercies. Thank goodness no one was killed. Given that there were well over two thousand people gathered there on that day, it is a miracle. Indeed, only one person suffered any injuries and even these were minor. I am reliably told that as soon as his breaches caught fire, he managed to put out the flames by throwing several bottles of beer on them. Ingenious, no? What a wide range of uses beer has! Falstaff was right. Mind you, I'm not so sure that even he would have approved of wasting so much good ale on putting out a fire.

Talking of 'miracles', did you know that the rumour has already spread far and wide that the fire was an Act of God in punishment against the theatre and all the immorality it represents. What utter nonsense. Of course, you know who spread the rumour, don't you? It was those ancient opponents of ours, the so-called 'puritans' of one kind or another, who have always professed the belief that the new-style modern theatres are filthy, corrupt and damnable places, where mischief and unspeakable acts make them the equivalent of "Satan's synagogue". What 'lack brains' they are. As

for why they hate the theatre so much, that is easy to answer. It is because they have a fearful dread of people enjoying themselves. The theatre excites people, so in their eyes it must be evil.

It is that man (Philip) Stubbes who I blame the most, for it was he who first unleashed the ‘wrath of God’ against the modern theatre, well over thirty years ago now, in that diatribe of his — *The Anatomie of Abuses*. No profanities were spared:

... if you will learn falsehood; if you will learn cozenage; if you will learn to deceive; if you will learn to play the hypocrite, to cog, lie, and falsify; if you will learn to jest, laugh, and flear, to grin, to nod, and mow; if you will learn to play the vice, to swear, tear, and blaspheme, both Heaven and Earth: If you will learn to become a bawd, unclean, and to devirginate maids, to deflower honest wives: If you will learn to murder, slay, kill, pick, steal, rob, and rove: If you will learn to rebel against Princes, to commit treasons, to consume treasures, to practice idleness, to sing and talk of bawdry, love and venery: If you will learn to deride, scoff, mock, and flout, to flatter and smooth: If you will learn to play the whore-master, the glutton, drunkard, or incestuous person: If you will learn to become proud, haughty, and arrogant; and, finally, if you will learn to contemn God and all his laws, to care neither for heaven nor hell, and to commit all kind[s] of sin and mischief, you need to go to no other school, for all these good examples may you see painted before your eyes in interludes and plays: wherefore that man who gives money for the maintenance of them must needs incur the damage of praemunire, that is, eternal damnation, except they repent.

To this day, whenever I hear his views repeated, I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry.

Anyway, as we can’t be at the Globe Theatre, I am assuming that we are the Blackfriars Theatre, just over the River Thames from the Globe. Am I right?

— No! Where are we then? Or, to quote Seneca, *Quis hic locus, quae regio, quae mundi plaga?*

— Milan!! What do you mean ‘Milan’? Which Milan do you mean?

— Milan, Italy!! Oooooohhhh la la la!! No, that can’t be the right expression, can it.

Maaaamma mia!!!!

— How did I get here? What the zounds am I doing here? Ah well, never mind. I have learned in my life never to look a gift horse in the mouth. I’m sure that all will be well that ends well!

Actually I’m very pleased to be here in Italy. I have of course heard of Milan, and I have even read a few things about the place, so it is not a completely unknown city to me. Mind you, if you don’t mind me saying, what a pity I’m not in Venice. Ah, how I would love to see the city. How does the saying go? Let me see if I can remember:

Venezia, Venezia

Chi non ti vede, chi non ti prezia

(Love’s Labours Lost – Act 4, Scene 2)

Still, whether it be Venice, Milan, Verona, Padua, Mantua, Naples or somewhere else round about here, the main thing is that by some miracle I have landed up in Italy. How I have long wanted to see the place for myself and not just rely on second-hand stories told me in books or in pubs. All too often my ‘Italy’ thus far has mainly been ‘London-bottled Chianti’; not the real thing at all.

So, now that I am here, let me introduce myself to you. My name is William Shake-speare, although occasionally I have also been called 'Shagspere', 'Shaxpere', 'Shakerag', 'Shakescene' and many other similar varieties. I tell you what, to make life easier why don't you just call me 'Will'? I hate formality, don't you? By profession I am – or at least was – an actor, or what we call a 'player'. It is a number of years, however, since I last actually performed a role on stage, although I have always worked with one principal theatre company. In more recent years, therefore, I have earned my keep principally by writing – mainly plays for the stage, but also some poetry as well, sonnets in particular. It is a form of poetry that you Italians, by the way, first invented. In fact, now that I come to think of it, you Italians have exerted tremendous influence in lots of ways, not just in terms of my own work, but in terms of the whole of contemporary English culture – from literature to music, from philosophy to physics, from fashion to art, from politics to satire, and just about everything in-between, including I might say borrowing a great deal of your language. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that in most cultural matters we English have invented virtually nothing. All we have principally done is borrowed – or stolen – just about everything from you. As you might imagine, for some of my fellow countrymen your influence is too vast and there are some who say we should fight the 'Italian infection'; with the biggest critics being those who consider your land a veritable den of sin, iniquity, immorality, wickedness, and the worst kind of vices imaginable. They likewise don't like the fact that so many Italian immigrants – especially from Lombardy – are arriving on our shores. But don't worry. I am not one of those Italophobes. Instead, I am a passionate Italophile, just like Queen Elizabeth was (God rest her soul), and King James and his wife are now. Indeed, I can't get enough Italian influence, and I am firmly of the belief that when God made Italy, He must have had an earthly copy of Paradise in mind. Given this love of mine for all things Italian – not least of course your wine and your women – perhaps this is the reason why I already feel as though I am at home here amongst you. I don't feel like a foreigner, a stranger, an outsider at all. I feel I belong here. And it's a nice feeling, I can tell you. I feel I have no limits here, no constraints. I feel rejuvenated.

By the way, just out of curiosity – you know what we actors and writers are like, we are extremely vain people – I don't suppose by any chance that any of you have already heard of me, have you? Ah, you have. Well, that is very pleasing and gratifying, I must say. Oh, how happy you have made me.

Anyway, let us get down to business. After all, if you are all out there and I am up here on stage that can only mean that you are expecting me to give you some kind of recital or performance. Now, I wonder what it is that I am meant to be doing? As you can tell, my memory is not all that good these days. I have a tendency to forget things, or to get a bit confused. There are even times when I forget my own name (which is probably why there are so many versions of it!!). But, then, as Juliet said to Romeo, what's in a name? 'That which we call a rose / By any other word would smell as sweet.' (Act 2, Scene 2)

Let me see, I must have written it down somewhere what I had planned to do today.

(Searches through his jacket and trouser pockets, and eventually finds a crumpled up note).

Ah, here we are. Monday 27 November: talk to young people about 'The Battle of Good versus Evil'. Oh, my!! What a subject that is. It will take me a lifetime to deal with this properly. How long have we got? About an hour? Okay, well I will try to synthesise and condense everything as best I can. It will mean a lot of improvisation, but after all, that is what we actors are meant to be good at, isn't it. And of course, if truth be told, this is the theme that has always most fascinated me, more than anything else. Indeed, in some ways you could say that all the plays that I have performed and helped to compose – whether they be tragedies, histories, comedies, or romances, or some mixture of them all – have all been underpinned and influenced by the theme of Good versus Evil, or what I

prefer to call Good *and* Evil. So, at least I have some experience and knowledge to go on. And just between you and me, I will let you into a secret. However, you must promise not to tell anyone outside of this room, okay? It is not just in my plays where I have debated and been concerned with the issue of Good and Evil. My own personal life as well has likewise been dominated by this concern; especially by the fear that I might end up later in some state of eternal hell because of certain things that I have done in my life. But let's not go into that, at least not yet at any rate.

Of course, as you will probably know from my poetry and especially from my plays, if there is one axis of this moral compass that has always predominated over the other, it is my interest in the category of evil. I readily confess that I find evil a much more interesting subject than goodness or virtue. There's so much more that you can do with evil, don't you find? Virtue has far too many limitations, whereas evil – well, there seem to be no limits at all. As Marc Antony says (in relation to Julius Caesar after he has been murdered): 'The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.' (Act 3, Scene 2).

Don't get me wrong or misunderstand me. I am not someone who openly or actively 'advocates' evil deeds or acts. Nor do I think that any moral choice is so absolute or so determined by uncontrollable circumstances that it cannot be reversed by some redeeming aspect of an individual personality and by the strength of one's will. No, far from it, I would like to think that in the end goodness/Good will prevail. But like so many who have come before me – especially writers and poets who have come before – I am firmly convinced that the only path to goodness is one that lies first of all through evil. There is no direct route to goodness. Nor can we possibly understand what goodness means without knowing, understanding, and experiencing what evil consists of, and especially how and why we human beings have always been so easily tempted and led astray by evil in just about everything that we do and desire. The task we face, just as our ancestors faced, is never to get stuck in the realm of Evil before redemption is possible. There is a road out of Evil and we must never give up searching for it and progressing down it as far as it will take us. And I repeat: all my great predecessors in the theatre and in the realm of poetry have always recognised this. It all started of course with the first person who can be considered a proper 'story teller' – I am talking about Homer of course.

Come to think of it, wasn't there an Italian poet who was likewise convinced that the route to goodness had to pass first of all through evil; that the path to Paradise first lay through the catacombs of Inferno? Now, what was his name? Oh, it's on the tip of my tongue. Tongue – that reminds me of something. Yes, I'm sure his name had something to do with the mouth. Got it! It is the teeth inside the mouth that has reminded me – DENTE. Yes, that's his name, I think. Dente. And his surname was something like 'Algae'; or at least something slimy and slippery like that. Dente Algae.

Anyway, Good versus Evil / Good *and* Evil, and the topic of evil in particular. What can I say about it? Why has it been such a strong, prominent theme in all my literary work? Well, the first response to that is actually to blame *you*; that is to say, you Italians. If there is one person more than anyone else who has influenced me here, it is your very own Machiavelli. By Jupiter, what a cool, practical and unsentimental realist he was. Not for him was there any need to waste time over misty (and mystical) forms of altruism. Men have, and have always had, the same ruling passions. Whether we like it or not, we are all governed by the base instinct of self-interest; nothing more, nothing less. Theologians may tell us otherwise, but I suspect deep down that even the best of them can't get away from the ultimate conviction that Machiavelli has hit the moral nail on the head. No wonder the name of Machiavelli (and through him 'Italy' as well) has been so interchangeable with Satan and has become the common denominator for all sins.

Nor is it just me, of course, who has been so influenced by his ideas and his approach. Every artist, every writer, every intellectual in England for a great many years now has done little else but debate the ideas of your Signor Machiavelli. As Francis Bacon once said, from a scientific point of view we should all be much beholden to Machiavelli. He might have put the level of human character at the lowest level possible, but no one more than him looked at things as clearly as through a field glass. He has taught us what men do, not what they ought they to do. And what a Machiavellian age we live in.

In the realm of the theatre, meanwhile, certainly all my own closest associates as writers and dramatists have leaned heavily on the shoulders of Machiavelli in just about everything that they have done. I don't know who calculates these things (or why for that matter), but I have been reliably told that over the past twenty years or so, just the name of Machiavelli – or Machiavel, as we like to call him – has been used no fewer than 395 times in plays and dramas as the embodiment and physical incarnation of human villainy. I myself have used the name on several occasions in my plays, starting with one of the very first ones that I wrote – *Henry VI*. You might recall that towards the end of Part 3 Richard of Gloucester (the future King Richard III) has a long monologue in which he reveals his desires and plans to get his hands on the crown of England, notwithstanding the fact that many others have a prior claim to it. At the conclusion of the monologue Richard then asserts:

Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile,
And cry 'Content!' to that which grieves my heart,
And wet my cheeks with artificial tears,
And frame my face to all occasions.
I'll drown more sailors than the mermaid shall;
I'll slay more gazers than the basilisk;
I'll play the orator as well as Nestor,
Deceive more slyly than Ulysses could,
And, like a Sinon, take another Troy.
I can add colours to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.
Can I do this, and cannot get a crown?
Tut, were it farther off, I'll pluck it down.
(*Henry VI – Part 3, Act 3, Scene 3*)

As for Christopher Marlowe – well, the whole of his life and theatrical career could not have been more dominated by Machiavellian themes if he had tried. And for sure, it was Marlowe who led the way in promoting the theatrical influence of Machiavelli. From Tamburlaine to Faustus, via Barabas (*The Jew of Malta*), Marlowe gave us the quintessential image of a living, breathing Machiavel and the powerful influence he exerts. To this day, for example, Marlowe's description of hell, as defined in his Machiavellian Faustus, still sends shivers down my spine. Hell, he said, is here, now, constantly with us. We are damned in hell precisely because we are human. It is the awful burden that the forever guilty conscience must drag with it wherever it goes.

Within the bowels of these Elements,
Where we are tortur'd, and remaine for ever.
Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd,
In one selfe place: but where we are is hell,
And where hell is there must we ever be.
(Act 2, Scene 1)

And then there is the scene at the end of the play where Faustus begs 'Ugly hell to gape not', and where he then says that as redemption for his sins, he will 'burne his books' – a scene, like so many others from Marlowe, that I have directly used in my own plays. In this case, of course, I had my Prospero destroy his own magic books at the end of *The Tempest*. By the way, who is Prospero? If you don't know, he is the Duke of ... Milan!!

Anyway, while on the subject of our Machiavellian friend Marlowe, let me also say this. Of all us playwrights, he was the true pioneer explorer and discoverer of a new world. He was the great free-thinker amongst us, the great libertine, the great destroyer, the great 'revolutionary' in the theatrical world. His aim and his achievement was to overthrow the established order around him. Unlike me, Marlowe absolutely thrived on chaos and disorder, and no one penetrated the mystery of Evil, and where it came from, quite like he did. Marlowe literally imbibed the energy of despair. He explored the world around him without sentiment, and it was this that allowed him to reach the profoundest depths of evil. The rest of us are still following in his wake. None of us other playwrights would have done anything of any real value (let alone innovation) without initially being able to be guided by him. It was thanks to Marlowe that we too could explore new poetic and linguistic experiences and by means of these to start to discover the human personality, not from an exterior but an *interior* perspective.

What other tribute can I possibly pay him? I suppose the ultimate one – the one that I would like to deny but can't – is this. Marlowe's tragic death, exactly twenty years ago now, was my gain. And if I am really honest and want to remain in a confessional mood, exactly the same can be said for all the other premature deaths of so many of my other fellow playwrights and poets during the space of just a few years – Sidney in 1586; Greene in 1592; Marlowe in 1593; Kyd in 1594; Peele in 1597; Preston in 1598; Nashe in 1601; and Lyly seven years ago in 1606. With their deaths, especially the death of Marlowe, the space for celebrity and notoriety was largely cleared for me. All I had to do was walk (or glide) into it.

So, evil. Evil as an end in itself, and evil as a means to an end that might actually be considered good or virtuous. Now that I am approaching the end of my career and, who knows, perhaps the end of my life, I am often asked: 'Who is the most evil villain or character that you have put on the stage?' To be honest, it's one of those questions I hate, because whatever I say it is bound to annoy or upset someone. Consequently, I prefer to leave this for others to debate and to decide.

Some say that it is Richard III – one of the first history plays that I wrote some twenty years ago right at the start of my theatrical career. For sure, Richard is one of my most Marlovian-inspired Machiavellian characters. He is also, I would say, a direct descendant of the 'Vice' character as portrayed in the old-style Morality plays dating back throughout the previous century. He is evil for the ambitions of power and control that he desires. But he is also very often evil for the sake of being evil. Indeed, he positively enjoys being evil. I suppose in your terms, Richard is the equivalent of your worst Borgias. He knows the power of deception: 'I clothe my naked villainy / With old odd ends stol'n forth of holy writ / And seem a saint, when most I play the devil.' (Act 1, Scene 3). He also knows that 'Conscience is but a word that cowards use' (Act 5, Scene 3). And whatever else he is, Richard is certainly no coward. He knows as well that what distinguishes him is the fact that he is set apart from the rest of mankind, not just because of his malformed body, but even more so by his thoroughgoing unadulterated individualism. In this sense, he truly is the epitome of the age we live in.

Richard III was one of the first principal stage roles for my great friend, Richard Burbage, and if you were to ask him what impacted on him the most when he played this role, for sure he would stress the manner in which the play encouraged him – indeed insisted – that he create the most intimate

relationship with the audience all around him; and it was an audience, don't forget, that would have been sitting there on the stage itself. In this way, the two Richards – Burbage the actor and the King he was playing – could literally and tangibly co-opt the audience into being *co-conspirators* and *co-torturers*. In short, Richard made the audience share in his guilty pleasures. The audience felt that they were absolutely complicit in every action, no matter how terrible or evil, that was being performed.

This play was also one of the first in which I could stretch the emotional contrasts to their limit at that particular time. I remember Burbage telling me after the first performance, for example, that when he played the scene in which he seduces Lady Anne, even though she knows that the man she is about to go to bed with has recently murdered her husband and her father-in-law (and has other murders planned, including her own eventually), it repelled him so much that it brought a real sense of terror to his eyes. After all, it is the complete breakdown of any notion of moral order. Moreover, the person we end up despising most is not Richard III but Anne. Ah, what cruelty is at work here. Later, however, towards the end when Richard knows that he is probably about to die and he sees the consequences of what is in store for him, it was a scene that nearly brought tears to the actor's eyes:

What! Do I fear myself? there's none else by:
Richard loves Richard; that is I am I ...
I shall despair. — There is no creature loves me;
And if I die, no soul will pity me: —
Nay, wherefore should they? Since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself.
(Act 5, Scene 3)

Notwithstanding the great success of this play, I nevertheless quickly came to realise that in the form in which it was written and produced I had reached a natural limit. If I thus wanted to go beyond that limit and develop matters further, I would have to change tack and experiment with new approaches. This is basically what I did in *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, which thus marks a real turning point in my career as a writer of tragedies. In essence, what I did in *Hamlet* was to take on board the realisation that things that are left unsaid and implicit, rather than said explicitly, have a much greater emotional impact on the audience and carries much greater depth of meaning and significance. *Hamlet* is a mystery – both as a character and as a play as a whole. And this is exactly what I wanted and what I intended it to be. To this day, this sense of mystery continues to intrigue and fascinate everyone who sees the play. In short, in *Hamlet*, really for the first time in my career, I realised just how powerful theatrical dramas could be in transmitting emotions on a scale that no other artistic form could compare with. I realised that the audience must *feel* what is being portrayed far more than simply seeing or hearing what is being portrayed. The power of a mystery is completely lost when it is revealed. Only when the mystery retains and increases its very sense of mystery can you reach unparalleled emotional depths.

In *Hamlet*, of course, there is no really strong evil villain in the play, and certainly Claudius, compared with Richard III or later villains, comes nowhere close to them. Consequently, for those who are comparing and classifying my evil characters, the next one that features on their list as a possible 'champion villain' (or 'villain of villains') is without a shadow of doubt Iago (in *Othello*). Although some people have likened Iago to Richard III and essentially seen one as the evil continuation of the other, there are undoubtedly clear and obvious differences. Richard, for example, is far less subtle than Iago and in quite a number of ways is less repellent. Iago has nowhere near the strength of feelings and passions that Richard possessed, and instead has a coldness of temperament that could freeze the very air we breathe. Yet under no circumstances can

one say that Iago is a violent man. Indeed, in some ways, quite the contrary is the case. One must not forget as well that compared with Richard, Iago is a very plain, very inconspicuous, very *ordinary* man. Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the two, however, is Iago's supreme intellectual superiority, and it is when we watch this intellect at work in all its imaginative, creative scheming 'glory' that we become – at least I hope, for that was my deliberate intention – both fascinated and appalled at one and the same time. There is something irresistible about watching Iago and his evil scheming at work. We would like to turn away. We would like not to watch. We would like to shout out all kinds of warning messages, and yet we can't. We are simply transfixed by him. For sure, it is this that has made quite a number of people accuse me of committing an unpardonable sin against the very essence of what 'art' and 'drama' should be. With Iago, I have transformed pure evil into pure artistry. No wonder the audience are mesmerised and frightened by what they see.

But there is one other thing that I wanted to depict with Iago, and in my humble opinion at least, this is the most evil aspect of all about the man. Such are his manipulative skills he is easily able in the end to corrupt a good, decent, honest man (i.e. Othello) into doing evil himself. Iago doesn't destroy people. What he does is to make people destroy themselves by making them instruments of his will. Iago's mastery over Othello becomes so complete that Othello eventually thinks, reasons, and even talks like Iago.

What makes Iago do this? More than anything it is his single-minded hatred of the Moor, for no other purpose or gain than the pure desire to act out his hatred. Indeed, personally, Iago can only lose by Othello's demise, but this personal loss pales into insignificance when compared with the intellectual joy of seeing his plans and the designs of his hatred come to fruition. As for why he hates Othello so much, not even he can provide an explanation. He just does.

At the end of the play, Othello looks for signs that Iago is the devil incarnate, or at least some kind of monster or beast, but he finds none. All he finds is a man; a cold, calculating man in full self-control, who knows perfectly well what he is and who refuses to change. He likewise finds a man who has no fear at all of any kind of judgement – divine or otherwise – that will be imposed on him. Now if that isn't frightening, I don't know what is.

The next evil villain to have his fair share of 'supporters', if I may put it like that, is Edmund (in *King Lear*). He too is like Iago, especially in the way in which he dismisses virtue and goodness as nothing more than the sentimentality of the simple-minded, and who knows that his evil designs are of his own free choosing. 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus', said Iago. (Act 1, Scene 3). It was with Edmund, however, that I expressed this perspective more deeply.

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeit of our own behaviour), we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion: knaves, thieves, and traitors, by spherical predominance: drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! (Act 1, Scene 2)

In short, then, man is the complete master of his own destiny. If one is evil it is because one has consciously and deliberately chosen to be so. To this extent, Edmund is much more a strategist of evil than Iago was, and less of an improviser. I would also say that in Edmund I created the ultimate nihilist.

Towards the end of the drama, I do provide Edmund with some redeeming qualities. What is most interesting for me at this point is to watch the reaction of the audience. Are they pleased, are they comforted, by Edmund's belated turn to the path of goodness? No, they are not. On the contrary, they seem disappointed by this sudden change of heart. It is precisely at this moment that they seem to detest him the most. I will leave it to others to explain this reaction on the audience's part.

One last thing about Edmund. Some of my acquaintances have accused me of portraying a very negative image of the real-life Marlowe in Edmund. In doing so, they think I have abused my deceased friend. What can I say in response? I think that the only thing I can say is that I cannot be responsible for the interpretations that others give based on what they see with their eyes and what they think with their minds — no matter how outlandish and ridiculous this might be.

Last, but most certainly not least, let us come to Macbeth, who I know is for many the strongest contender for being the most evil of my villainous characters. This is certainly the view expressed by other characters in the drama. To cite the words of Macduff, for example: 'Not in the legions / Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd / In evils to top Macbeth.' (Act 4, Scene 3). With *Macbeth*, many assert, we have an unblinking perspective of pure sublime evil, not just in the individual, but in the state, and in the whole cosmos as well.

What, then, can I say about him? I think the first thing to stress is that the drama is undoubtedly the blackest of my works, literally as well as metaphorically. It is a play in which virtually everything takes place at night or in some dark spot. Even without anything happening, I wanted to create an all-powerful sense of fear and horror. Even the stars seem to bear no light, no fire, within them. And even when there is a little bit of daylight, it is 'thick', 'murky' and eventually 'strangled'.

The next thing to stress is that Macbeth is a very different kind of character to all the other 'villains' that I had thus far created. He is no Richard III; he is no Iago; he is no Edmund. He has no physical deformities which might justify his being led astray down the path of evil. He is no psychopath or sociopath. Nor is he the victim of any kind of injustice or ingratitude that again might potentially extenuate, mitigate, or provide an excuse for his later actions. On the contrary, in Macbeth I wanted to create a character that starts out as an honest, loyal and brave man. In the initial view of others, he is a 'hero', and for the deeds he has performed he is well rewarded and highly praised. What leads Macbeth down the path of evil is his ambition. All of us are ambitious to a certain extent, but what I wanted to demonstrate with Macbeth is what happens when a certain boundary, a certain line, is crossed that takes us from one moral dimension to another. It is a boundary found in all of us. It is a line that runs through every human heart, and with Macbeth we can see just how easily that boundary is crossed. Moreover, in Macbeth's case, once it is crossed, for him at least, there is no going back. He knows only one direction — forward. Having committed one evil, he knows full well that he will go on to commit another... and another... and another. In effect, therefore, he becomes consumed by evil. 'I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er.' (Act 3, Scene 4). In the process, however, we also see a soul tortured by agony. More than with any other character I wanted to show the on-going development of this character from an inner perspective of just how his mind operates. I wanted to show in the most in-depth way possible just how an individual grows and evolves into evil; how he responds to this development; how it impacts on him; and above all how it literally tortures him. It is in this sense, I hope, that Macbeth achieves a level of intensity unmatched anywhere else. And because of this agonising intensity, I think we cannot help but at the end feel sorry for Macbeth. We don't rejoice at his eventual destruction. We feel instead what a terrible waste of a potentially good life has been lost. Our sadness for him, indeed our identity with him, is perhaps involuntary, but no less inescapable for that. As Macbeth falls, so we seem to fall with him. And when he makes his final summation of what

life and existence mean you can visibly see the shared anguish on the faces of people watching and listening to him.

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
(Act 5, Scene 5)

The four characters I have mentioned – Richard III, Iago, Edmund and Macbeth – are by no means the sum total of the evil villains that I have created or portrayed; not by a long way. If one had the time and the inclination, many others could be included as well. These four, however, tend to be the ones that are regularly mentioned as embodying, in their respective ways, key essential aspects of a deep-seated portrayal of evil and its most despicable, catastrophic traits and consequences; ones that affect the evil character himself as well as all those around him.

Occasionally I have heard it claimed that Shylock (from *The Merchant of Venice*) should also be included at the top of the evil characters list, along with the likes of Iago, Macbeth and company. I have to say, however, that I find this perspective extremely unfair – both to Shylock and even more so to me personally. Of all the characters I have created, Shylock is one of the most ambiguous ones, and very deliberately so. Of course, I knew that I was playing with fire when I created the character. Is the play anti-Semitic, as some claim? Not at all. Or, if it is, then it is equally anti-Christian as well, given some of the things I say about other characters. For sure, there is a lot of hatred on display in the drama; an unusual amount given that it is usually classed as a 'comedy'. But again, I insist, the hatred is shared by all parties and each party ends up being equally responsible for mutually reinforcing the ingrained hostile attitudes that they have. As for Shylock himself, no one can surely claim that he is my equivalent of Marlowe's 'Jew of Malta' (Barabas). The two characters are light years apart. Yes, Shylock is a 'villain' and has many despicable traits. But I repeat, in virtually no other character did I deliberately set out to balance these kinds of traits with alternative ones so much as with Shylock. The ambiguity that resides in Shylock must not be considered accidental or irrelevant. On the contrary, it is the key element at work. Is he ultimately good or evil; victim or aggressor; guilty or innocent; saint or monster? In all cases, the answer is *both*. He is also equally persecuted and manipulative, complex and stereotypical. Let me quickly remind you of his ambiguities in his key monologue; the 'I am a Jew' speech (in Act 3). When asked what use taking Antonio's pound of flesh would be for him, he starts the speech with an unabashedly villainous comment: 'To bait fish withal; if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.' At the onset, then, he appears motivated entirely and exclusively by revenge, and he continues by cataloguing all the wrongs Antonio has committed against him, for which he feels his revenge is warranted and justified. These offences range from mocking him in public, aiding his enemies, and hindering his business. He then makes it clear that he is convinced that these injustices are committed simply because he is a Jew. But it is at this point that I provide a real sympathetic element to his speech. Although Shylock's revenge is driven by rage, there are undoubtedly good reasons for his possessing such wrath; but it is a wrath comprising a plea for him to be treated humanely and indeed as a constituent part of all humanity: 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?' Are we not 'Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?' Of course, the reference to being 'fed with the same food' is not strictly true, and to some extent I was deliberately over-stating the similarities. After all, Jews keep Kosher, they are not in fact fed with the same food, and this can, and in the play itself *has*, caused

tensions between the characters adhering to different religious beliefs. Nevertheless, one should not overstate this at the cost of what is common between them from a human and humanitarian perspective. As Shylock continues: 'If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?' By posing such questions, one cannot help but agree with his appeals. As for his desire for revenge and vengeance, this too is largely paralleled by the actions and beliefs of Christians.

The key thing about Shylock, I want to stress, is not that he is a Jew but that he is an *outsider*. Even more than that, he is an outsider in a society – Venice – that can't do without him (because of his wealth), but which also can't fully accept him. I might also add that this sense of being an outsider is a theme that I explored in several other plays as well. It is a theme that has always intrigued and fascinated me – for personal reasons as well. In Shylock's case, of course, the difficulty of his being 'Other', of his being an outsider, is 'resolved' by his forced conversion. He is compelled to conform; he is compelled to become 'one of us'. By the time that I wrote *Othello*, several years later – which is likewise set in Venice, you might remember – I felt no compulsion to provide such a 'reassuring' ending. As I have emphasised before, Iago undergoes no conversion. And never forget the fact that Iago is no 'outsider'. He is already 'one of us'. Reflect carefully on that.

* * *

'I would not open windows onto men's souls.' As I hope you can immediately appreciate, these are not the words of any of my characters. They are the words instead of someone who it was impossible to represent on stage, at least directly or explicitly. The words were spoken by Queen Elizabeth. They were uttered in the conditional tense. It was never meant as a royal command or order; or at least that is how we new generation of playwrights interpreted it. To that extent, we didn't feel under any obligation to heed her advice. Perhaps we should have done. Who knows? Others must be the judge. But as I say, we didn't, or I certainly didn't. Instead, I turned the handle on the window and slowly opened it; only a little bit at first, but then wider and wider, ultimately as far as I could, or as far as I dared to. Now that the window is open, I have a feeling it will never be closed again, at least not completely. Indeed, I suspect that ever new windows will be opened wider and further than my own. But that is for later generations to decide.

Why did I feel compelled to open the window on the soul? I felt that we needed to cast new light on it; to see things from a new, different perspective. Above all, I wanted to allow some fresh air to come in and cleanse the foul stench of accumulated stains that had so deeply infected the soul of Man. Stains of evil: evil thoughts, evil deeds. I am reminded of the words of Edgar in *King Lear*: 'The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.' (Act 5, Scene 3)

Why are we so infected by evil? Where could I look to find some clues, and even more importantly, some answers? According to the old-style Miracle and Morality plays the answer was simple and straightforward. Good came from God and Evil came from the Devil. Human beings had no say in the matter. Good and evil were things that were imposed on us from outside ourselves. When someone behaved well, they were being influenced by God, and when someone behaved badly they were under the power of the Devil, sometimes even possessed by his demons. But times have changed now. This is no longer an entirely satisfactory approach or answer. I could not rely on any kind of crude religious dogma to help me provide answers. The comforts and inspiration of orthodox religion had to be put aside. After all, what could possibly be considered 'orthodox' now that England had split from Roman Catholicism? Of one thing I was certain. It was not to things outside or external to man where I had to look. Instead, I had to focus my gaze and attention on Man himself – his nature and above all his passions. Nothing should be left untouched. Everything needed to be

dissected, from ambition to (the green-eyed monster of) jealousy; from arrogance to resentment, and everything in between. I had to imagine the predicament of man stripped of his moorings and turned loose in a world empty of human kindness or sacred pity. There's nothing in a man above His nature. Every shred of mitigation needed to be rejected. No easy sentimentality or happy-ending could lighten the burden that was laid on suffering mankind. We were all tempest-tossed bodies set afloat on the great and stormy ocean of our own passions; passions we often could not fathom, let alone understand. I had to look at man in the flesh. More than that, I had to look at man in the raw. I had to get inside him, penetrate his mind, undress his thoughts and his soul as much as possible. Inwards, forever inwards, that was the direction I needed to go in. The conflict between Good and Evil, vice and virtue is not fought outside of us. It is fought deep within us and the tension of the struggle often tears us apart. As we grow conscious of this conflict, the horror and pain is often unbearable. And equally unbearable is the dismay and terror, not to mention sadness and sorrow, at what human nature and the passions that drive that nature are capable of doing.

I had to ask the questions that normally we are too afraid to ask because we fear the answers that will be given. When answers are given, as they invariably are by all manner of people with different perspectives and viewpoints, we then have to confront these answers in the most open, and thus often tragic, painful way possible, always recognising, always allowing for the fact that no answer comes with any certitude any more. One must learn to doubt everything, including the most painful doubt of all: is life itself worth living or not? If yes, why? 'To be or not to be?' That indeed is the question of questions, and when I put those words in Hamlet's mouth I knew the terrible reaction they would provoke.

I had to highlight the vulnerability of the human condition and the different passions that govern it. I had to show how we are rarely, if ever, in full control of our thoughts, feelings and actions. Yes, we have the capacity for reasoning, but this too is an extremely fragile force and can itself be subject to abuse. Evil is most certainly not devoid of our capacity to reason. Nor is it devoid of intellect and knowledge. More than anything, this is what I wanted to show in portraying the character of Iago for example. Right from the outset I knew as well that I had to explore human passions in the most *dispassionate* way possible. My principal aim has always been to describe these passions as accurately and as poetically as I could. Yet as the author of these descriptions, I – William Shakespeare – had to disappear morally. It was not my task, not my right, to supply or impose my own moral assessments. You the audience must take on that task and that responsibility. I am a writer; I am not, and have never wanted to be, a preacher. It is by taking me out of the character that I have created that I have hopefully given them the chance to be seen as individuals in their own right; one might almost say that I wanted to try to give them a sense of *self-awareness*. If I am fortunate and lucky, my characters will continue to live and develop long after I have departed from the scene of existence.

More than anything else, however, I wanted to show how Good and Evil are not separate entities, each one occupying a given space all of their own, but are constantly merging with each other, metamorphosing from one to the other, in constant tension with each other. Fair truly is foul at times, just as foul can also be fair on occasions. As I constantly and repeatedly stressed, there is always at least some soul of goodness in things evil, just as too much goodness may even make it easier for evil to flourish and escape punishment. As for the possibility of any final victory of one over the other – forget it. It is inconceivable; impossible. The fluid tension between them is permanent. Not only can't one exist without the other; they can't exist without constantly flowing into each other, or, if you prefer, without constantly 'contaminating' each other. It is this tension, of course, which resides in all of us, and the attempts to mediate this tension — successfully or unsuccessfully — is the very life force of any human drama. Any character who was the absolute, unlimited, unadulterated embodiment of either Good or Evil simply does not interest me. He or she

would not be real. And the same goes for every kind of attribute, be it Beauty, Love or anything else. Certainly if you have read my sonnets, for example, you will know full well how the concept of love is a constant combination of fairness and foulness (see especially 127/138/144). Don't forget as well that arguably the couple that I portray who genuinely love each other the most are the Macbeths.

What makes a drama truly tragic, therefore, is the fact that in trying to rid ourselves of any residual evil, we cannot help but lose some of the potential goodness as well. If you prefer, think of it like an illness or a poison that afflicts the body. In order to get rid of the poison we take medicines that also cannot help but destroy some of our healthy, living, good cells. It is likewise on this basis that when we try to inflict punishment on those who are guilty of evil acts, the innocent often suffer as well. There is simply no justice that perfectly matches the measures required to be taken with the just deserts of those affected. There are no perfect criteria of 'measure for measure'. Many innocent people suffer beyond measure, out of all proportion, unjustly. But notwithstanding this, I insist that the very fabric of human life and existence would be both impossible and incredibly dull without the presence of both good and evil and the constant tension between them and their constant mixture.

As I am sure that you can very easily imagine, over the course of my twenty years or so of writing plays and poems about all kinds of matters to do with Good and Evil, especially in light of the concentration I have given to the latter, my approach, my style, and my ideas have come in for quite a good deal of criticism, and in some cases as well quite a fair amount of abuse, some of it very personal. It seems that some people are highly offended by the moral vision that I have portrayed. Depending on the play that they have seen, I have been accused of legitimising evil too well, even to the point of glorifying murderers, traitors, and other nefarious characters, enveloping them in a poetic atmosphere that is totally incompatible with their conduct. Moreover, by focusing on their inner turmoil I have generated too much sympathy for them and have thus minimised the true horror of their ambition-driven actions, their (self) deceptions, their intrigues, and their depth of hatred. By this means, so it is claimed, the people who suffer at their hands are downgraded or even almost ignored in some instances. Similarly, it has been claimed that my villains too often appear to get enjoyment out of their evil deeds and are invariably proud of what they do and what they achieve. They possess a sardonic wit that seems to lend them immense charm. And because I, as the author, have deliberately withheld explicit condemnation of them, my critics assume that this implies a too willing acceptance of their evil deeds.

Others, meanwhile, complain that the all too frequent lack of clear-cut motives for acts of evil maliciousness produces a kind of banality of evil. When there is seemingly no real motive for what they do — other than doing evil for the pure hell of it, or because they are bored with their lives and seem to have nothing better to do — that this makes the moral counterattack on their actions all the more difficult.

Then there is the criticism that very often I introduce acts of pure gratuitous evil or an unnecessary, unwarranted, over-exaggerated sense of violence. In *Titus Andronicus*, for example, a woman is raped by two brothers on the corpse of her husband, whom they have just murdered. And if that is not enough, she then has her tongue cut out and her hands cut off. In an act of revenge by her father, the rapists are killed and their bodies and flesh are cut up and baked in a pie that is then served to their mother. Others, meanwhile, cite the example of Gloster having his eyes gouged out in *King Lear* as one of the most unbearable scenes to watch. And so the examples continue.

What can I say in my defence here that I haven't already said countless times before? Nothing really. I just wish that people wouldn't deliberately twist my meanings and intentions. As I have said so many times until I am blue in the face, whenever evil is performed in my plays it does eventually get punished. I do explicitly show the suffering that is caused by acts of evil, both to the individual

directly concerned and on a much wider indirect scale, thus clearly indicating that these acts in future must be avoided at all costs because of their terrible consequences. And if I don't personally add my own condemnation of such acts, it is simply because, as I have already stressed, I have every confidence in the intelligence and moral capacity of my audience to draw the appropriate lessons for themselves. Last but not least, I never indicate that there are forces at work which make evil acts by individuals totally inevitable or unavoidable. They choose to act in an evil way, and it is this act of choice that must be focused upon and scrutinised in depth so that lessons can genuinely be learned to avoid these choices and temptations and allow for more positive moral choices to predominate in the future. In short, there is no evil, no tragedy, without responsibility.

I would also add one other thing here. I am a realist, not a utopian. Like so many of my other playwrights, all I am doing is holding a mirror to the real, existing world around me and reflecting what can be seen. I am not inventing the evil deeds that I portray. They have existed long before me, stretching back over the entire course of time and human history. What's more, the evil and violence that I portray often pales into insignificance compared with the evil and violent atrocities being committed almost on a daily basis in the reality in which we exist – here, now, today in the year of our Lord 1613. For example, take a walk round London on any day of the week and what you will see will, or *should*, shock and disturb you far more than watching one of my tragedies or history plays in the theatre. The real sadistic theatre of cruelty and evil is performed out there on the streets. Wherever you go you will see or hear excruciating pain, torture and death in (and of) the flesh. There will be birds pecking out the eyeballs of the innumerable victims who have been hanged; heartless victims, and I mean this literally not metaphorically, because before the victim dies their heart would have been cut out and shown to them as their last living image. In many cases as well, don't forget, the steaming corpses would have been chopped up into quarters before being left for the birds of prey. Walk a bit further and you will hear the screams of the whores being publically whipped and chastised. You will see vicious, terrifying bears and dogs ripping and tearing themselves to pieces, before a large crowd of excited, mesmerised spectators, speculating large sums of money on the outcome of the fight. You will see and smell the diseased bodies of hundreds, if not thousands, of beggars lying curled up in agony on the streets. And God help us if it is a season of plague, because if it is (and it regularly is, I'm afraid), then you had best avert your gaze, block your sense of smell, and run for cover. A plague-ridden body means ribs sticking out, worms crawling through the diseased sores and boils, which will eventually rupture, causing pain so agonising that most victims will at this point prefer to kill themselves; not that they can express this wish with their own tongues, as they would have long since lost the capacity to speak... Do you really want me to continue with the descriptions? Moreover, when the plague is rife, starvation and madness are its natural companions, even amongst those who have not succumbed to the plague, such is the level of fear and terror the plague generates. Consequently, I beg of you critics, don't lecture me on my theatrical portrayal of evil and violence.

On a parallel front, of course, my critics don't like the fact that, in their view at least, I give so little focus in my plays to acts of goodness and virtue so as to counterbalance the evil on display. Nor do they like the fact that I seem to restrict (for the most part) my displays of virtue to women – primarily, of course, Ophelia (in *Hamlet*), Desdemona (in *Othello*), and Cordelia (in *King Lear*). Nor are these unblemished images of virtue and goodness. In each case, they assert, I seemingly strive to deprive them of a complete state of innocence, and their virtues are countered by at least some degree of imperfection. Worst of all, of course, is the ultimate fate that I bequeath my heroines. Ophelia commits suicide. Desdemona is strangled by her husband, and Cordelia is also brutally killed. In other words, my critics imply that I am keen to draw the equation that any display of virtue and goodness will in the end only lead to suffering, anguish, excruciating pain and premature death by one foul means or another. In other words, they argue, what's the point of being good and virtuous if this is the end result?

If I had to pick out one of these characters that I have portrayed as an emblem of suffering virtue, whose demise and end has unleashed the most vociferous criticism and abuse against me, it would almost certainly be Cordelia. Just in case you don't know or you have forgotten, let me remind you that in the original 1606 version of *King Lear*, the drama ends with Cordelia murdered on Edmund's orders, and as Lear cradles the body of his deceased daughter in his arms, he dies in painful agony from a broken heart. Whenever you heard Richard Burbage utter the final words of Lear up there on the stage, I can guarantee that there wasn't a dry eye in the packed theatre.

No, no life.
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
And thou no breath at all?
O, thou wilt come no more.
Never, never, never. Pray you, undo
This button. Thank you, sir. O, O, O, O
...
Breake heart, I prethe breake.

But if everyone was in tears, not all the tears were of sorrow. Many were of absolute outrage and disgust at me. How could I be so mean, so vicious, so heartless, so ... *evil* ... as to conceive an excruciatingly painful ending like this? How could I be so ... inhuman? After all, in all earlier accounts of the life of King Lear, a much happier ending had been implied. Why, then, had I deliberately and so radically changed the outcome? So virulently strong were the attacks against me that the company caved in to all the pressure and ended up revising the ending of the play. It seems that it literally was too dark and too unbearable for a great many people. As you might know, the revised ending still contains Cordelia's murder – on that front I was adamant I would not alter my original script – but the scene is played in far less agonising ways. In addition, although Lear still dies immediately afterwards, he is at least consoled with the (self) delusion that the body of the hanged Cordelia might actually still be breathing, for in his wishful thinking he appears to see her lips move: ('Do you see this? Look on her, — look, — her lips, — / Look there, look there!') It is thus with these words that he dies, and his original last words ('Breake heart, I prethe breake') are now uttered by Kent instead. Did the new ending relieve me of some of the criticism and abuse that had been hurled at me? Barely. All I can hope is that some day in the future, a theatre director and company will have the courage to perform the original intended version and will sympathise and empathise with the poor author of this most tragic of tragedies.

But at least let me finish my comments on this complaint of little or no attention to the positive attributes of goodness and virtue with one of my own favourite lines from *The Merchant of Venice* and which underpins my own thoughts and emotions. It is the line spoken by Portia to Nerissa, when she sees the light in the hall flooding her garden at the darkest moment before dawn:

How far that little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.
(Act 5, Scene 1)

While on the subject of my female characters, not only am I often criticised for the treatment of my virtuous heroines, I am also bitterly criticised at the opposite end of the moral scale for portraying some of my female characters as equally evil as their male counterparts; and perhaps even more so. But my simple retort here is this: if all is fair and equal between the sexes in love, why shouldn't all be fair and equal in evil? No moral category – whatever it is – is exclusively masculine or feminine in its attributes, impact, or consequences. And don't tell me that you have never come across a truly

evil woman in your life. Anyway, right from the outset, evil women fascinated me greatly, and all throughout my writing career I couldn't resist including an evil female character. From Queen Margaret (in *Henry VI*) to Goneril and Regan (in *King Lear*), and ending up with Cymbeline's wife at the end, we are confronted with some truly dreadful, horrible acts of female villainy and evil. All of these women, it has to be said, are pretty nasty pieces of work, but probably the more dominant weight of opinion would say that no one beats Lady Macbeth on the terrain of evil deeds, or at least certainly on the terrain of evil thoughts and words spoken. It is not a term I like to use, but by Jupiter what a nasty bitch that woman was! Here, for your disgust, or for delight if you wish (!) are just two brief examples of the thoughts that dominated this woman:

Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever, in your sightless substances,
You wait on nature's mischief!
(Act 1, Scene 5)

I have given suck and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.
(Act 1, Scene 7)

By far the worst criticisms and abuse that I have had to suffer, however, are those that are explicitly or implicitly directed at me personally and at certain key aspects of my own life. In essence, the criticism levelled at me is this: under the cover and pretext of highlighting, excusing, and perhaps legitimising evil acts in others, I was attempting to mitigate and justify the bad things and deeds that I have carried out in my own personal life. What do these accusations, then, consist of?

First, that I have for a great many years effectively abandoned my wife, Anne, leaving her to fend for herself as best she can on the little income that I send to her. It seems as well that some people have found out and made it known in certain quarters that following my very recent purchase (through three trustees – John Heminges, John Jackson and William Johnson) of the gatehouse in Blackfriars earlier this year, I had a legal clause drawn up which effectively excludes Anne from any claim on the house should she outlive me. This, they say, is clear evidence of my selfish, calculating, devious and manipulative character, not just in relation to my wife, but to others as well.

In conjunction with this, it is widely put about that I have a tendency to – how do they put it? – 'unlock my pants'. I presume you get the meaning. Anyway, it would certainly be foolhardy of me to deny that I have a strong libido, that I have had a fair number of illicit love affairs of all kinds and varieties, and that I thus have a bit of a promiscuous reputation. It all started of course many years ago when John Manningham, one night in the Mermaid tavern, told the story about me and Richard Burbage. Where he got his information from, I don't know. It certainly wasn't from Burbage.

Anyway, the upshot of it was that during a stage run of Richard III, Burbage was bedding a particularly attractive young lass. Now it just so happened that the young wench was intimately 'known' to me as well, and thus I sent Burbage a message reminding him that William the Conqueror came before Richard the Third.

Apart from these kinds of 'innocent' encounters', there is of course the much more serious – and by now 'infamous' – affair with the 'Dark Lady' of my sonnets. Who, then, is she? Come on, you honestly don't expect me to reveal her name now, do you, after all these years of keeping her identity a secret? All I will say – especially in light of my present location – is that she does have a strong connection with Venice, with my love and appreciation of music, and with some knowledge I acquired of the Jewish community and their traditions in Venice. Given the way that the affair ended, you might also say that this perhaps explains my love-hate relationship with Venice and Venetians, and in particular why the relationship between Venice and the 'green-eyed monster' (of jealousy) is particularly strong in me.

As for some of the other claims that have been periodically made, I deny them categorically. No, to the best of my knowledge, I have not fathered any illegitimate children. And, no, I have not succumbed to any of those sexually transmitted diseases such as venereal disease, and certainly not to that disease that the Veronese physician, Girolamo Fracastoro, first discovered and named (syphilis).

Moving away from my love life and onto other matters relating to my family, it pains me greatly to hear those allegations that not only did I abandon my wife, but my three children as well. Worst, and most painful of all, however, are those rumours that suggest that I showed no remorse whatsoever at the death of my one and only son and heir, Hamnet, all those years ago now (in 1596), and that I followed his death by writing some of my lightest comedies and farces. For all kinds of reasons, the loss of a male heir did – and still does – cause me immense grief, not to mention anxiety.

As for the wider members of my family – my brothers and sisters for example – again I strongly deny that just because my two youngest brothers happened to be called Richard and Edmund that this meant that they were the 'role models' upon which I constructed the villainous characters of Richard III and Edmund in *King Lear*. You might have even heard the rumour that if I had any long abiding vengeance against Richard in particular, this was because he had supposedly had an affair with my wife during my absence from our home in Stratford. Now, I know you might think that because I name one of the principal female characters in my play, Anne, and because she is seduced by Richard III that there therefore might be something to these rumours. But I repeat: No (at least as far as I know!). And anyway, it's all water under the bridge now, especially given that my brother died earlier this year. God rest his soul.

Last but not least as regards the personal abuses levelled at me, there are all those accusations and vile innuendos about the way in which I have amassed a hard-earned fortune during my life; why I seem to be so obsessed about acquiring vast amounts of property, land, and other forms of wealth; and the extent to which I have engaged in certain kinds of unethical and outright illegal business dealings that have supposedly led to me causing great hardship for a great many people, and especially some of the already poorest sectors of society.

The specific allegations are these. First, that I have frequently falsified the amount of taxes that I should be liable to pay and that I have also repeatedly not paid those official taxes that have been levied against me. Second, that I have been a speculative hoarder of grain and only released it for sale at huge profits for myself when prices reached their highest point during the repeated famines that the country has experienced. In other words, that I have made a fortune, a 'killing', out of

famine by essentially standing by while women and children died of starvation (just like I portrayed Coriolanus as doing). Third, notwithstanding the fact that I have become a big property owner in London and one of the largest of all property and land owners in my home town of Stratford, I have consistently refused to assume what are considered to be the normal civic responsibilities which this wealth and property normally confers. Fourth, that I am a petty usurer of money, who regularly amasses great fortunes out of these loans and who harasses and persecutes anyone who doesn't pay back the loans with their full interest on time. Fifth, that I have occasionally used my writings to convey support for the poor and needy in order to camouflage and throw people off the scent of those real-life business activities that have exploited these most vulnerable social groups. In other words, that I convey one set of ethical views in theory, and the completely opposite set of ethical approaches in practice, thus making me a master of double or 'contradictory consciousness'. And sixth, that I have no real residual artistic interest in my plays and poems, and that they mean nothing more to me than a convenient and easy way of amassing money, which is then used to satisfy my ultimate goals and ambitions as a businessman and landowner. In short, if you give any credence to these rumours and accusations, I am a shabby, self-serving, calculating, scheming, conniving, reprehensible, manipulative, money-grubbing, exploitative miser and skinflint, who has repeatedly used all kinds of underhand, immoral, unethical, dishonest and illegal means for my own individual gains and to satisfy my egotistical ambitions. I trust I haven't left anything out in this list of character traits allocated to me!

Just to cap things off, as you might be aware I have always had a reputation as a writer who has coined and invented some of the most brilliant, and certainly some of the most colourful, forms of insult now existing in the English language, with all of them ready to be used at all times and for all occasions. In light of my so-called 'misdemeanours' on the business front, then, these self-same insults that I have invented are often thrown back at me now with interest added. Let me just give you a small flavour of my own insults now being thrown back in my face:

— '[You] live in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, / Stew'd in corruption, honeying and making love / Over the nasty sty.' (*Hamlet* 3.4. 91-94)

— '[You are] spacious in the possession of dirt.' (*Hamlet* 5.2. 88-89)

— '[You] sweat to death, / And lard the lean earth as [you] walk along. (*Henry IV, Part 1* 2.2. 103-4)

— '[You are] a huge translation of hypocrisy, / vilely compil'd, profound simplicity.' (*Love's Labour Lost* 5.2. 51-52)

— 'False face must hide, / what the false heart doth know.' (*Macbeth* 1.7)

— '... there's daggers in men's smiles' (*Macbeth* 2.3. 139-40); none more so than your own.

— 'Would thou wert clean enough to spit upon!' (*Timon of Athens* 4.3. 361)

— 'There is no more mercy in him than there is milk in a male tiger.' (*Coriolanus* 5, 4)

So, is there any truth in these claims, allegations and abuses levelled at me as regards my business and wealth-creating activities? Is King Lear speaking for me when he says that he is 'a man more sinned against than sinning'? Or is Prospero speaking for me when he says in the Epilogue of *The Tempest*: 'As you from crimes would pardoned be / Let your indulgence set me free.'? My response is what it has always been: 'No comment'. And you, and everyone else for that matter, can read into that comment whatever you want. I couldn't care less!

* * *

Let me briefly return to my writings and some of the impact they have had, not just on others, but on me personally. In particular, let me take you back a few years and remind you of what I produced in a short, highly concentrated spell of artistic creativity. In the space of just a couple of years or so, roughly from the end of 1604 to 1608, I managed to come up with half a dozen tragedies – *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, and *Timon of Athens*. Although I have given them in that order, don't make the mistake of thinking that one inevitably followed on from the other. As always, I would work on several scripts at a time and none of them were ever definitively complete until the whole company had had their say and we had agreed on how we would stage it. And even then, of course, we would all continue to work on it and make revisions as we went along.

Why, you might ask, did I exclusively concentrate only on very serious, high-brow tragedies during these years? Even on a matter like this, very snide remarks could occasionally be heard, casting all kinds of aspersions about me. It was said, for example, that the principal motive for these tragedies was nothing more than to cash in on what had become, amongst the paying public, a real vogue or fashion at this time. Audiences seemed to be crying out for the portrayal of tragedies and were prepared to pay good sums of money to go and see plays and dramas of this kind. Hence, smelling a tidy profit, hey presto, I came up with the necessary goods. But the reality is very different. The simple truth of the matter is that by this stage in my career I was tired and bored of writing comedies or simplistic romances. Writing and staging *Hamlet* a few years before really had been a major turning point for me. But *Hamlet* was a beginning, not an end. I realised that there were so many other issues that I had barely touched on before that I now wanted to explore in much greater depth, particularly as regards questions of evil, the passions that drive this force in all their different guises, and the consequences to both guilty and innocent alike. In my writing, I now felt that I was attaining the fullness of my creative powers and that these powers would best be served in the writing of complex tragedies, rather than any other genre. And, yes, I admit, a more meditative, sceptical, melancholic mood within me, and within the country as well, certainly helped to stimulate and drive this new turn to the kinds of tragedies that I eventually came to write during these years.

If you have read or seen these plays for yourselves, you will certainly not need me to tell you that all of them deal with very painful, very dark, very bleak forces governing human nature. The evil on display here often reaches unbearable, excruciating depths; almost inhuman depths. And all of them in their different ways certainly took a great emotional toll on me. Do you think it is easy dealing with this; exploring the lowest depths of what we are capable of doing to ourselves and to others? Do you think I enjoyed wallowing in all this filth and slime of evil? Can you imagine living with these characters and images day in, day out; every day of your waking life and every moment of your dreams, and especially of your nightmares? Well, I can assure you it is not easy and the further I explored, the more it started to affect me personally. Yet, as painful and sorrowful as it was, I couldn't stop.

If I had to pick out two plays which came to impact on me most – personally speaking – they would undoubtedly be *King Lear* and *Timon of Athens*. I want to stress *both* plays here, for in many ways the one shaped and led to the development of the other. It is in these two dramas in particular where the evil on display is at its greatest abundance, where the evil characters are particularly cold, repellent, hard and savage, and where the consequences of these evil forces are most terrible and appalling. Both plays deal with the tragic effects of ingratitude. In both the victim is exceptionally unsuspecting and extremely naive. In both he is completely overwhelmed, passing through fury to madness in the one case, to suicide in the other. Both plays contain some of the most terrible curses and harsh language that I have ever invented. The misanthropy of Timon in particular pours itself out in a torrent of maledictions and wrath on the whole race of man; and these at once recall, both by

their form and their substance, the most powerful speeches uttered by Lear in his madness. And in both plays I repeatedly made comparisons between men and beasts and tried to show how the bestial degradation of mankind will end in a furious struggle of all against all, in which ultimately the human race will perish.

We have seen the best of our time:
machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorders,
follow us disquietly to our graves.
(Gloster - Act 1, Scene 2 – *King Lear*)

It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.
(Albany - Act 4, Scene 2 – *King Lear*)

One of the specific things that should strike you about *Lear* is how the twelve principal characters in the drama are equally divided into six who represent some form of virtue and goodness and six who represent some form of evil. One side is pitted against the other, but by the end of the drama both sides have perished. Good and evil, persecuted and persecutor, torturer and tortured have become varieties of one single species and both alike are victims of the forces that were unleashed.

In *Timon*, meanwhile – which recounts the story of the open-hearted and over-generous spendthrift, who turned into a violent misanthrope and fled from human society when he lost his money and found that none of his so-called friends who had profited by his generosity would come to his aid – the rage, violence, and evil horrors that afflict mankind are so beyond any form of control, have become so universal, that nothing and no one is spared or immune, not even the realm of nature.

The sun's a thief, and with his great attraction
Robs the vast sea; the moon's an arrant thief,
And her pale fire she snatches from the sun;
The sea's a thief, whose liquid surge resolves
The moon into salt tears; the earth's a thief,
That feeds and breeds by a composture stolen
From general excrement; each thing's a thief;
The laws, your curb and whip, in their rough power
Have uncheck'd theft. Love not yourselves; away!
Rob one another...
Hate all, curse all; show charity to none,
But let the famish'd flesh slide from the bone,
Ere thou relieve the beggar; give to dogs
What thou deniest to men; let prisons swallow 'em,
Debts wither 'em to nothing; be men like blasted
Woods,
And may diseases lick up their false bloods!
(Act 4, Scene 3)

After this, what else was there left to be said? One simply runs out of words. As Timon himself puts it, shortly before he ends up committing suicide: 'Lips, let sour words go by, and language end.' (Act 5, Scene 2). Having reached this point – the lowest of the low for anyone whose life is so dominated by the use of words and language – I really couldn't go on. The intensity of the sad, tragic vision I had created had overwhelmed me. Again, in the words of Timon: 'What is amiss, plague and infection

mend! / Graves only be men's works, and death their gain! / Sun, hide thy beams! Timon hath done his reign.' (Act 5, Scene 2). It is for this reason, therefore, that the play – or at least my role in it – was never properly finished. It was more than I could stand or bear. And to this day, when I conjure up visions of *Timon* and the period in which I was writing it, it remains an open wound that continues to bleed.

By this stage, then, I readily confess, I had reached nervous breaking point. For several years without a break I had portrayed a world and humanity's place in it in complete disintegration and decomposition. And when I looked at the world I had created on the stage and the world outside the theatre, I could see little or no difference. Worst of all, this all-consuming disintegration from without had become a disintegration from within as well. My mind couldn't take it. If I told you about the nightmares I suffered, you would all run away. I literally had 'scorpions in my mind' (just like Macbeth – Act 3, Scene 2).

Dealing with a pessimistic perspective on life and mankind in general had long featured in my work. You only have to read some of the sonnets to see this on display, and of course it reaches a new, higher level in *Hamlet*. But on all these previous occasions I had managed to see and portray countervailing tendencies and a contrasting optimism in humanity that always prevailed in the end. With *Lear* and *Timon*, however, this had no longer become possible. I really had reached the end of the road; one in which there appeared to be no hope, no amends, no mercy, and no possible redemption at all. It truly was a frightening, frightful image, I can tell you. It literally scared me like hell. Everything around me had crumbled to atoms. And I was not alone in this belief. It was a perspective that was becoming ever more pervasive, but this only made it seem worse, not better. To cite again the words of my fellow poet John Donne:

'Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;
All just supply, and all relation.
Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,
For every man alone thinks he hath got
To be a phoenix, and that then can be
None of that kind, of which he is, but he.

Oh, what weariness, what despair, what bleak disenchantment. One looks inside oneself and all that one can see is ... emptiness. I, who had had such great hopes for humanity, now had all these hopes crushed. 'Is this the promised end?' (Kent in *Lear*, Act 5, Scene 3). Do you remember the words of Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes: 'For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.' Knowledge is inseparable from pain. And just as Ulysses is shipwrecked by a barbarian god for daring to know, so I too felt completely washed up by my attempts to penetrate to the very heart of why evil exists and the consequences of our capacity for evil. I had fooled myself by thinking that seeking out the truth of evil would lead us to the path of goodness. But I had now reached the point where I was convinced that this was a pure illusion. Just as nothing can wash the wind or sweep the sky, so nothing can ever efface evil. I had fallen into the deepest abyss of misery and felt nothing but helplessness.

* * *

And yet, by some miracle, it turned out that all was not quite lost. The spectacle of life is too fascinating and enchanting to give up on it without a fight. There, on the edge of doom and oblivion, in the full face of the tempest, I discovered that there was one realm I could still turn to which could provide me with some comfort, some balance in my life; which could set me personally on the road to recovery and a new state of grace and serenity; which could make unified and harmonious what

had been discordant, and thus restore some faith and hope for humanity. It is the realm of music, and in particular the realm we call 'music of the spheres'. It is here, then, that I have found new vision, new illumination and a feeling of re-birth. And it is here that following the harrowing and painful experiences of the tragic period, I eventually re-emerged with a quiet but reassuring confidence that the mould of Nature will not so easily disintegrate into absolute chaos. Behind the visible reality there is some absolute essence which provides a real sense of cosmic harmony, peace and tranquillity.

In many ways, the importance and significance of music was certainly not a new discovery on my part. Rather, it was a recollection of what had always been a vitally crucial part of my life. Deep down inside me I had always believed that music had the power to unlock the secret of existence, and it certainly had the power to heal a wounded soul and to facilitate a state of reconciliation. Even in the most monstrous of circumstances I had tried to emphasise the potential of music. One recalls, for example, the words of Marcus, spoken shortly after the horror and pathos of Lavinia's torture, in *Titus Andronicus*, one of my very first dramas of evil:

O! had the monster seen those lily hands
Tremble like aspen-leaves upon a lute,
And make the silken strings delight to kiss them,
He would not then have touch'd them for his life;
Or had he heard the heavenly harmony,
Which that sweet tongue hath made,
He would have dropp'd his knife, and fell asleep,
As Cerberus at the Thracian poet's feet.
(Act 2, Scene 5)

And let me remind you as well of the viewpoint that Lorenzo expresses in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted.
(Act 5, Scene 1)

And the healing, reviving, reconciling power of music frequently appears in many subsequent plays; so much so that I would like to think of my work as an echo of the eternal power of music, and perhaps even as a style of writing akin to verbal music.

As I have already indicated, what has helped me in my own 'recovery' over the past few years has been a specific focus on the 'music of the spheres'; that is to say, the essential belief that the world and the universe is made up and harmoniously held together by musical vibrations, impulses, and motions that are woven into the very fabric of the universe and that are essential in making the universe function properly. This harmony is the *musica mundana*, which is mirrored in the human body and soul in the form of *musica humana*; a microcosm of the universe. And once again, one must give thanks and praise to an Italian thinker for giving these ideas a real sense of substance and wider recognition – that thinker being Marsilio Ficino. If I have understood him correctly, the fundamental power of music has a two-fold nature. First, music is composed of air and thus, in its material nature, resembles the physical state of the human spirit. Second, musical sound, perceived by the senses, is animated and hence, like the living, moving nature of the human spirit, it thus

Scene 3

After a short while, the music slowly begins to fade away and as the lights come back on, J.L. (as himself) reappears on stage.

Was that sweet music I heard, or was I just dreaming? How often in recent times I have taken refuge and comfort in listening to music, especially late at night. There are times when I even feel a bit like Caliban from *The Tempest* who senses that the whole world around him is permanently full of music:

Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd,
I cried to dream again.
(Act 3, Scene 2)

Thank you for your patience, by the way. It is most appreciated. The short rest that I have had has done me the world of good, and I am now ready to give my talk. How long have we got left? You know, I have completely lost track of time. What time is it? (*A response is given from someone in the audience*) No, you can't be serious? You mean to tell me that I slept for all that time? How can that possibly be? If it's true, of course, it means that the allocated time for my prepared talk is over. How embarrassing for me. How can I possibly apologise enough for the inconvenience I must have caused you. All I can say is that it's remarkable that you have all stayed here in my absence. How very strange though; I simply have no memory at all of the past hour-and-a-half or so. My recollections are a blank. I must have slept really soundly for that to happen.

Look, as you have been so patient and so kind, if it's possible I promise I will come back on another occasion. I really did want to give my talk and to tell you more about what it has been like possessing someone else's memory. All I will say very quickly is this. If you were to ask me if it has been worth acquiring Shakespeare's memory, then I would have to say, categorically, 'No'. As others have frequently remarked of the famous writer, he really is a hidden enigma, and I don't think that we will ever get close to fully understanding him. Indeed, I'm tempted to say that no one even in his own day fully understood him, and that includes Shakespeare himself. I am reminded of that very astute anecdote about him. 'The story goes that shortly before or after his death, when he found himself in the presence of God, Shakespeare said: « I who have been so many men in vain want to be one man only, myself. » The voice of God answered him out of a [tempest]: « Neither am I what I am. I dreamed the world the way you dreamt your plays, dear Shakespeare. You are one of the shapes of my dreams: like me, you are everything and nothing. »'

In acquiring his memory I thought I was receiving a 'gift', but instead I have received a very heavy burden; one that I am anxious to be rid of. I don't suppose you know of anyone who might like to receive his memory from me, do you? Maybe even one of you here would consider taking it? Oh, go on ... please ...

* * *

Appendix
Shakespeare and the World



Appendix

Shakespeare and the World



The World	England	Shakespeare*
	1483	Coronation of Richard III
	1485	Coronation of Henry VII The end of the War of the Roses
1492		
Christopher Columbus lands in Cuba		
Jews and Moslems expelled from Spain		
1493		
The Pope divides the New World between Spain and Portugal		
1497		
Vasco de Gama sails round the Cape of Good Hope		
1509	1509	
Erasmus publishes <i>In Praise of Folly</i>	Coronation of Henry VIII	
	1516	
	Thomas More publishes <i>Utopia</i>	
1517		
Beginning of the Protestant Reformation		
1519		
The conquest of Mexico by Hernán Cortés		
Death of Leonardo da Vinci		

* All the dates given for Shakespeare's plays are approximations. No one knows for sure when the plays were written and there remains much disagreement about the actual dating of the plays.

- 1525/1535** English translation of the Bible
by Tyndale and Coverdale
- 1531** Henry VIII proclaims himself as the
The Head of the Church of England
- 1532** The conquest of Peru
by Francisco Pizarro
- Il Principe* by Niccolò Machiavelli
- Gargantua et Pantagruel*
by François Rabelais
- 1534** Ignazio de Loyola founds the
'The Companions of Jesus'
(Jesuits)
- La Cortigiana* by
Pietro Aretino
- 1543** *De revolutiōibus orbium
coelestium* by Nicolaus
Copernicus
- 1546** The Scottish Rebellion
- 1552** *Bartolomé de las Casas*
condemns the cruelty meted
out on the indigenous
peoples of the New World
- 1559** Coronation of Elizabeth I
- 1560** Puritanism begins in Europe
- 1564** Death of Michelangelo
Death of Calvin
Birth of Galileo
- 1564** Birth of
Shakespeare
(23 April)
- 1570** Pope Pio V excommunicates
Queen Elizabeth
- The Mayor of London forbids
theatrical performances in the
City
- 1571** Defeat of the Turks in the
naval battle of Lepanto

- 1572** The Night of Saint Bartholomew in Paris
- 1576** James Burbage constructs the first modern theatre in London
- 1577** Drake circumnavigates the world and attacks the Spanish colonies in Peru and Chile
- 1580** *Les Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (Books I & II)
- La Gerusalemme Liberata* by Torquato Tasso
- Spain takes control of Brazil.
- 1586** First performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* of Thomas Kyd
- Tamburlaine the Great* by Christopher Marlowe
- 1587** Beheading of Mary Stuart
- 1588** *De mundi aetherei recentioribus phaenomenis* by Tycho Brahe
- 1588** Destruction of the Spanish Armada
- The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Marlowe
- 1589** Essex attacks Portugal at the Head of the English armada
- 1590/1591** *Henry VI* (Parts 2 & 3)
- 1591/1592** *Henry VI* (Part 1)
- 1592** *The Jew of Malta* and *The Tragedy of Edward II* by Marlowe
- 1592** *Richard III*
- The Comedy of Errors*
- Venus and Adonis* (poem)
- 1593** *The Massacre at Paris* by Marlowe
- 1593/1594** *Titus Andronicus*
- The Taming of the Shrew*
- Murder of Marlowe

			<i>The Rape of Lucrece</i> (poem)
		1594/	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
		1595	<i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>
			<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>
1595	Irish revolt		
1596	Essex and Drake attack Cadiz	1596	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
			<i>Richard II</i>
1597	<i>Essays</i> by Francis Bacon	1596/	<i>King John</i>
	The closure of London theatres and imprisonment of Ben Jonson	1597	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
			<i>Henry IV (Parts 1 & 2)</i>
1598	Opening of the Globe Theatre	1598/	<i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>
		1600	<i>The Sonnets</i>
			<i>Henry V</i>
			<i>Julius Caesar</i>
			<i>As You Like It</i>
			<i>Twelfth Night</i>
			<i>The Phoenix and Turtle</i> (poem)
1600	Giordano Bruno burnt at the stake by the Inquisition	1600	<i>De magnet</i> e by William Gilbert
		1601	Execution of Essex
		1601/	<i>Hamlet</i>
		1602	<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>
			<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
			<i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>

- 1603** Death of Elizabeth I and coronation of James VI of Scotland as King James I
- John Florio's translation of Montaigne's *Essays*
- 1604** *The Honest Whore* by Thomas Decker
- 1603/1604** *Measure for Measure*
- 1605** *L'Ingénieux Hidalgo Don Quichotte de la Manche* by Miguel de Cervantes (Part I)
- 1605** *Volpone* by Ben Jonson
- 1605/1606** *Othello*
- 1606** *King Lear*
- Macbeth*
- 1606** Birth of Pierre Corneille
- 1606/1607** *Antony and Cleopatra*
- 1607** Colony of Jamestown founded
- 1608** *Coriolanus*
- Timon of Athens*
- 1609/1610** *Pericles*
- 1610** *Cymbeline*
- 1610** *Sidereus Nuncius* by Galileo Galilei
- 1610** *The Alchemist* by Jonson
- 1610** The Winter's Tale
- 1611** King James Bible published
- 1611** *The Tempest*
- 1612/1613** *Henry VIII*
- 1613** Fire destroys the Globe Theatre
- 1616** Death of Cervantes
- 1616** *The Devil is an Ass* by Jonson
- 1616** Death of Shakespeare (23 April)
- 1618** The Church condemns the Copernican system
- Start of the Thirty Years War
- 1619** *Fuente Ovejuna* by Lope de Vega
- 1619** First African slaves in Virginia

1622 Birth of Molière

1623 Publication of the first Folio edition of Shakespeare's works

1628 William Harvey discovers the principle of the circulation of blood

1631 *La vida es sueño* by Pedro Calderón

1632 *Dialogo dei massimi sistemi* by Galileo

1633 Galileo reneges on his doctrine in front of the Inquisition

1634 *Le Cid* by Pierre Corneille

Discours de la méthode by René Descartes

Civitas solis by Tommaso Campanella

1639 Birth of Jean Racine

1642 Death of Galileo

Molière founds the *L'illustre Théâtre*

1642 Civil War/Bourgeois Revolution

Birth of Isaac Newton

The Puritans close the theatres

1648 Peace of Westphalia

1649 Execution of Charles I and proclamation of the Commonwealth (Republic) of England