Will in the World

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CHAPTER ONE

Primal Scenes

Let us imagine that Shakespeare found himself from boyhood fascinated by language, obsessed with the magic of words. There is overwhelming evidence for this obsession from his earliest writings, so it is a very safe assumption that it began early, perhaps from the first moment his mother whispered a nursery rhyme in his ear:

Pillycock, pillycock, sate on a hill,
If he's not gone-he sits there still.

(This particular nursery rhyme was rattling around in his brain years later, when he was writing King Lear. "Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill," chants the madman Poor Tom [3.4.73].) He heard things in the sounds of words that others did not hear; he made connections that others did not make; and he was flooded with a pleasure all his own.

This was a love and a pleasure that Elizabethan England could arouse, richly satisfy, and reward, for the culture prized ornate eloquence, cultivated a taste for lavish prose from preachers and politicians, and expected even people of modest accomplishments and sober sensibilities to write poems. In one of his early plays, Love's Labour's Lost, Shakespeare created a ridiculous schoolteacher, Holofernes, whose manner is a parody of a classroom style that most audience members must have found immediately recognizable. Holofernes cannot refer to an apple without adding that it hangs "like a jewel in the ear of caelo, the sky, the welkin, the heaven" and that it drops "on the face of terra, the soil, the land, the earth" (4.2.4-6). He is the comical embodiment of a curriculum that used, as one of its key textbooks, Erasmus's On Copiousness, a book that taught students 150 different ways of saying (in Latin, of course) "Thank you for your letter." If Shakespeare deftly mocked this manic word game, he also exuberantly played it in his own voice and his own language, as when he writes in sonnet 129 that lust "Is perjured,murd'rous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust" (lines 3-4). Concealed somewhere behind this passionate outburst are the many hours a young boy spent in school, compiling long lists of Latin synonyms.

"All men," wrote Queen Elizabeth's tutor, Roger Ascham, "covet to have their children speak Latin." The queen spoke Latin-one of the few women in the realm to have had access to that accomplishment, so crucial for international relations-and so did her diplomats, counselors, theologians, clergymen, physicians, and lawyers. But

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command of the ancient tongue was not limited to those who actually made practical, professional use of it. "All men covet to have their children speak Latin": in the sixteenth century, bricklayers, wool merchants, glovers, prosperous yeomen-people who had no formal education and could not read or write English, let alone Latin-wanted their sons to be masters of the ablative absolute. Latin was culture, civility, upward mobility. It was the language of parental ambition, the universal currency of social desire.

So it was that Will's father and mother wanted their son to have a proper classical education. John Shakespeare himself seems to have had at most only partial literacy: as the holder of important civic offices in Stratford-upon-Avon, he probably knew how to read, but throughout his life he only signed his name with a mark. Judging from the mark she made on legal documents, Mary Shakespeare, the mother of England's greatest writer, also could not write her name, though she too might have acquired some minimal literacy. But, they evidently decided, this would not suffice for their eldest son. The child no doubt began with a "hornbook"- a wooden tablet with the letters and the Paternoster printed on a piece of parchment covered with a thin sheet of transparent horn-and with the standard primary school text, The ABC with the Cathechism. (In The Two Gentlemen of Verona, a lover sighs "like a schoolboy that had lost his ABC"[2.1.19-20].) Thus far he was only acquiring what his father and possibly even his mother may have possessed. But probably starting at age seven, he was sent to the Stratford free grammar school, whose central educational principle was total immersion in Latin.

The school was called the King's New School, but it was not new and it had not been founded by the king who was honored in its name, Elizabeth's short-lived stepbrother Edward VI. Like so many other Elizabethan institutions, this one wore a mask designed to hide origins tainted with Roman Catholicism. Built by the town's Guild of the Holy Cross in the early fifteenth century, it was endowed as a free school by one of its Catholic chaplains in 1482. The schoolhouse-which survives more or less intact-was a single large room above the guildhall, reached by a flight of external stairs that were at one time roofed with tile. There may have been partitions, particularly if an assistant teacher was teaching very young children their ABCs, but most of the students-some forty-two boys, ranging in age from seven to fourteen or fifteen-sat on hard benches facing the schoolmaster, sitting in his large chair at the head of the room.

By statute, the Stratford schoolmaster was not allowed to take money for his instruction from any of the students. He was to teach any male child who qualified-that is, anyone who had learned the rudiments of reading and writing-"be their parents never so poor and the boys never so unapt." For this he received free housing and an annual salary of twenty pounds, a substantial sum at the high end of what Elizabethan schoolmasters could hope to make. The town of Stratford was serious about the education of its children: after the free grammar school there were special scholarships to enable promising students of limited means to attend university. This was not, to be sure, universal free education. Here as everywhere else, girls were excluded from both grammar school and university. The sons of the very poor-a large proportion of the population-also did not go to school, for they were expected to begin work at a young age, and, besides, though there was no fee, there were some

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expenses: students were expected to bring quills for pens, a knife for sharpening the quills, candles in winter, and-an expensive commodity-paper. But for the sons of families of some means, however modest, a rigorous education, centered on the classics, was accessible. Though the Stratford school records from the time do not survive,Will almost certainly attended this school, fulfilling his parents' desire that he learn Latin.

In the summer the school day began at 6 A.M.; in the winter, as a concession to the darkness and the cold, at 7. At 11 came recess for lunch- Will presumably ran home, only three hundred yards or so away-and then instruction began again, continuing until 5:30 or 6. Six days a week; twelve months a year. The curriculum made few concessions to the range of human interests: no English history or literature; no biology, chemistry, or physics; no economics or sociology; only a smattering of arithmetic. There was instruction in the articles of the Christian faith, but that must have seemed all but indistinguishable from the instruction in Latin. And the instruction was not gentle: rote memorization, relentless drills, endless repetition, daily analysis of texts, elaborate exercises in imitation and rhetorical variation, all backed up by the threat of violence.

Everyone understood that Latin learning was inseparable from whipping. One educational theorist of the time speculated that the buttocks were created in order to facilitate the learning of Latin. A good teacher was by definition a strict teacher; pedagogical reputations were made by the vigor of the beatings administered. The practice was timehonored and entrenched: as part of his final examination at Cambridge, a graduate in grammar in the late Middle Ages was required to demonstrate his pedagogical fitness by flogging a dull or recalcitrant boy. Learning Latin in this period was, as a modern scholar has put it, a male puberty rite. Even for an exceptionally apt student, that puberty rite could not have been pleasant. Still, though it doubtless inflicted its measure of both boredom and pain, the King's New School clearly aroused and fed Will's inexhaustible craving for language.

There was another aspect of the very long school day that must have given Will pleasure. Virtually all schoolmasters agreed that one of the best ways to instill good Latin in their students was to have them read and perform ancient plays, especially the comedies of Terence and Plautus. Even the clergyman John Northbrooke, a killjoy who in 1577 published a sour attack on "dicing, dancing, vain plays or interludes with other idle pastimes," conceded that school performances of Latin plays, if suitably expurgated, were acceptable. Northbrooke stressed nervously that the plays had to be performed in the original language, not in English, that the students should not wear beautiful costumes, and, above all, that there should be no "vain and wanton toys of love." For the great danger of these plays, as the Cambridge scholar John Rainolds noted, was that the plot may call for the boy who is playing the hero to kiss the boy who is playing the heroine, and that kiss may be the undoing of both children. For the kiss of a beautiful boy is like the kiss of "certain spiders": "if they do but touch men only with their mouth, they put them to wonderful pain and make them mad."

In fact it is almost impossible to expurgate Terence and Plautus: take out the disobedient children and sly servants, the parasites, tricksters, whores, and foolish

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fathers, the feverish pursuit of sex and money, and you have virtually nothing left. Built into the curriculum, then, was a kind of recurrent theatrical transgression, a comic liberation from the oppressive heaviness of the educational system. To partake fully of the liberation, all you needed, as a student, was a histrionic gift and enough Latin to get the point. By the time he was ten or eleven, and perhaps earlier, Will almost certainly had both.

No surviving records indicate how often the Stratford teachers during Will's school years had the boys perform plays or which plays they assigned. Perhaps there was a time, a year or so before Will left school, when the teacher-Oxford-educated Thomas Jenkins-decided to have the boys perform Plautus's frenetic farce about identical twins, The Two Menaechmuses. And perhaps on this occasion, Jenkins, recognizing that one of his students was precociously gifted as both a writer and an actor, assigned Will Shakespeare a leading role. There is hard evidence from later in his life that Shakespeare loved this particular play's combination of logic and dizzying confusion, the characters constantly just missing the direct encounter and the explanation that would resolve the mounting chaos.When he was a young playwright in London casting about for the plot of a comedy, he simply took over The Two Menaechmuses, added a second set of twins to double the chaos, and wrote The Comedy of Errors.The comedy was a great success: when it was performed at one of London's law schools the students rioted trying to get seats. But for the talented schoolboy in the King's New School, this future triumph would have seemed almost as implausible as the zany events depicted in the play.

In Plautus's opening scene, Menaechmus of Epidamnum squabbles with his wife and then goes off to visit his mistress, the courtesan Erotium (women's parts as well as men's would have been played by the boys in Will's class). Before Menaechmus knocks at her door, it swings open and Erotium herself appears, ravishing his senses: "Eapse eccam exit!" ("Look, she's coming out herself!"). And then in this moment of rapture-the sun is bedimmed, he exclaims, by the radiance of her lovely body-Erotium greets him: "Anime mi, Menaechme, salve!" ("My darling Menaechmus, welcome!").

This is the moment that anxious moralists like Northbrooke and Rainolds most feared and hated: the kiss of the spider boy. "Beautiful boys by kissing," writes Rainolds, "do sting and pour secretly in a kind of poison, the poison of incontinency." It is easy to laugh at this hysteria, but perhaps it is not completely absurd-on some such occasion as this, it is possible that the adolescent Shakespeare felt an intense excitement in which theatrical performance and sexual arousal were braided together.

Long before performances in school,Will may already have discovered that he had a passion for playacting. In 1569, when he was five, his father, as the bailiff-that is, the mayor-of Stratford-upon-Avon, ordered that payments be made to two companies of professional actors, the Queen's Men and the Earl of Worcester's Men, which had come to town on tour. These traveling playing companies would not have been an especially impressive sight: some six to a dozen "strowlers" carrying their costumes and props in a wagon, compelled by circumstances, as one contemporary observer wryly put it, "to travel upon the hard hoof from village to village for cheese and

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butter-milk." In fact the usual rewards would have been slightly more substantial-a pound or two in cold cash, if they were fortunate-but not so great as to make the players turn up their noses at whatever free cheese and buttermilk they could cadge. Yet to most small boys it would all have been unspeakably thrilling.

The arrival in provincial towns generally followed a set pattern.With a flourish of trumpets and the rattle of drums, the players swaggered down the street in their colorful liveries, scarlet cloaks, and crimson velvet caps. They proceeded to the house of the mayor and presented the letters of recommendation, with wax seals, that showed that they were not vagabonds and that a powerful patron protected them. In Stratford in 1569 they would have come to Henley Street, to the boy's own house, and they would have spoken to his father with deference, for it was he who would decide whether they would be sent packing or allowed to post their bills announcing the performances.

The first performance was known as the Mayor's Play, and it was usually free to all comers. Stratford's bailiff would certainly have been expected to attend this, for it was his privilege to determine the level of the reward to be paid out of the city coffers; he would, presumably, have been received with great respect and given one of the best seats in the guildhall, where a special stage had been erected. The excitement of this occasion was not limited to small boys: municipal records in Stratford and elsewhere routinely recorded broken windows and damage to chairs and benches caused by mobs of unruly spectators jostling for a good view.

These were festive events, breaks in the routines of everyday life. The sense of release, always bordering on transgression, was why some stern town officials occasionally turned the players away, particularly in times of dearth, sickness, or disorder, and why the players were not permitted to perform on Sundays or during Lent. But even the most puritanical mayors and aldermen had to think twice about annoying the aristocrats whose liveries the players proudly wore. After all, at the end of each performance in these country towns, the players would kneel down solemnly and ask everyone present to pray with them for their good lord and master- or, in the case of the Queen's Men, for the great Elizabeth herself. Hence, even when they were forbidden from performing, the troupes were often sent off with a gratuity, bribed in effect to go away.

John Shakespeare, the records indicate, did not send the players on their way. He permitted them to play. But would he have taken his fiveyear- old son to see the show? Certainly other fathers did. In his old age, a man named Willis, born the same year as Will, recalled a play (now lost), called The Cradle of Security, that he saw in Gloucester-thirtyeight miles from Stratford-when he was a child. On arriving in town the players, Willis wrote, followed the usual routine: they presented themselves to the mayor, informed him what nobleman's servants they were, and requested a license for performing in public. The mayor granted the license and appointed the company to give their first performance before the aldermen and other officials of the town. "At such a play," Willis remembered, "my father took me with him and made me stand between his legs, as he sat upon one of the benches, where we saw and heard very well." The experience was a remarkably intense one for Willis: "This sight

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took such impression in me," he wrote, "that when I came towards man's estate, it was as fresh in my memory as if I had seen it newly acted."

This is probably as close as it is possible to get to Will's own primal scene of theatricality. When the bailiff walked into the hall, everyone would have greeted him and exchanged words with him; when he took his seat, the crowd would have grown quiet in the expectation that something exciting and pleasurable was about to happen. His son, intelligent, quick, and sensitive, would have stood between his father's legs. For the first time in his life William Shakespeare watched a play.

What was the play that the Queen's Men brought to Stratford in 1569? Records do not show, and perhaps it does not matter. The sheer magic of playing-the fashioning of an imaginary space, the artful impersonations, the elaborate costumes, the flood of heightened language- may have been enough to capture the young boy forever. There was, in any case, more than one occasion for the spell to be cast.Troupes came repeatedly to Stratford-the Earl of Leicester's Men in 1573, for example, when Will was nine years old, the Earl of Warwick's Men and the Earl of Worcester's Men in 1575, when he was eleven-and each time the thrilling effect, initially enhanced by the child's sense of his father's importance and power, may have been renewed and strength- ened, the clever devices stored away as treasured memories.

For his part, Shakespeare's contemporary Willis remembered all his life what he had seen at Gloucester: a king lured away from his sober, pious counselors by three seductive ladies. "In the end they got him to lie down in a cradle upon the stage," he recalled, "where these three ladies, joining in a sweet song, rocked him asleep, that he snorted again; and in the meantime closely conveyed under the cloths wherewithal he was covered, a vizard, like a swine's snout, upon his face, with three wire chains fastened thereunto, the other end whereof being holden severally by those three ladies; who fall to singing again, and then discovered his face, that the spectators might see how they had transformed him." The spectators must have found it very exciting. Some of the older ones probably remembered the swinish face of Henry VIII, and all in the audience knew that it was only under special circumstances that they could publicly share the thought that the monarch was a swine.

Young Will is likely to have seen something similar. The plays in repertory in the 1560s and '70s were for the most part "morality plays," or "moral interludes," secular sermons designed to show the terrible consequences of disobedience, idleness, or dissipation.Typically, a character- an embodied abstraction with a name like Mankind or Youth-turns away from a proper guide such as Honest Recreation or Virtuous Life and begins to spend his time with Ignorance, All-for-Money, or Riot.

Huffa, huffa! Who calleth after me?
I am Riot, full of jollity.
My heart is light as the wind,
And all on riot is my mind.
(The Interlude of Youth)

It is rapidly downhill from here-Riot introduces Youth to his friend Pride; Pride introduces him to his glamorous sister Lechery; Lechery lures him to the tavern-and

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it looks like it will all end badly. Sometimes it does end badly-in the play Willis saw, the king who is transformed into a swine, is later carried away to punishment by wicked spirits-but more typically, something happens to awaken the hero's slumbering con- science just in time. In The Interlude of Youth, Charity, reminding the sinner of Jesus's great gift to him, frees him from the influence of Riot and restores him to the company of Humility. In The Castle of Perseverance, Penance touches Mankind's heart with his lance and saves him from his wicked companions, the Seven Deadly Sins. In Wit and Science, the hero Wit, asleep in the lap of Idleness, is transformed into a fool, complete with cap and bells, but he is saved when he catches sight of himself in a mirror and realizes that he looks "like a very ass!" Only after he is sharply whipped by Shame and taught by a group of strict schoolmasters-Instruction, Study, and Diligence-is Wit restored to his proper appearance and able to celebrate his marriage to Lady Science.

Relentlessly didactic and often clumsily written, morality plays came to seem old-fashioned and crude-any summary of them will make them sound boring-but they were in vogue for a long period of time, extending into Shakespeare's adolescence. Their blend of high-mindedness and exuberant theatrical energy pleased an impressively broad range of spectators, from the unlettered to the most sophisticated. If these plays had little or no interest in psychological particularity or social texture, they often had the canniness of folk wisdom along with a strong current of subversive humor. That humor could take the form of a swine-snouted king, but it more often centered on the stock character known generally as the Vice. This jesting, prattling mischief-maker-bearing in different interludes names such as Riot, Iniquity, Liberty, Idleness, Misrule, Double Device, and even, in one notable instance, Hickscorner-embodied simultaneously the spirit of wickedness and the spirit of fun. The audience knew that he would in the end be defeated and driven, with blows or fireworks, from the stage. But for a time he pranced about, scorning the hicks, insulting the solemn agents of order and piety, playing tricks on the unsuspecting, plotting mischief, and luring the innocent into taverns and whorehouses. The audience loved it.

When Shakespeare sat down to write for the London stage, he drew upon those rather creaky entertainments that must have delighted him as a child. He learned from them to give many of his characters emblematic names: the whores Doll Tearsheet and Jane Nightwork in and the sergeants Snare and Fang in 2 Henry IV, the drunken Sir Toby Belch and the puritanical Malvolio ("ill will") in Twelfth Night. On rare occasions he went further and brought personified abstractions directly onto his stage-Rumour, in a robe painted full of tongues, in 2 Henry IV, and Time, carrying an hourglass, in The Winter's Tale. But for the most part his debt to the morality plays was more indirect and subtle. He absorbed their impact early, and they helped fashion the foundations, largely hidden well beneath the surface, of his writing. That writing builds upon two crucial expectations the morality plays instilled in their audiences: first, the expectation that drama worth seeing would get at something central to human destiny and, second, that it should reach not only a coterie of the educated elite but also the great mass of ordinary people.

Shakespeare also absorbed specific elements of his stagecraft from the moralities. They helped him understand how to focus theatrical attention on his characters'

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psychological, moral, and spiritual life, as well as on their outward behavior. They helped him fashion physical emblems of this inner life, such as the withered arm and hunchback that mark the crookedness of Richard III. They helped him grasp how to construct plays around the struggle for the soul of a protagonist: Prince Hal poised between his sober, anxious, calculating father and the irresponsible, seductive, reckless Falstaff; the deputy Angelo, in Measure for Measure, given the reins of power and put to the test by his master the duke; Othello torn between his faith in the celestial Desdemona and the obscene suggestions of the demonic Iago. And above all, they provided him with a source for a theatrically compelling and subversive figure of wickedness.

The Vice, the great subversive figure of the moralities, was never far from Shakespeare's creative mind.With mingled affection and wariness, Hal refers to Falstaff as "that reverend Vice, that grey Iniquity" (1 Henry IV, 2.5.413); the mordantly funny, malevolent Richard III likens himself to "the formal Vice, Iniquity" (3.1.82); and Hamlet describes his wily, usurping uncle as "a vice of kings" (3.4.88). The word "vice" does not have to be directly invoked for the influence to be apparent: "Honest Iago," for example, with his air of camaraderie, his sly jokes, and his frank avowal of villainy, is heavily indebted to this figure. It is no accident that his diabolical plot against Othello and Desdemona takes the form of a practical joke, an unbearably cruel version of the tricks played by the Vice.

It may seem strange at first that the lovable Falstaff should find himself in the company of cold-hearted murderers like Claudius and Iago. But Shakespeare learned something else essential to his art from the morality plays; he learned that the boundary between comedy and tragedy is surprisingly porous. In figures such as Aaron the Moor (the black villain in Titus Andronicus), Richard III, and the bastard Edmund in King Lear, Shakespeare conjures up a particular kind of thrill he must have first had as a child watching the Vice in plays like The Cradle of Security and The Interlude of Youth: the thrill of fear braided together with transgressive pleasure. The Vice, wickedness personified, is appropriately punished at the end of the play, but for much of the performance he manages to captivate the audience, and the imagination takes a perverse holiday.

The authors of the morality plays thought they could enhance the broad impact they sought to achieve by stripping their characters of all incidental distinguishing traits to get to their essences. They thought their audiences would thereby not be distracted by the irrelevant details of individual identities. Shakespeare grasped that the spectacle of human destiny was, in fact, vastly more compelling when it was attached not to generalized abstractions but to particular named people, people realized with an unprecedented intensity of individuation: not Youth but Prince Hal, not Everyman but Othello.

To achieve this intensity, Shakespeare had as much to free himself from the old morality plays as to adapt them. He felt free to discard many aspects of them altogether and use others in ways their authors could never have imagined. At times he greatly intensified the fear: Iago is immeasurably more disturbing-and more effective-than Envy or Riot. At other times he greatly intensified the laughter: the Vice's trickery and delight in confusion turns up in Puck in A Midsummer Night's

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Dream, but the wickedness has been entirely leached away, leaving only the mischievousness. So too if the ass's head placed on Bottom strikingly recalls the swine's snout placed on the face of the king, the heavy weight of moral instruction has been entirely lifted. Bottom, to be sure, is asinine, but it takes no magical transformation to reveal that fact. Indeed, what is revealed is not so much his folly-he does not have one moment of embarrassment or shame, and his friends do not laugh at him-as his intrepidity. "This is to make an ass of me," the ass-headed Bottom stoutly declares, when his friends have all run away in terror at his appearance, "to fright me, if they could; but I will not stir from this place, do what they can" (3.1.106-8). He is surprised at the Fairy Queen's passionate declaration of love, but he takes it in his stride: "Methinks, mistress, you should have little reason for that. And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays" (3.1.126-28). And he is entirely at ease in his new body: "Methinks I have a great desire to a bottle of hay. Good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow" (4.1.30-31).When the ass's head is finally taken from him, he does not experience a moral awakening; rather, as Puck puts it, he merely peeps at the world once again with his own fool's eyes.

Here, and throughout his career, Shakespeare altogether scrapped the piety that marked the plays he saw in his youth. The underlying structure of those plays was religious. Hence they often climaxed in a moment of vision that signaled the protagonist's redemption, a vision that pointed beyond the everyday and what was familiar to a truth that exceeded mortal understanding. In the words of St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, words deeply familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries from endless repetitions in church, "The eye hath not seen, and the ear hath not heard, neither have entered into the heart of man" those things that God has prepared (1 Corinthians 2:9, from the Bishops' Bible [1568], the version Shakespeare knew and used most often). "I have had a most rare vision," Bottom begins, when he is returned to his human shape. And then, in a series of fits and starts, he tries to recount it:

I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream. Methought I was-there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had-but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. (4.1.199-207).

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