SHAKESPEARE'S EXISTENTIALISM

CHARLOTTE KEYS

Royal Holloway, University of London

PhD Thesis

DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Charlotte Keys

ABSTRACT

This thesis undertakes a fundamental reappraisal of Shakespeare's existentialism. The drama of Shakespeare and existentialist philosophy, I contend, are equally fascinated by issues such as inwardness, authenticity, freedom, and self-becoming. In recent years, Shakespearean criticism has shied away from these fundamental existentialist concerns reflected in his drama, preferring to investigate the historical and cultural conditioning of human subjectivity. However, as this thesis argues, a failure to acknowledge and address the existential problems and intensities at the heart of Shakespeare's plays prevents a full appreciation of both the philosophical and the theatrical dimensions of his drama. This thesis treats Shakespeare as existentialism's prolific precursor, as a writer who experimented with existentialist ideas in his own distinctive theatrical and poetic terms long before they were fully developed in the philosophical and literary terms of the twentieth century.

The introductory chapter of this thesis provides a preliminary sketch of existentialist thought and surveys the influence of existentialism on readings of Shakespeare. This paves the way for the second chapter, which offers a historical account of the inception of existentialist thought in the early modern period. By identifying existentialist concerns and ideas in the work of writers such as Montaigne, Pico, Raleigh, Bacon, Donne and others, I argue that an embryonic form of existentialism was beginning to emerge in the literary, philosophical and religious discourses of the Renaissance. The third chapter suggests that Shakespeare and modern existentialist thinkers share a deep interest in the creative fusion of fiction and philosophy as the most faithful means of articulating the existentialist immediacy of experience and the philosophical quandaries that existence as a human being entails. The subsequent three chapters explore the existentialist predicaments and problems dramatised in three Shakespearean tragedies. My readings trace the broad trajectory of existentialist thought in these plays, firstly by looking at the ontological and subjective concerns of *Hamlet*, then by examining Shakespeare's treatment of ethics in *Coriolanus*, and finally by considering the existential resonance of the politics in *King Lear*.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Royal Holloway for the generous funding provided for my PhD studies and the Arts and Humanities Research Council for awarding me a full scholarship for my Masters degree. I have benefited hugely from the lively and inspiring research environment at Royal Holloway, and I am indebted to a number of academics at the college who have taught me at various points during my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. My supervisor, Kiernan Ryan, has provided tremendous support and encouragement throughout this project. It has been a great privilege to work with him. His patience and invaluable insights have been essential to the completion of this thesis. I would also like to acknowledge my previous supervisor, Ewan Fernie, who provided the initial impetus for this research. I wish to thank my mother, Kristina Keys, my sister, Natalie Keys, and my partner, Joakim von Essen, for their continual kindness and support. A special note of thanks must also go to my father, Stephen Keys. Without his love, understanding and good spirits, this work would not have been possible. This thesis is dedicated to him.

A NOTE ON TEXTS AND REFERENCES

Unless otherwise stated, quotations from *Hamlet* are from the Arden Shakespeare edition by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Thomson Learning, 2006). Quotations from *Coriolanus* are from R. B. Parker's edition in the Oxford Shakespeare series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Quotations from *King Lear* are from *The History of King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), which is based on the Quarto and divides the text into scenes, omitting act divisions. All other quotations from Shakespeare's plays and poetry are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008). All emphases in quotations are original unless otherwise indicated.

CHAPTER ONE

SHAKESPEARE'S EXISTENTIALISM: AN INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare and existentialists share a special philosophical kinship: both are fascinated by how human beings live in the world, how they experience themselves, and how they interact with and respond to other people. Shakespeare's plays – and his tragedies in particular – are full of existentially painful and intense moments. Time and again, Shakespeare shows his interest in complex ontological and existential issues by presenting characters who experience themselves as divided, damaged, and even dissolved. Richard III's syntactically disjointed speech after his nightmare on the eve of battle demonstrates Shakespeare's particular aptitude for dramatising the disintegration of subjectivity:

> Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
> What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.
> Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
> Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.
> Then fly! What, from myself? Great reason. Why?
> Lest I revenge. Myself upon myself?
> Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
> That I myself have done unto myself?
> O no, alas, I rather hate myself
> For hateful deeds committed by myself.
> I am a villain. Yet I lie: I am not.
> Fool, of thyself speak well. (*Richard III*, V.v.135-46)

'Richard loves Richard': the narcissistic embrace of self is a desperate attempt by Richard to repair this internal fracturing and become self-identical, but the tight

rhetorical structure of the speech and the self-estranging use of the third person are literally and figuratively self-defeating. As Eric Langley notes, 'Paradoxically, it is the language of self-assertion or definition that unravels in reflective repetition.'[1] An act of self-identification becomes an act of self-annihilation for Richard. Rather than reaffirming his identity, his oscillations - 'No. Yes, . . . I love myself . . . I rather hate myself . . . I am . . . I am not' - cancel each other out and only succeed in intensifying and exacerbating his traumatic experience of self-loss.

Throughout his work, Shakespeare frequently presents his characters as inwardly divided. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Cressida struggles to come to terms with her fragmented sense of self:

> *Troilus*. What offends you, lady?
> *Cressida*. Sir, mine own company.
> *Troilus*. You cannot shun yourself.
> *Cressida*. Let me go and try.
> I have a kind of self resides with you—
> But an unkind self, that itself will leave
> To be another's fool. (III.ii.132-7)

At such moments, Shakespeare compels his characters to sever their identity, their socially constructed self, from their subjectivity, their internal relationship with their immediate and intuitive sense of self. Linda Charnes suggests that, as a result of this gap between identity and subjectivity, 'the possibility of indeterminacy, of dis-identification, as well as a fantasy of autonomous choice in thought, action, or emotion, becomes thinkable.'[2] In these implicitly philosophical lines, Cressida explains to Troilus that her self is made up of multiple, conflicting selves, which can betray, deceive and mislead each other. As she declares her desire to distance herself from her self or selves, Shakespeare reveals his fascination with the workings of human consciousness. His plays repeatedly ask: what does it mean to have a relationship with your self? What faculty of the human mind makes conscious self-reflection and self-differentiation possible? Similar issues emerge in *The Comedy of Errors*, when Adriana mistakes Antipholus of Syracuse for her husband. She says: 'O how comes it, / That thou art then estrangèd from thyself?— / Thy 'self' I call it, being strange to me / That, undividable, incorporate, / Am better than thy dear self's better part' (II.ii.119-23). As she addresses

[1] Eric Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 20.
[2] Linda Charnes, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 8-9.

her husband's identical twin brother, the product of a literal division of the self, Adriana plays on the idea of being estranged from oneself and from others. There is a strong sense in these lines that Shakespeare is posing fundamental questions about the nature of human subjectivity.

The alienated and unstable subjectivity of Othello is another compelling example of Shakespeare's interest in ruptured interiority. When Lodovico asks, 'Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?', Othello answers: 'That's he that was Othello. Here I am' (V.ii.289-90). It is a strange, disconcerting statement, which suggests that Othello's sense of himself is no longer linked to his social identity. *He* and *I:* Kiernan Ryan argues that 'The entire tragedy is contained in the gulf that divides those two pronouns.'[3] At the end of the play, Othello's social identity dissolves, leaving behind a sense of self, a contingent subjectivity that exists purely in the present moment. His plight reminds us of our own existential vulnerabilities. As Ewan Fernie puts it: 'The way in which the once glorious Othello has turned into an abject and disfigured creature elicits pity and fear in the audience, and the fear is for their own more fragile selves.'[4] Shakespeare implies that, as human beings, we have a delicate and unstable relationship with our selves. We can try to be true to ourselves and live a more authentic life; we can also deceive ourselves and try to evade our existential responsibilities. For Shakespeare, human existence is contentious and problematic. But his plays force us to question what it means to exist as a human being in the world, and this is why so many modern existentialist thinkers have found his work philosophically advanced. In *The Tempest*, when Miranda gazes on the shipwrecked Ferdinand, Prospero instructs her: 'say what thou seest yon' (I.ii.413). Miranda responds not with a statement but with more questions: 'What is't? A spirit?' (I.ii.413). Through Miranda's innocent reply, Shakespeare asks an immensely significant ontological question: 'what is a human being?'[5] For a philosophically inquisitive dramatist such as Shakespeare, basic ontological, epistemological and ethical questions are the building blocks of great drama.

In Shakespearean tragedy, the idea that human beings have an intimate, inward self-experience broadens into a wider consideration of the ethics and politics of human existence. Shakespeare is not only interested in what human beings are, he is also concerned with how they live and interact with one another. His plays do not establish ethical boundaries in a prescriptive or didactic way, but they do imply that ethical limits

[3] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 89.
[4] Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 166.
[5] I am indebted to Ewan Fernie for drawing the implications of this line to my attention.

and feelings of inwardness are connected. After the witches' cryptic predictions, Macbeth remarks in an aside:

> This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
> Why hath it given me earnest of success
> Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
> Against the use of nature? Present fears
> Are less than horrible imaginings.
> My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
> Shakes so my single state of man that function
> Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
> But what is not. (*Macbeth*, I.iii.129-41)

Macbeth's moral deliberation is characterised by the continuous interplay of thinking and feeling. It is experienced phenomenologically, welling-up inside his consciousness. The thought of transgression makes Macbeth's hair stand on end and his heart pound in his chest; he is physically unsettled by the 'horrid' contemplation of breaching the ethical codes that bind him to his community. But the experience is both existentially terrifying and thrilling, because, as Andy Mousley argues, morality in Shakespeare's plays 'cannot be easily externalised. Moral roles aren't merely "roles", but selves or possible selves. These selves come into conflict with other selves, because life in the Shakespearean world is densely complicated.'[6] The existential intensity of human ethics can also be seen when Lear, hovering between lucidity and delirium, is reunited with his daughter:

> *King Lear.* Pray do not mock.
> I am a very foolish, fond old man,
> Fourscore and upward, and to deal plainly,
> I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
> Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
> Yet I am doubtful, for I am mainly ignorant
> What place this is; and all the skill I have
> Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
> Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me,
> For as I am a man, I think this lady

[6] Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 113.

To be my child, Cordelia.

Cordelia. And so I am.

King Lear. Be your tears wet? Yes, faith. I pray, weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause; they have not.

Cordelia. No cause, no cause.

(*King Lear*, xxi.57-73)

Cordelia's 'No cause, no cause' is a heart-breaking reply. In this scene, Shakespeare creates an ethics based on empathy and identification. There is an existentially important understanding between Cordelia and her father, a sudden recognition that they live alongside each other, and are therefore responsible for each other.

Unable to explain fully Shakespeare's persistent curiosity about the nature of human existence, a great deal of criticism of the last twenty years has overlooked the extraordinary existential power of such passages. These moments that punctuate Shakespeare's drama call for a fresh, informed reading of the inward experience of trauma and self-estrangement his tragic protagonists undergo. The philosophical reward of viewing some of Shakespeare's tragedies through the lens of existentialist literature and philosophy is an enhanced appreciation of the existential energy that pulses through the plays and ensures their continuing appeal. Although reading Shakespeare as an existentialist *avant la lettre* and illuminating the existential intensities in Shakespearean tragedy is its primary purpose, this study is also conscious of the fact that Shakespeare's plays had a tremendous influence on the development of existentialist thought. As they were formulating their ideas about human existence, many of these philosophers were immersing themselves in Shakespeare's texts. Jean-Paul Sartre's letters to Simone de Beauvoir reveal that he was deeply engaged with Shakespeare's writing. In a letter dated 20 November 1939, he writes: 'I've read *Troilus and Cressida* again and, you know, liked it less than last time. On the other hand, I'm enchanted by *Anthony and Cleopatra*, a little gem. It's true that the guy is astounding.'[7] A couple of weeks later, after reading *Hamlet* (which he applauds as 'terrific'), he informs Beauvoir that he is about to start reading *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*. One week later, in a letter discussing a recent breakthrough in his thinking, Sartre remarks: 'I've discovered new ideas on liberty, facticity, and motivation and I'm coming up with, God forgive me,

[7] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Witness to my Life: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir 1926-1939*, ed. Simone de Beauvoir and trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992), p. 353.

bold new ideas about human nature.'[8] It is not unreasonable to suggest that his reading of Shakespeare helped him forge these new ideas. Shakespeare's power to provoke an invigorating, renewed confrontation with questions of inwardness and self-understanding is a privileged point of reference in existentialism, and it furnishes a warrant for a critical engagement with both Shakespearean drama and existentialist philosophy.

Before examining the kinds of existential ideas that were emerging in the Renaissance and in Shakespeare's plays, I shall first provide an overview of the main ideas and arguments of existentialism. To approach existentialism in this categorical way is at odds with the movement's characteristic denunciation of systematic thought, but a broad, permissive sketch of important existentialist themes will lay the foundations for further detailed discussion and elaboration in subsequent chapters. I shall then explore how existentialism has influenced Shakespearean criticism and argue that in the recent years, Shakespeare critics have begun to renew existentialism as a critical discourse. This will pave the way for a full investigation of Shakespeare's existentialism.

What is Existentialism?

Defining existentialism has proved an exceptionally problematic task. Some intellectual historians have offered general and often ambiguous definitions of the movement; others have preferred to characterise existentialism as a supple, protean attitude rather than a cohesive school of philosophy. Marjorie Grene pessimistically laments that 'the word is nearly meaningless' because 'nearly every philosopher since Hegel is shown to be in some sense an existentialist.'[9] The struggle to define existentialism is made harder by the fact that many of its key figures resist narrowing their work to a single, clear-cut set of ideas. In the introduction to *Search for a Method,* Sartre declares: 'It is in the nature of an intellectual quest to be undefined. To name it and define it is to wrap it up and tie the knot. What is left? A finished, already outdated mode of culture, something like a brand of soap, in other words, an idea.'[10] Penelope Deutscher regards the 'transformational terms' in Simone de Beauvoir's work as 'an increasingly complex

[8] *Ibid*., p. 416.
[9] Marjorie Grene, *Introduction to Existentialism* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 1-2.
[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Random House, 1968), p. xxxiii.

intersection of accumulated meanings', which are 'constantly challenged, reconsidered and refined.'[11] The same can be said of existentialist thought more generally, as its central terms are always in the process of critical negotiation and re-evaluation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the themes and concepts explored by existentialists are interconnected. Even though many of the figures identified with the movement expressly repudiated the term 'existentialism', there are various overlapping ideas in the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir and Camus. Rather than attempting to wrestle with conflicting definitions of existentialism, it is more helpful for the purposes of this introductory chapter to enumerate the principal philosophical ideas shared by key existentialist thinkers.

'The word existence,' explains Karl Jaspers, 'is one of the synonyms of the word reality, but owing to Kierkegaard it has acquired a new dimension; it has come to designate what I fundamentally mean to myself.'[12] Kierkegaard's most significant contribution to existentialism was his observation that human beings are deeply invested in the experience of existing. For Kierkegaard and the major existentialist thinkers who followed him, philosophical investigations begin with the basic premise that individuals are actively engaged in the processes that shape and constitute their existence. As Heidegger argues, to exist is not simply to be, but to be concerned about oneself; we 'care' about the nature of our existence.[13] This leads existentialists to suggest that human existence is not reducible to an aggregate of definitive essences or instantiated universals. This anti-essentialist view of the human self is crucial for existentialists. Heidegger chooses to hyphenate the word 'ex-ist' in order to bring to light the word's etymological roots and draw attention to the way human beings 'stand out' from their characterising properties. Sartre tells us: 'Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards.'[14] What Sartre suggests here is that an individual has the ability to decide how he or she stands in relation to his or her own life. This idea underpins his famous dictum 'existence precedes essence'.[15] In a similar way, Heidegger's describes *Being and Time* as an

[11] Penelope Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 22.
[12] Karl Jaspers quoted by Jean Wahl, *Philosophies of Existence: An Introduction to the Basic Thought of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre*, trans. F. M. Lory (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 30. These lines are originally from Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard F. Grabau (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), pp. 3-4.
[13] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 1962), p. 235.
[14] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 28.
[15] *Ibid.,* p. 28.

inquiry into the 'being that we ourselves are.'[16] For existentialists, human beings are conscious, sentient, self-creating individuals. Existence is always in a state of flux, constantly being formed through an individual's actions and choices. Existentialists insist on the characterisation of a human being not as an object or thing, but as an event - the unfolding realisation of life as a whole.

Existentialists suggest that there are two elements of human existence: facticity and transcendence. Aspects of facticity – race, class, age, past, body, beliefs, desires, personality traits - are the given, factual dimensions of human existence. They are aspects of a human being that can be viewed from a third-person perspective. Human beings, existentialists claim, have a special, complex relationship to these aspects of their existence. Although an individual can try to adopt an objective stance towards them, that perspective will remain largely subjective, because an individual will always interpret these facts in terms of what they mean to him. He cannot truly view himself as others do, as if he were an object. My facticity belongs to me and my perspective on it contributes to my sense of my unique, distinctive existence. In Sartrean terminology, human consciousness exists 'in-itself' (*en soi*) and 'for-itself' (*pour soi*). In a fundamental sense, consciousness exists: this is what Sartre calls *Being-in-itself*. But a distinctive feature of consciousness is its capacity to separate itself from its determining factors: this is what Sartre calls *Being-for-itself*. As a consequence, consciousness is irreparably divided. Consciousness is not the property of an individual; likewise, there is no inhabitant of consciousness. Instead, it acts as a mental framework that structures our apprehensions of the world. It is the ability of consciousness to reflect on itself that makes choice, decision, action and agency possible.[17]

Although existentialists insist that human beings have the ability to transcend the givens of their existence, they also insist that human lives are always enmeshed in social, historical and cultural situations. There is no sharp, definitive distinction between self and world: they form a tightly woven whole, which Heidegger terms 'Being-in-the-world'.[18] Transcendence allows an individual to formulate projects or position themselves in the world, but these projects are also situated and circumscribed. We can transcend our situations, but we cannot transcend the limits of the world we know. Human consciousness is always situated and embodied. But human beings are not solely the product of their historical and cultural conditioning. They are also capable

[16] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 26.
[17] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
[18] Heidegger, *Being in Time*, p. 65.

of choosing how they respond to the world. Jaspers puts it this way: 'Although my social I is thus imposed upon me, I can still put up an *inner* resistance to it. . . . Although I am in my social I at each moment, I no longer coincide with it. . . . I am not a result of social configurations, for though my social existence determines all of my objective phenomenality, I retain my own original potential.'[19]

Existentialism is popularly associated with the idea of absurdity. It is important to separate existentialist philosophy proper from the fashionable existentialist cultural movement that swept through Western Europe in the wake of the Second World War. The popular image of the existentialist dressed in black and brooding on man's pointless struggle against an irrational and absurd universe is one that must be dispelled. The notions of alienation and absurdity are still important for existentialism, but they must be properly explained and qualified. Existentialists claim that there is no ultimate, transcendent meaning to the world. Human beings create gods, religions, and teleologies because they want to believe the world is ordered and purposeful. According to the existentialists, responsibility for one's life lies entirely with oneself. Although there are religious and Christian forms of existentialism, the major thinkers argue that the world contains meaning only because individuals have projected meaning onto it. This shift towards a more secularised view of human meaning largely came about as a response to the increasing dissatisfaction in Europe with theological constructions of meaning. The question of the human creation of meaning arose as a result of Nietzsche's questioning of the validity of a universal moral code and thus paved the way for the argument that human life is meaningful because man chooses to make it so.

But it is important to note that existentialists are concerned with the absurdity of human choice as well as metaphysical absurdity. Sartre argues that there is no rational basis for choice because all motives, justifications, reasons and desires operate within a chosen world. By this he means that we all choose to exist because we cannot not choose to exist. He writes: 'The choice is absurd because there has never been any possibility of not choosing oneself.'[20] What Sartre means by this is that, paradoxically, freedom is not freely chosen. Instead, 'Man is condemned to be free.'[21] There is no escaping freedom, because to exist is to be freely engaged in the world. Sartre elaborates further: 'Precisely because here we are dealing with *a choice*, this choice as it is made indicates in general other choices as possibles. The possibility . . . is lived in the

[19] Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), vol. 2, p. 30.
[20] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 501.
[21] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 34.

feeling of unjustifiability; and it is this which is expressed by the fact of the *absurdity* of my choice and consequently my being.'[22] The absurd is located in the tension between our serious engagement with the world and the lack of justificatory ground on which this engagement is built. But, as Albert Camus stresses in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, absurdity does not inexorably lead to nihilistic despair.[23] Human beings must strive to overcome the absurdity of existence by choosing to act. Sartre concurs and extends his understanding of the absurd to his understanding of the absurd in Shakespeare. The idea that life is 'a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing' (*Macbeth*, V.v.25-7), Sartre insists, 'should not pass as Shakespeare's final word.'[24]

An individual's capacity for freedom is created by the way their consciousness is structured. For a large part of their existence, human beings are absorbed in the actions, concerns and desires of their everyday life. At these times, consciousness and circumstance are fused together. In Heidegger's terminology, objects and things in the world are encountered as 'ready-to-hand', meaning that human beings naturally think of objects as types of functional equipment. But these objects have another dimension of being: They are also 'present-at-hand'.[25] They can be dissected, inspected and contemplated until they become unfamiliar. The instrumentality of things conceals a deeper dimension of reality. In a state of alienation, the usefulness of the object is no longer taken for granted. When the individual confronts the brute existence of an object or thing, he becomes alienated from the world. A distinctive characteristic of human consciousness, argues Sartre, is that it is capable of 'nihilating' Being. An individual 'causes a world to be discovered' through the negativity he imparts to elements of the world.[26] Sartre uses the example of looking for his friend Pierre in a café and realising that his friend's absence is as real and vivid as the other physical features of the café.[27] This leads him to suggest that there is a nothingness at the heart of human consciousness which allows individuals to doubt, imagine and interrogate things in the world.

Existentialists believe that the phenomenological analysis of moods reveals fundamental aspects of the self. Anguish or angst are the terms existentialists employ to describe how freedom reveals itself to human consciousness. Sartre writes: 'The

[22] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 502.
[23] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005).
[24] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), vol. 4, p. 264.
[25] Heidegger, *Being in Time*, p. 101.
[26] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 48.
[27] *Ibid.,* p. 34.

permanent possibility of non-being, outside us and within, conditions our questions about being.'[28] When consciousness becomes aware of its capacity to nihilate things, to be other than the things that surround it, the individual becomes anguished or angst-ridden. For Heidegger, this experience has an important individualising power. In a state of angst, when the usual meanings of things 'sink away' and objects become unfamiliar, an individual's understanding of himself and the world is challenged. He realises he has the power to shape the significance of his life by taking up the task of existing. An apprehension of death functions in the same way. Sartre writes: 'Death is the limit, but also a constituent of my freedom . . . If a being was endowed with temporal infinity, he could realise all his possibilities . . . he would disappear with respect both to individuality . . . and to freedom'.[29] If an individual's life had no temporal limit, he would be pointlessly free. The finitude of life makes freedom meaningful and possible. Death is also crucially significant for Heidegger. He suggests that there is a deep connection between an apprehension of human finitude and the authenticity of a life. If we fully understand the limits of our existence, we begin to see the importance of taking responsibility for our actions and choices. But angst and the experience of apprehending death, although existentially important, are sources of distress, and thus human beings naturally look for ways to flee from them.

There are various ways in which human beings try to evade their existential responsibilities. Existentialists claim that, in a state of alienation, the sense of man being essential to the construction of the world is lost. This results in the individual using disingenuous ploys to stave off a sense of alienation. They retreat into the world of what Heidegger terms the 'They-Self' and Kierkegaard calls 'the Public'. In this state, the individual recoils from the difficult task of choosing himself and instead leads an inauthentic life. They become absorbed or tranquilized by ready-made belief-systems; they live in 'bad faith', an inauthentic mode of existence that involves self-alienation and self-deception. Bad faith is a response to anguish in the face of freedom. The individual's sense of alienation is exacerbated, according to Sartre, by another facet of human existence: 'being-for-others'.[30] The world is not only revealed to me, but I reveal the world to others. For the most part, human beings unreflectively go about their life absorbed in their first-person perspective. However, when the individual becomes aware that they are being looked at, their existence becomes objectified: their subjectivity

[28] *Ibid*., p. 29.
[29] Jean-Paul Sartre, *A Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), pp. 338-9.
[30] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 246.

becomes part of the world of another. The individual becomes aware that they have an external nature or character that can be objectified or viewed from a third-person perspective. The individual's realisation that another person can access this dimension of their being (which the individual cannot) makes them feel alienated and ashamed.

A crucial term for existentialists is *Eigentlichkeit* or 'authenticity'. Authenticity is best defined as the attitude with which an individual engages in his projects as his own. Existentialists claim that there is a gap between basic existence and the realisation of the responsibility one has for one's existence, which opens up the possibility of creating an authentic self. Authenticity is the way individuals recover from their sense of alienation or anxiety without fleeing into inauthentic modes of being. A resolute commitment to one's life is an explicit self-choice. In *Being and Time,* authentic existence is described as 'anticipatory resoluteness'.[31] An authentic individual is 'anticipatory' because he projects forward towards a final end: death. Whether human beings realise it or not, each individual presses forward in a way that imparts coherence, continuity and cohesiveness to his life. An authentic individual is also 'resolute' because he overcomes his groundlessness and his entanglements in everyday life by becoming his own ground for existing. He takes a stand on his situation and becomes fully committed to his own existence. To be authentic, therefore, requires a degree of transparency with regard to a given situation. Ironically, authenticity is often misrepresented as individualistic self-assertion. For existentialists, this is only a more subtle and inconspicuous form of inauthenticity. The premium placed on self-assertion, independent thought and individual action actually makes an individual's subjection to their They-self even more thorough. Authenticity, on the other hand, means that the individual must take responsibility for a self that he cannot ever be entirely responsible for.

The idea of freedom runs parallel to the idea of authenticity in existentialist thought. Sartre remarks that a man, being free, 'carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders . . . [He] is the only one by whom it happens that *there* is a world; . . . he is also the only one who makes himself'.[32] But it is important to clarify some misconceptions about the existentialist notion of freedom.[33] Firstly, unlike political or social freedom, it cannot be increased or decreased. It is an individual's relationship to his freedom that is susceptible to change rather than the degree to which he is free. Secondly, existential freedom is not manifested in the commission of unmotivated *actes*

[31] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 352.
[32] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 576.
[33] The following clarification of existential freedom is based on David E. Cooper's lucid analysis in *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 153-4.

gratuits. 'Freedom is not the caprice . . . of inclining in this or that direction', writes Heidegger.[34] Instead, it is the very fact that human beings are situated in the world, subjected to things that they cannot control, that makes them free: their facticity is a condition of their freedom. As David Detmer asserts, for Sartre there are two kinds of freedom: ontological freedom and practical freedom.[35] Human beings are ontologically free, because the *for-itself* of consciousness allows them to reconsider their relationship to the world. But their practical freedom is always conditioned and limited by the circumstances in which they find themselves. Heidegger makes a similar distinction when he writes that an individual's freedom is 'released from the illusions of the They', yet remains 'within the limitations of its thrownness.'[36]

In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre offers a broad understanding of his philosophy. He claims that it is a doctrine that 'render[s] human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity.'[37] This is an important starting point for exploring existentialism in detail. More recently, David E. Cooper has offered a succinct summary of the core ideas in existentialist thought:

> Existence . . . is a constant *striving*, a perpetual *choice*, it is marked by a radical *freedom* and *responsibility*; and it is always prey to a sense of *Angst* which reveals that, for the most part, it is lived *inauthentically* and in *bad faith*. And because the character of a human life is never given, existence is *without foundation*; hence it is *abandoned* or *absurd* even.[38]

Like Cooper, I have attempted to outline the main concerns and arguments of existentialism. I have not, however, provided an exhaustive history of the movement. It is important to remember that the perspectives and arguments of existentialists often vary greatly; no two existentialist thinkers are the same. Reflecting on the experience of writing on existentialism, William Barrett commented that 'what had seemed a single branch had already broken out into a cluster', and his aim was to find 'a way through this greater density, in search of the line of development in relation to which each of

[34] Martin Heidegger, 'On the Essence of Truth', in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: Taylor and Francis, 1978), p. 128.
[35] David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), p. 59.
[36] Heidegger, *Being in Time*, p. 417.
[37] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 24.
[38] Cooper, *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, pp. 3-4.

these philosophic shoots has its own grade of relevance.'[39] This is also the way I have approached existentialism. A fuller and more detailed explanation of these key ideas will be offered alongside my analysis of Shakespeare's plays.

Existentialist Readings of Shakespeare - Then and Now

Before looking at how existentialism can be used to produce fresh readings of Shakespeare, it is important to establish how existentialism has influenced readings and critical studies of Shakespeare in the past. There have been two main periods, I contend, when existentialism has been employed as an illuminating critical discourse in Shakespearean criticism. In the post-war years, when existentialism gained notoriety as a flourishing cultural and philosophical movement, there were several studies that sought to investigate the existentialism in Shakespeare's plays. The popularised existentialism of the 1950s and 1960s (which I wish to distinguish from a more strictly philosophical sense of existentialism) filtered into a number of readings of Shakespeare. These 'existentialist' studies, which were often limited and inaccurate, were soon replaced by new lines of enquiry. The new, more historically minded critics were extremely wary of existentialist ideas and vocabulary. However, since the turn of the millennium, Shakespeare critics have started to return to existentialism and explore its concepts in more detail. As the quotations from Fernie, Mousley, Ryan, Charnes and Langley in the opening section of this chapter demonstrate, there has been an effort to produce more existentially sensitive criticism in recent years. In addition to this, critics such as Jonathan Dollimore and Stephen Greenblatt have revised their original suspicions of existentialist ideas and shown a renewed interest in notions such as authenticity, inwardness and freedom. Building on some of these changes in criticism, my thesis brings Shakespeare and existentialism explicitly into dialogue with each other.

After the war, existentialism became an extremely popular philosophical movement. The existentialist agenda chimed with the populist taste for individualism, the anti-establishment backlash, and the increasing interest in counter-cultural movements. The word 'existentialism' became an item of casual everyday parlance. However, this sudden mainstream popularity often meant that existentialism's

[39] William Barrett, 'What is Existentialism?', in *The Development and Meaning of Twentieth-Century Existentialism*, ed. William McBride (New York and London: Garland, 1997), p. 10.

philosophical concerns were either overlooked or wilfully misconstrued. It became thought of as a gloomy, morbid philosophy that stressed the impossibility of a human situation immune to sin, failure, flux and death. Existentialism's sudden rise to fame impeded and undermined its philosophical merits. It became strangely and paradoxically characterised as an ahistorical, essentialist, humanistic, amoral and absurdist form of philosophy. As I shall show, this kind of existentialism became evident in readings of Shakespeare.

In 1959, Walter Kaufmann published *From Shakespeare to Existentialism: An Original Study*.[40] It was the first study to explicitly acknowledge a philosophical affinity between its two subjects. However, the title is misleading, as the book is not a history of existentialist ideas originating from Shakespeare. Kaufmann's study is compromised by a hazy, general understanding of existentialism, which he refers to elsewhere as 'a timeless sensibility that can be discerned here and there in the past'.[41] He identifies two principal existentialist aspects of Shakespeare's drama and poetry: the existentialist (rather than psychologically realistic) construction of character, and the existentialist 'world view' that there are no metaphysical reasons that explain human existence. He claims that Shakespeare 'knew the view that man is thrown into the world, abandoned to a life that ends in death; but he also knew self-sufficiency. He had the strength to face reality without excuses and illusions and did not even seek comfort in the faith in immortality.'[42] Rather than showing the powerful existential intensities at the core of Shakespearean drama, Kaufmann makes vague, pop-existentialist remarks to disprove Christian interpretations of the plays. He repeatedly refers to the opening two lines of Shakespeare's ninety-fourth sonnet: 'They that have power to hurt and will do none, / That do not do the thing they most do show'. For Kaufmann, the sonnet is an earlier articulation of Nietzsche's idea of the *Übermensch*. In a review of the study, Hazel Barnes observes how Kaufmann singles out in Shakespeare's work 'the self-contained, self-sufficient man, one who lives and dies for himself and who helps humanity only by making himself a monument of moral perfection.'[43] Kaufmann suggests that Shakespeare is an existentialist because he is Nietzsche's great precursor. Although there may be some critical mileage in this argument, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism* falls short as a full study of Shakespeare's existential concerns.

---

[40] Walter Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism: An Original Study* **(**Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 3.

[41] Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre,* trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 12.

[42] Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, p. 3.

[43] Hazel E. Barnes, 'Walter Kaufmann's New Piety', *Chicago Review*, 13:3 (1959), p. 91.

Jan Kott's book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (first published 1964) also offers an inadequate and insubstantial analysis of Shakespeare's existentialist vision. Kott associates existentialism with absurdism and nihilism. He reads *King Lear* as a colossal tragic drama of the absurd and argues that the play is akin to Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. He concludes that in both these plays man is 'A nobody who suffers, tries to give his suffering a meaning or nobility, who revolts or accepts his suffering, and who must die'.[44] Like Gloucester's conclusion that 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods, / They kill us for their sport' (xv.35-6), Kott claims that Shakespeare's tragedy epitomises man's sad struggle in an absurd and meaningless universe. But Kiernan Ryan notes that in *King Lear* Gloucester's world view 'is ironically framed and deliberately disqualified within the tragedy. It is demolished not only by Edmund's caustic parody of his father's philosophy, but also by the whole play's confirmation that its calamities stem from the fact "that men / Are as the time is" rather than as nature or the gods direct.'[45] In sharp contrast to Kott, existentialists such as Sartre and Heidegger would agree with Shakespeare's view of human existence as historically situated. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, arguments that followed a line similar to Kott's were mounted in a number of journal articles. In '*Hamlet* and Absurd Freedom' Eric R. Boyer reads Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* as an existentialist critique of *Hamlet*.[46] Anne Paolucci argued that the existential dilemmas in Shakespearean tragedy are identical to those found in the theatre of the absurd.[47] Robert G. Collmer's essay 'An Existentialist Approach to *Macbeth*' concludes that Shakespeare's 'treatment of Macbeth is curiously similar in major emphases to the diagnosis of the human predicament offered by modern existentialism.'[48] Not only do these critics misconceive existentialism as a philosophy of the absurd, they also appropriate Shakespeare anachronistically as a fully-fledged existentialist philosopher.

Kaufmann's and Kott's studies were followed in 1965 by David Horowitz's *Shakespeare: An Existential View*. Horowitz describes his study as an investigation into Shakespeare's portrayal of 'the relation between human vision and human realisation, the relation between the mode in which men see reality and the manner in which they

---

[44] Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1974), p. 155.
[45] Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 96.
[46] Eric R. Boyer, '*Hamlet* and Absurd Freedom: *The Myth of Sisyphus* as Commentary on Shakespeare's Creation', *Ball State University Forum* 16:3 (1975), 54-66.
[47] Anne Paolucci, 'Shakespeare and the Genius of the Absurd', *Comparative Drama*, 7 (1973), 231-46.
[48] Robert G. Collmer, 'An Existentialist Approach to *Macbeth*', *Person*, 44 (1960), p. 484.

live it.'[49] However, Horowitz explains that the term 'existential' is used broadly in his study to denote 'simply a view that proves itself in the reality of lived existence, not in the principles of metaphysical or theological discourse'.[50] He does not approach Shakespeare in explicitly existentialist terms. Instead, he begins his study with a general sense that Shakespeare offers a positive portrayal of human existence. Surprisingly, the major tragedies receive little attention from Horowitz. Like many of the 'existential' readings of Shakespeare that surfaced during the post-war years, Horowitz's study is full of quasi-existentialist remarks that are neither polemical nor particularly revealing. He argues that Lear learns on the heath that 'he is nothing, and will return to nothing' and that the only aspect of life that can redeem him is the love of his daughter.[51] James V. Baker makes a similar assessment of the existentialism in *King Lear*, arguing that the play shows how man must forge his own values 'before death cuts him short.'[52]

In 1967, Northrop Frye published *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, in which he argues that existentialist ideas lie at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision. He argues that

> the conceptions that existential thinkers have tried to struggle with, care, dread, nausea, absurdity, authenticity, and the like, are all relevant to the theory of tragedy. Tragedy is also existential in a broader, and perhaps contradictory, sense, in that the experience of the tragic cannot be moralized or contained within any conceptual world-view.[53]

Frye claims that in tragedy 'the hero is an individual, but being so great an individual he seems constantly on the point of being swept into titanic forces he cannot control.'[54] He points to dying Hotspur's last remark, 'Thoughts, the slaves of life, and life, time's fool' (*Henry IV Part I*, V.iv.80), as a moment that is both existential and tragic. It is an example in Shakespeare's drama, Frye claims, when the magnitude of human existence exceeds any philosophical system or theory. *Fools of Time* follows in the tradition of twentieth-century humanist Shakespearean criticism. Like A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, which celebrates Shakespeare's all-too-human tragic heroes,[55]

---

[49] David Horowitz, *Shakespeare and Existentialism* (London: Tavistock, 1965), p. xii.
[50] *Ibid*., p. xi.
[51] *Ibid*., p. 127.
[52] James V. Baker, 'An Existential Examination of *King Lear*', *College English*, 23:7 (1962), p. 550.
[53] Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 4.
[54] *Ibid*., p. 5.
[55] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 3rd edn (1904; Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1992).

and *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, in which Harold C. Goddard suggests that 'Shakespeare is like life. There are almost as many ways of taking him as there are ways of living',[56] Frye locates a powerful existential significance at the heart of Shakespeare's plays. However, Frye's commentary does not actively engage with specific existentialist ideas and concepts. Like other existentialist studies of Shakespeare from this period, Frye's study is weakened by an oversimplification and misunderstanding of fundamental philosophical ideas.

There are a few other studies and articles from the 1960s and 1970s that are worth mentioning briefly. Charlotte N. Clay's book, *The Role of Anxiety in English Tragedy*, devotes two chapters to the existential concept of anxiety in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.[57] In his 1974 essay on *The Tempest* entitled 'Shakespeare's Existential Comedy', Mike Frank finds the same inherently meaningless and absurd world that other critics at the time were identifying in the tragedies. He writes: 'there is no external order to which man must commit himself; there is simply an indifferent and impersonal nature which will follow its own imperative regardless of what man does.'[58] *The Tempest* presents a world, Frank argues, that is 'very much like that of modern existentialism.'[59] In her 1967 essay Joyce Carol Oates traces a number of important existential features in *Troilus and Cressida* and concludes that 'What is so modern about the play is its existential insistence upon the complete inability of man to transcend his own fate.'[60]

As a theoretical and philosophical discourse, existentialism initially emerged and was then superseded by other lines of enquiry. In the 1980s and 1990s its influence was less palpable in Shakespearean criticism. With many scholars preferring to investigate the cultural and historical conditioning of subjectivity, existentialist terms such as authenticity, freedom, self-becoming, angst, alienation and inwardness became unfashionable. However, there is evidence that existentialism is becoming visible again in Shakespearean studies. In *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity*, Mousley argues that Shakespeare has an 'inordinate ability to intensify the "existential significance" of otherwise abstract ideas and precepts through human

[56] Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 1.
[57] Charlotte N. Clay, *The Role of Anxiety in English Tragedy: 1580-1642* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1974).
[58] Mike Frank, 'Shakespeare's Existential Comedy', in *Caliban*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1992), p. 114.
[59] *Ibid*., p. 114.
[60] Joyce Carol Oates, 'Essence and Existence in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*', in *Troilus and Cressida: A Casebook*, ed. Priscilla Martin (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), p. 169.

embodiment.'[61] He also underlines the importance of the idea of authenticity in Shakespeare's plays. He writes: '[Shakespeare] gives us cause to question which way of living might be a more or less authentic expression of what it is to be human.'[62] Mousley offers a compelling reading of Shakespeare's fascination with embodied existence. He recognises a resurgence of what he calls 'literary humanism' in criticism and theory. 'Literary humanism', Mousley explains, is not the traditional, ahistorical, essentialist humanism so often associated with the Renaissance, but a broader and deeper notion that focuses on the ethically charged question 'how to live'.[63] The strength of this approach is that it acknowledges that skeptical, critical questioning must be integrated with an awareness of the way Shakespeare's plays encourage personal and passionate engagement with the world. Mousley's central concern with the crucial issue of 'how to live' in his study makes existentialism and existential ideas relevant and significant once again. In his rereading of the humanist tradition, he challenges the anti-humanists' critique of essentialism, arguing that 'the principle of freedom can be extended to mean freedom from *all* determination, which recognises no such thing as a pre-defining human essence. Rather than being "pre-made", we make ourselves in the manner of Jean-Paul Sartre.'[64] Although he does not explicitly invoke specific existentialist theories, Mousley's reconsideration of Shakespeare's existential intensities is an important starting point for this thesis.

Mousley's study has in many ways paved the way for other existentially attuned studies of Shakespeare. In *Shakespeare's Individualism*, Peter Holbrook reads Shakespeare 'as an author for a liberal culture of self-realization.'[65] Holbrook is aware of the way Shakespeare problematises and polemicises this deceptively simple notion, and his study reveals that questions such as 'what actually constitutes an authentic self?', 'what does human freedom really mean?' and 'how does self-realisation relate to human ethics?' were pertinent to the cultural climate of Renaissance England. Holbrook is drawn to Heidegger's interest in how human beings always retain 'a *potentiality* for deciding what it wants to do and what it wants to be.'[66] He continues: 'This projective not-yet dimension to human - only human - life, the ability to commit oneself to a specific identity . . . is an ineradicable part of our human reality.'[67] This is a central

[61] Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, p. 10.
[62] *Ibid*., p. 10.
[63] *Ibid*., p. 21.
[64] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[65] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 234.
[66] *Ibid*., p. 235.
[67] *Ibid*., p. 235.

concern in Shakespeare's drama. 'What I was, I am, / More straining on for plucking back, not following / My leash unwillingly' (*The Winter's Tale*, IV.iv.453-5): Holbrook points to Florizel's constancy and determination to remain true to himself in *The Winter's Tale* as a prime example of authentically liberating human passion in Shakespeare's plays. Following Charles Taylor's seminal work, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Holbrook notes that notions of individual authenticity and self-realisation are as pervasive in our culture as they were in Shakespeare's, and philosophers from both our time and his worried about the moral complexity and ambiguity of human individualism. Throughout his study, Holbrook flirts with existentialism, frequently resorting to key passages from Nietzsche, Heidegger and Kierkegaard to elaborate his argument, but he never explicitly invokes existentialism.

Ewan Fernie also makes important existentialist questions central to his essay 'Terrible Action: Recent Criticism and Questions of Agency'. He reads Shakespearean action 'in broadly existentialist terms, whereby character is the effect of action, not its origin'.[68] The immediate advantage of this strategy is that it produces a kind of critical engagement that complements the energy and intensity of the plays themselves. The action in Shakespeare's plays, Fernie tells us, 'is thrilling and frightening because it is defining, and potentially not just of character, but of the whole theatrical mise-en-scène in which it takes place.'[69] Fernie's essay surveys the theories and arguments surrounding the contentious subject of human agency. He argues that some new historicist and cultural materialist criticism has produced a weak and impoverished understanding of personal agency, which is entirely at odds with Shakespeare's fascination with the subjective, ethical, theatrical and existential implications of action. Fernie claims that Shakespearean criticism is only beginning to grapple with the fresh, existentially sensitive reconsiderations of human agency offered by thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Alan Liu and Jacques Derrida. This essay was followed a few years later by *Shakespeare and Moral Agency*, a collection of essays which investigate the relationship between action and moral existence in Shakespeare.[70]

Julia Reinhard Lupton's study, *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life*, also looks seriously at the existential resonance of Shakespeare's work. She explains that she is attracted to what the plays have to say about human life, writing: 'I take *life* as that which names the existential and phenomenological interests of the

[68] Ewan Fernie, 'Terrible Action: Recent Criticism and Questions of Agency', *Shakespeare*, 2:1 (2006), p. 95.
[69] *Ibid*., p. 95.
[70] Michael D. Bristol (ed.), *Shakespeare and Moral Agency* (London: Continuum, 2010).

plays; I am interested, that is, in the extent to which Shakespeare's plays examine through their presentational medium as well as their plots and themes the ways in which human beings appear as human to themselves and others, in tandem with other life forms.'[71] Although she focuses on the 'biopolitical and theopolitical themes in Shakespeare' by drawing on the work of Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben, she treats Arendt as an 'existentialist and a phenomenologist.'[72] She clarifies her approach, explaining that: 'By existentialism I mean a philosophy oriented around human being in the trembling vulnerability of our multiple dependencies on each other and our permanent exposure to the scars, mutation and new births delivered by the slings and arrows of our signifying practices.'[73]

In some of his recent work, Jonathan Dollimore provocatively criticises some new historicist research for overlooking crucial existential concerns. Although experiences such as death differ according to their cultural or historical context, claims Dollimore, 'the agreeable truth (diversity and difference) is used to evade the less agreeable (the anguish of mortality).'[74] In its anti-essentialist revolt against the notion of an unalterable 'human condition', historicism has also dodged some of the most basic and ineradicable concerns of human existence. Fernie concurs with Dollimore: 'For all its savvy transcendence of a tweedier past', he writes, new historicism is 'frightened of life.'[75] It is not only Renaissance scholars who are making such observations. In his discussion of new historicism and medieval literature, Lee Patterson underlines the importance of human action and experience, and suggests: 'The self may well be made, but it is also self-made.'[76]

In his introduction to the third edition of *Radical Tragedy*, Dollimore describes his newfound respect for the ethically charged 'high humanism' of Herman Hesse.[77] For Dollimore, there is something powerful and illuminating in humanism's direct confrontation with the contradictions and antinomies of human existence. In a redeploying of Nietzsche's dialectic of the Apollonian and Dionysian intensities of

---

[71] Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 8.
[72] *Ibid*., pp. 8, 14.
[73] *Ibid*, p. 14.
[74] Jonathan Dollimore, Afterword to *Spiritual Shakespeares*, ed. Ewan Fernie (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 213.
[75] Ewan Fernie, 'Dollimore's Challenge', *Shakespeare Studies*, 35 (2007), p. 142.
[76] Lee Patterson, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, Wisconsin and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 74.
[77] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. xiv.

human life, Dollimore sees human beings as conflicted by their desire for both civilised order and transgressive action. He celebrates the power of desire to produce 'the shattering of the self into a vulnerable, receptive authenticity.'[78] Following Nietzsche, Dollimore insists that, 'we are most ourselves when we are in this destructive, dangerous and suffering state of freedom, violating the restraints of the very history which has produced us.'[79] It is surprising to see Dollimore, a staunchly materialist and anti-humanist critic, suggest that an existentially alert criticism attuned to the dynamics of human existence may better illuminate the interdependence of historical influence and human agency in Shakespearean drama. But as Fernie notes, 'One massive gain in Dollimore's recent work is that it enables him to write directly about Shakespeare's major characters and with an existential inwardness that is at one with the terrible appeal and force of the plays themselves.'[80]

It can be argued that popular lines of critical investigation have made us blind to existentialism and its influence on contemporary thought. The dominant turn towards historicism and the workings of cultural production in Shakespearean studies has left literary criticism's connection to an existential heritage unexamined and suppressed. This is nowhere more evident than in the work of Stephen Greenblatt. Greenblatt's grim concluding remarks to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* have come to stand as the definitive overture of new historicism:

> In all my texts and documents, there were, so far as I could tell, no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity; indeed, the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society . . . I found not an epiphany of identity freely chosen but a cultural artefact.[81]

Greenblatt's provocative suggestion that subjectivity is little more than the product of the intersection of historical and cultural forces, and that literature is condemned in spite of itself to prop up the social and political status quo, has been hotly debated since the publication of these words. Greenblatt found that his investigations led him to shift the critical focus from the idea of self-constructed subjectivity to the larger processes of social power. However, existentialist ideas have continued to shape and inform his criticism even as he has tried to discard them. In the preface to the 2005 edition of

[78] Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 105.
[79] Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. xxxi.
[80] Fernie, 'Dollimore's Challenge', p. 148.
[81] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1980), p. 256.

Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Greenblatt describes Foucault's influence on his thoughts and ideas. Foucault's position was

> that the innermost experiences of the individual – the feelings that lurk in the darkness – were not a kind of raw material subsequently worked on by social forces. Rather, they were called into being and shaped by the institution that claimed only to police them. The experiences were not, for that reason, inauthentic; rather, he argued, the very conviction of authenticity was something that the institution, with its doctrines, its hierarchies, its cultural arrangements, its procedures, its conception of periodicity and discursive adequacy, made possible.[82]

Greenblatt speaks of 'the innermost experiences of the individual', 'the feelings that lurk in the darkness' and 'the very conviction of authenticity'. By adopting the distinctive language and vocabulary of existentialist philosophy, he inadvertently exposes the difficulty of suppressing these concerns. Paul Stevens senses in Greenblatt's revisions, later works and autobiographical anecdotes the formative influence of the existentialism of the 1960s. He finds that his criticism,

> even at its most innovative or at its most postmodern, exemplifies the persistence of modernism, that the intellectual imperative at the heart of his work is largely determined by the legacy of popular existentialism. His obsessive struggle with identity, whether explicit in his profoundly moving analyses of figures like Thomas More or implicit in his own self-dramatizing and telltale acts of name-dropping, does much to explain the breadth of his influence. The issues raised by existentialism are alive and well.[83]

Greenblatt's resistance to existentialist ideas paradoxically reveals their continuing importance for current Shakespearean criticism. His investigation develops from the existentialist dialectic between being and nothingness, claims Stevens. In his conclusion to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt writes: 'In our culture to abandon self-fashioning is to abandon the craving for freedom, and to let go of one's stubborn hold upon selfhood, even selfhood conceived as a fiction, is to die.'[84] As Francis Barker sums up, Greenblatt concludes 'with the ambiguities and ambivalences in his representation of the relation between autonomy and determination intact.'[85]

---

[82] *Ibid*., p. xv.

[83] Paul Stevens, 'Pretending to be Real: Stephen Greenblatt and the Legacy of Popular Existentialism', *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 33: 3 (2002), p. 512.

[84] Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 257.

[85] Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 153.

Greenblatt's seminal work is not a radical departure from existentialist concepts of human subjectivity: it is the continuation of the same crucial concerns in a different critical register.

Greenblatt's position with regard to the problematic issue of human agency has also wavered in recent years. 'Human actions', he writes in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 'must constantly be referred to an inner state that must, nonetheless, be experienced as the irresistible operation of a force outside the self, indeed alien to the self.'[86] As Fernie notes, 'Greenblatt often seems driven to frustrate and deny the very agency he invokes.'[87] In *Learning to Curse*, Greenblatt champions a new, existentially resonant commitment to human agency by claiming that 'even inaction or extreme marginality is understood to possess meaning and therefore to imply intention.'[88] His new insistence on the 'virtually inescapable' nature of agency is, of course, tempered by an acknowledgement of the inherent ambiguity of human actions: 'A gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimation process, while an attempt to stabilize the order of things may turn out to subvert it.'[89] Greenblatt's fluctuating view on human agency is symptomatic of his deeper concern with the potential individuals have to change the world they live in. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that throughout his latest study, *Shakespeare's Freedom*, Greenblatt invokes many fundamental existentialist ideas. He begins by asserting that 'Shakespeare . . . is the embodiment of human freedom', but adds that 'he is also a figure of limits.'[90] He clarifies his position by suggesting that 'These limits served as the enabling condition of his particular freedom.'[91] This is almost identical to Sartre's paradoxical claim that human beings are free by necessity, liberated because they are constrained by their worldly existence. Greenblatt highlights the imprisoned yet defiant Barnardine in *Measure for Measure* as the epitome of human freedom. He writes: 'Radical individuation - the singularity of the person who fails or refuses to match the dominant cultural expression and thus is marked as irremediably different - is suggestively present throughout the plays.'[92]

---

[86] *Ibid*., p. 111.
[87] Fernie, 'Terrible Action', p. 99.
[88] Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 164.
[89] *Ibid*., p. 164.
[90] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), p. 1.
[91] *Ibid*., p. 1.
[92] *Ibid*., p. 15.

With the existential concepts in Greenblatt's work becoming apparent and the disapproval expressed by some critics of 'dehumanised history',[93] existentialism is making its presence felt again in Shakespearean studies. Several other critics have also examined Shakespeare's plays explicitly through an existentialist lens. Richard A. Andretta's essay 'Is Iago an Atheistic Existentialist?' advocates an interpretation of Iago based on Sartre's atheistic existentialism.[94] In a recent article, Simon Palfrey traces Macbeth's presence in Kierkegaard's work.[95] Reading *Macbeth* and Kierkegaard as 'mutual illuminators', he examines how Shakespearean and Kierkegaardian notions of inwardness overlap. In a similar way, Michael G. Bielmeier offers a Kierkegaardian reading of *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* in *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard and Existential Tragedy.*[96] Some critics have isolated key moments in Shakespeare's plays that seem to be anticipating existentialist ideas. In an essay on the anticipation of Sartre's existentialist ethics in *Macbeth*, John F. Hennedy argues that Macduff's morally ambiguous decision to leave his family unprotected while he solicits political support from England dramatises the ethical ultimacy of human choice.[97] Macduff's dilemma, Hennedy claims, is not dissimilar to Sartre's recollection of a young student who felt compelled to choose between joining the resistance and staying at home to comfort his recently bereaved mother. Another interesting recent example of the revival of existentialism by Shakespearean critics is Asloob Ahmad Ansari's *The Existential Dramaturgy of William Shakespeare*.[98] The book contains several essays that were published between 1981 and 1999, and focuses predominantly on the relationship between Shakespeare's plays and the work of the German existentialist Karl Jaspers. Although many of Ansari's conclusions are anachronistically phrased,[99]

[93] Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, p. 6.

[94] Richard A. Andretta, 'Is Iago an Atheistic Existentialist?', *Arab Journal for the Humanities*, 58 (1997), 360-81.

[95] Simon Palfrey, 'Macbeth and Kierkegaard', *Shakespeare Survey*, 57 (2004), 96-111. For other Kierkegaardian readings of Shakespeare's plays see King-Kok Cheung, 'Shakespeare and Kierkegaard: Dread in *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35:4 (1984), 430-9 and William E. Bennett, 'Shakespeare's Iago: The Kierkegaardian Aesthete', *Upstart Crow*, 5 (1984), 156-9.

[96] Michael G. Bielmeier, *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard and Existential Tragedy* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

[97] John F. Hennedy, 'Macduff's Dilemma: Anticipation of Existentialist Ethics in *Macbeth*', *Upstart Crow*, 18 (1998), 110-7.

[98] Asloob Ahmad Ansari, *The Existential Dramaturgy of William Shakespeare: Character Created Through Crisis* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).

[99] In the opening paragraph of a chapter entitled 'Shakespeare's Existential Tragedy', Ansari suggests that Hamlet is 'acutely aware of the radical duality between the in-itself and its nihiliation in [the] for-itself and therefore of the ontological necessity of making a choice, thereby undergoing the experience of the anguish of freedom' (p. 69).

his overarching argument that Shakespeare was fascinated by 'the concreteness of lived experience'[100] certainly carries weight.

The turn by some Shakespearean critics towards overtly existentialist ideas mirrors some theorists' and philosophers' revived interest in such issues. In an interview, Jacques Derrida concedes that although he did initially attempt to distance his work from existentialist conceptions of existence, he has always endeavoured to maintain an existential intensity in his work. He writes: 'My intention was certainly not to draw away from the concern for existence itself, from concrete personal commitment, or from the existential pathos that, in a sense, I have never lost. . . . In some ways, a philosopher without the ethico-existential pathos does not interest me very much.'[101] In his later work, Derrida draws directly on Kierkegaard's writings on the opaque and absurd nature of 'the decision'.[102] In 'Force of law' Derrida speaks of 'freedom', 'intentionality' and 'a sense of responsibility without limits', all of which are fundamentally existentialist notions.[103] Michel Foucault's *The Care of the Self* shifts the emphasis from the productivity of power and the mechanisms of subjection to theories of self-constitution. In doing so, he reveals his interest in what R. Schürmann calls 'practical subjectivity'.[104] Of course, Foucault still focuses on the historical constitution of the subject, but he recasts his study in quasi-existentialist terms. Foucault sees individuals as constituted and constituting entities and he analyses the 'forms and modalities of the relation to self [*rapport à soi*] by which the individual constitutes and recognises himself *qua* subject.'[105] The emphasis on self-constitution and the particular ways in which individuals experience themselves is what Foucault describes as an 'exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform oneself and to attain a certain mode of being.'[106] In a recent article, Jürgen Habermas, whose philosophy is openly opposed to the notion of monological subjectivity, enlists Kierkegaard's ethical insights and denounces philosophy's tendency to 'withdraw to the meta-level of an inquiry' instead of 'taking a stand on precisely those issues that are

[100] *Ibid*., p. 1.
[101] Jacques Derrida, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 40.
[102] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).
[103] Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Grey Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 19-20.
[104] R. Schürmann, 'On Constituting Oneself as an Anarchistic Subject', *Praxis International,* 6:3 (1986), 294-310.
[105] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 5-6.
[106] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 113.

most relevant to our personal and communal lives.'[107] As Derrida, Foucault and Habermas confirm, existentialist ideas continue to have critical currency, and their work buttresses Amanda Anderson's claims that 'contemporary theory is already pursuing a less constrained understanding of first-person experience (singular and plural), one which finds expression in ways that consistently exceed the sociological grid.'[108]

Before turning towards an examination of early modern existential ideas, it is worth pausing briefly over one other existentially focused study of Shakespeare. Jagannath Chakrevorty's book *King Lear: Shakespeare's Existentialist Hero* is useful because it highlights the pitfalls of bringing the terminology of a twentieth century philosophy to bear on Shakespeare's plays. Like Ansari's study, Chakrevorty's analysis is anachronistic and her study shows little concern for the dangers of transhistorical assumptions. Her criticism assumes that Shakespeare was already familiar with advanced existentialist ideas. In her introduction, she writes: 'To argue that Shakespeare had not read Sartre is as futile as to argue that Sophocles had not read Freud.'[109] Furthermore, the study is careless and philosophically inaccurate. Chakrevorty's main argument is that 'King Lear, so long immersed in Bad Faith, awakens to the consciousness of freedom and decides to assert it.'[110] Forcing existentialism onto Shakespeare's plays in this way produces reductive and over-simplified criticism, and Chakrevorty's study reveals the dangers of disregarding historical difference. To read Shakespeare through the lens of existentialism, we must heed Palfrey's advice: 'If we want to traverse such cross-cultural turf, we need to do so tenderly, with due attention both to shifting terrain and our own steps upon it.'[111]

Conclusion

This thesis does not attempt to re-establish the absurdist or nihilistic existentialist readings of Shakespeare offered by Kott, Frye, Kaufmann and Horowitz in the 1960s and 1970s. Nor does it arbitrarily impose existentialist ideas and principles upon Shakespeare's work. Instead, it seeks to understand more fully the intellectual and

[107] Jürgen Habermas, 'How to Answer the Ethical Question', in Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly (eds), *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (London: Eurospan, 2007), p. 145.
[108] Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 5-6.
[109] Jagannath Chakrevorty, *King Lear: Shakespeare's Existentialist Hero* (Calcutta: Avantgarde Press, 1990), p. 1.
[110] *Ibid*., p. 4.
[111] Palfrey, 'Macbeth and Kierkegaard', p. 97.

philosophical rapport between Shakespeare and existentialism. Whilst this thesis does acknowledge that there are many fascinating prefigurations of specific existentialist ideas in Shakespeare's plays, it aims to treat Shakespeare as an existentialist in a broader sense, as a playwright who was fascinated by questions of embodiment and enactment, and as a writer who was particularly attentive to the ontological, ethical and political aspects of human existence. As I have outlined in this chapter, there are strong indications that existentialism is being revived in theory and Shakespearean studies. This thesis reads Shakespeare's drama and existentialism together in order to reveal the existential intensities that exist at the heart of his plays. In a dialectical move, it may also be possible to read existentialism back through the lens of Shakespeare in order to show some of the shortcomings of existentialist thought and demonstrate how, in some ways, Shakespeare is more existentially attuned than existentialists themselves. But first it is necessary to offer a historical account of the range of existentialist ideas that were beginning to emerge in the Renaissance and outline more fully the ways in which we can read existentialism historically.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY MODERN EXISTENTIALIST IDEAS

What do Shakespearean drama and existentialist philosophy, two fields of interest that face each other across radically disparate cultural and intellectual epochs, have in common? As a cultural and philosophical movement, existentialism has a specific intellectual history which begins with precursors such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky and ends with the fully-fledged philosophies of Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Beauvoir.[112] In the mid-twentieth century, existentialism emerged as a popular and recognisable academic movement. However, as a philosophical impulse rather than a school of thought, existentialist concerns also have an important transhistorical reach. If human beings are 'infinitely interested in existing'[113] as Kierkegaard claims, then individuals have always been fascinated - to a greater or lesser degree - by what it means to be a living, breathing human being interacting with the world. Existentialism thus has an important pre- and post-history. This interest in existentialist matters may manifest itself in different ways at different historical moments, but the fundamental issues, problems and dilemmas that relate to the nature of human existence remain crucially important to writers who predate and postdate existentialism's theoretical heyday. Embryonic existentialist ideas can be found in the Renaissance,[114] just as the existentialist concept of the self as practical, embodied, being-in-the-world continues to

[112] Although this thesis argues that the genesis of existentialism can be traced back to the early modern period, it should be noted that the development of fundamental existentialist concerns – notably the conception of the self not as a transparent subject but as a continuous process of self-relation – owes a great deal to German Idealism and early German Romanticism, particularly the work of Fichte, Schelling, Schlegel and Novalis. Not only were these writers hugely influential on existentialist thinkers, with existentialists frequently invoking their ideas and texts in their own work, but their frequent and sustained attention to Shakespeare also helps establish a philosophical bridge between the two epochs.

[113] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 325.

[114] There has been a great deal of critical debate surrounding the terms 'Renaissance' and 'early modern'. Although both terms are used interchangeably in this thesis, the latter is preferred for its implicit suggestion that there is a line of continuity between early modernity and late modernity.

inform and enlighten current theories of subjectivity. As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, existentialist preoccupations can transcend and call into question the particular social and cultural circumstances of different historical eras.

How can we read existentialism historically? In *Shame in Shakespeare*, Ewan Fernie reads the human experience of shame as 'a variable constant'.[115] According to Fernie, the universal nature of shame does not necessarily make it a historically undifferentiated experience. Its depth, severity and corrosive effect on subjectivity are felt more strongly in cultures that cherish individual integrity. As successive epochs develop and prize varying conceptions of selfhood, the experience of shame is remodelled from one historical period to the next. Andy Mousley observes that Fernie's nuanced and self-conscious historicism treats historical issues 'as though they are inseparable from existential ones'.[116] This vital existential awareness, claims Mousley, rehumanises history and thus enhances rather than limits an appreciation of Shakespeare's historical specificity. Following Fernie, I want to suggest that modern existentialist concerns and issues were prevalent in other terms in the literary, philosophical and religious writings of the early modern era. This is not to contend, of course, that the proto-existentialism of the Renaissance is identical to later twentieth century existentialist philosophies and arguments. But there are many surprising and uncanny prefigurations of existentialism in the Renaissance that build a strong case for reading Shakespeare and existentialism together. In the work of writers such as Michel de Montaigne, Pico della Mirandola, Walter Raleigh and Francis Bacon, and in the poetry, drama and prose of some of Shakespeare's contemporaries, there is evidence that existentialist ideas were beginning to emerge and that there are good grounds for regarding Shakespeare as being in important respects an existentialist *avant la lettre*. For Shakespeare is not *just* a writer of his age. His work also possesses an extraordinary ability to anticipate the thoughts and ideas that would preoccupy subsequent epochs by seizing upon them in their seminal shape and dramatising them as if they were already fully formed. As Kiernan Ryan puts it, 'the poetically encoded texts bequeathed to posterity by Shakespeare offer themselves to be construed today as memories of the future, as parables not only of the present time, but also of times to come.'[117] It is this anticipatory quality in his work that prompts A. D. Nuttall to observe that 'Shakespeare

[115] Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 24.
[116] Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 6.
[117] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 175.

has as much to do with existentialism as with Elizabethan neo-stoicism.'[118] Reading Shakespeare through existentialism reveals that he was already articulating the philosophy's key concerns in the distinctive theatrical and poetic terms of his plays.

By looking specifically at five key areas of existentialist thought - individualism, authenticity, angst, self-becoming, and the relationship between self and other - this chapter surveys the intriguing anticipation of existentialism in the Renaissance. It draws on a range of sources, which include plays, poetry, historical chronicles, religious sermons and pamphlets, political works and philosophical theses in order to show how existential ideas were materialising in different domains of Renaissance culture.

The Self Uncovered: Early Modern Individualism

The age of Shakespeare was a time of tremendous cultural and ideological change. The most important of these changes was the seismic shift from the relative stability and clearly structured hierarchy of medieval feudalism to the dynamic dispensation of early modern capitalism, which demanded the ceaseless transformation of the conditions of production and of social relationships. Under capitalism, writes Marx, 'man does not want to wish to remain what he has become, but lives in a constant process of becoming.'[119] The emergence of early modern merchant-capitalist culture, with its emphasis on the primacy and advancement of the individual and on the unleashing of the acquisitive self, marked a significant departure from the previously dominant feudal system, in which a person's predetermined place in society was a 'sacred limit'.[120] In 1577, William Harrison recorded the self-seeking motivations of market traders and condemned their ability to manipulate prices and market conditions for their own personal gain. In a chapter called 'Of faires and markets', he writes: 'I wish that God would once open their eyes that deal thus to see their own errours: for as yet some of them little care how manie poore men suffer extremitte, so that they fill their purses, and carie awaie the gaine.'[121] In this nascent capitalist world, Harrison's anxieties about 'how each one of us indeavoureth to fleece and eat up another' were symptomatic of a

[118] A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 379.
[119] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*: *Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 488.
[120] *Ibid*., p. 542.
[121] William Harrison, 'A Historicall description of the Iland of Britaine, with a briefe rehersall of the nature and qualities of the people of England, and such commodities as are to be found in the same', in *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles*, ed. Raphael Holinshed and William Harrison (London: Printed by Henry Denham, 1587), II.xviii, p. 203.

wider concern with the idea and consequences of individual freedom and autonomy.[122] The transformation of the whole social and economic order rendered human relations indeterminate and unstable. This transition gave rise to a new conception of man and his relationship to his surrounding environment and community. Jacob Burckhardt was the first critic to suggest that the Renaissance anticipated modern liberal individualism. In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860) he writes:

> In the Middle Ages . . . man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation - only through some general category. In Italy this veil was first melted into air; an *objective* treatment of the state and all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual,* and recognized himself as such.[123]

According to Burckhardt, the early modern individual delighted in his new-found capacity for self-creation. This iconic image of the self-possessed individual, who is empowered by a sense of essential identity and confident of his ability to manipulate events and people around him, is nowhere better described than in Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Machiavelli argues in a well-known passage that 'a wise ruler cannot, nor should he, keep his word when doing so would lead to his disadvantage. . . . But one must know how to disguise his nature well, and how to be a fine liar and hypocrite.'[124] Of course, the recognition that early modern writers and thinkers simultaneously exulted in and worried about the power of unshackled individualism is not new. The dangerous individualism of Iago, Edmund, Faustus and Tamburlaine provides the most obvious and vivid testimony to the fact that early modern dramatists and their audiences were fascinated by the dark side of human freedom and the thrilling expansion of individual agency. The main point is that many thinkers of the time were beginning to view the individual as a self-experiencing entity, a being that has a direct and intimate awareness of its own existence. They were starting to develop 'existentialist' accounts of what it meant and what it felt like to be a self-conscious individual.

It is necessary at this junction to comment briefly on the etymological origins of words such as 'individual', 'person' and 'self'. 'Individual' is a word with an extraordinarily complex linguistic genealogy. As a word that signifies the special,

---

[122] *Ibid*., p. 203.
[123] Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 98.
[124] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 7.

unique identity of each human being, it is, strictly speaking, a critical term fostered by Romanticism. Raymond Williams explains that 'Individual originally meant indivisible.'[125] However, although a specific terminology was conspicuously absent from the discourse of the period, it does not necessarily follow that thinkers of that time had little interest in such ideas. In *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, Marjorie Garber points out that notions of performativity and selfhood were linked in Renaissance thought. She writes: 'the source word for "person" is "persona," which means "mask," so that the idea of a person is, in a way, a back-formation from stage performance; the performed self, at least etymologically, produces the person and not the other way around.'[126] Early modern thinkers and writers thus had an advanced understanding of the way individuals become the people they are through the process of existing. Renaissance writers and dramatists would perhaps not have found the notion that 'existence precedes essence' entirely novel and unfamiliar. Garber also draws attention to the fact that when the word 'self' is first used as an independent substantive in 1595 in sonnet XLV of Spenser's poem *Amoretti* ('and in my selfe, my inward selfe I meane'[127]), it already carries the suggestion that the self is something that is divided and ruptured. We can begin to appreciate how notions of individuality, selfhood and personhood were being developed in Renaissance writings.

It is interesting to observe how Renaissance individualism - something that is actually articulated in multiple and variegated ways in early modern thought - has surreptitiously evolved into the homogeneous idea of a free-standing, self-determining and transcendent human subject. In the wake of Romanticism, individualism, humanism and essentialism have become mutually reinforcing concepts. J. A. Symonds's celebration of man's unfettered freedom and independence in the Renaissance is a paradigmatic example of how these notions merged in nineteenth-century scholarship. He writes: 'The essence of humanism consisted in a new and vital perception of the dignity of man as a rational being apart from theological determinations, and in the further perception that classic literature alone displayed human nature in the plenitude of intellectual and moral freedom.'[128] Dollimore is deeply sceptical of this inflated and hubristic view of the individual. In *Radical Tragedy*, he claims that in such assessments

[125] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1983), p. 161.
[126] Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), p. 75.
[127] Edmund Spenser, *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 627
[128] J. A. Symonds, *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1897), p. 52.

'the individual is understood in terms of a pre-social essence, nature or identity and on that basis s/he is invested with a quasi-spiritual autonomy. The individual becomes the origin and focus of meaning - an individuated essence which precedes and - in idealist philosophy - transcends history and society.'[129] However, although new historicist critics may rightly insist that the self is not independent of its social context, we cannot overlook the fact that the ideas of human agency, inwardness and autonomy were important for early modern thinkers. Katharine Maus notes how a postmodern critique that uncovers the socially constituted nature of human identity 'often seems to assume that once this dependence is pointed out, inwardness simply vaporizes'.[130] For Symonds, the Renaissance witnessed the birth of the modern idea of the self as a self-invented, self-fashioned site of subjective intensity. Dollimore, on the other hand, sees in the Renaissance the glimmerings of the postmodern self and suggests that 'it seems more useful to talk not of the individualism of this period but its self-consciousness, especially its sense of the self as flexible, problematic, elusive, dislocated - and, of course, contradictory: simultaneously arrogant and masochistic, victim and agent, object and effect of power.'[131] The strengths and shortcomings of both formulations have been debated at length. Louis Adrian Montrose argues that, as a result of historically sensitive literary research, the idea 'the freely self-creating and world-creating individual of so-called bourgeois humanism is - at least in theory - now defunct.'[132] But Francis Barker points out that the postmodern self is a remote, impersonal phenomenon which 'doesn't share with the classical subject the capacity for anguished alienation' or the power to produce 'acute - often introspective - negativity'.[133] The existentialist conception of subjectivity synthesises both these views. Like the postmodern self, the unfixed and anti-essential existential self is a site of open, fluid potentiality; like the classical subject, it retains a certain degree of agency and an ability to shape its own existence. Selfhood in many Renaissance texts is often portrayed as deeply unstable and frequently contradictory, but something which individuals nevertheless feel responsible for.

In their evaluations of Shakespearean and Renaissance subjectivity, some critics have started to gesture in an existentialist direction. Harold Bloom argues that

---

[129] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 250.
[130] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 28.
[131] *Ibid*., p. 179.
[132] Louis Adrian Montrose, 'The Poetics and Politics of Culture', in *New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 21.
[133] Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 98.

Shakespeare's characters 'develop because they reconceive themselves.'[134] John Jefferies Martin claims that the Renaissance 'relational self' negotiated a relationship between 'one's inner experience' and 'one's experience in the world.'[135] John Lee argues in a similar vein in his investigation of Hamlet's 'self-constituting sense of self'.[136] Perhaps the most significant text that supports the argument for the emerging existentialist conception of selfhood in the Renaissance is Montaigne's *Essays.*[137] As an intimate and personal record of the workings of his inner life, Montaigne originally intended his *Essays* to testify to the existence of a stable, immutable core of being. In his brief address to the reader, he writes: 'Here I want to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without striving or artifice: for it is my own self that I am painting. Here, drawn from life, you will read of my defects and my native form'.[138] Like many works of the period, the *Essays* were originally designed to provide a traditional, humanistic insight into the interiority of the individual self. As Charles Taylor notes: 'This is the virtually unanimous direction of ancient thought: beneath the changing and shifting desires in the unwise soul . . . our true nature, reason, provides a foundation, unwavering and constant.'[139] However, what Montaigne discovered instead of a secure foundation of being was a fluctuating consciousness fraught with contradiction and ambiguity, a landscape of 'terrifying instability'.[140] In his reflections - which we know Shakespeare read, in some form and at least in part - Montaigne anticipates Sartre's suggestion that 'man is . . . something which propels itself forward towards a future and is aware that it is doing so.'[141]

In *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne,* Hugh Grady explains how Montaigne presents subjectivity as mediated by socio-historical influences but also as something that has the ability to affect those influences in turn. For Montaigne, there is a dialectical interplay between self and world. As a result, his private self, Grady

---

[134] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. xvi.
[135] John Jefferies Martin*, Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 14-15.
[136] John Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 2.
[137] Montaigne's work is an important point of reference for many existentialist writers. Simone de Beauvoir quotes him in the opening lines of *The Ethics of Ambiguity.* Kierkegaard refers to passages from the *Essays* in his journals. Nietzsche refers to Montaigne as 'the freest and mightiest of souls' in 'Schopenhauer as Educator'.
[138] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 1. All subsequent citations in this chapter are from this edition and indicated by page number in brackets.
[139] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 178.
[140] *Ibid*., p. 178.
[141] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 28.

claims, is 'a flux, an inconstancy, not really a subject at all because it cannot fix itself', and this perpetual subjective instability allows for a 'complex, layered interiority'.[142] There are many passages in the *Essays* which present selfhood as a process of becoming. In 'An Apology for Raymond Sebond', Montaigne writes:

> To conclude: there is no permanent existence in our being or in that of objects. We ourselves, our faculty of judgement and all mortal things are flowing and rolling ceaselessly: nothing certain can be established about one from the other, since both judge and judging are ever shifting and changing.
>
> We have no communication with being, for every human nature is wholly situated forever between birth and death, it shows itself only as a dark shadowy appearance, an unstable weak opinion. And if you should determine to try and grasp what Man's being is, it would be exactly like trying to hold a fistful of water. (p. 680)[143]

The passage is a radical anti-essentialist depiction of human existence. The experiencing mind and the things experienced are not separate and distinct, but part of a continual happening. As Antonia Szabari puts it, 'to read Montaigne's book - with Montaigne - as a painting-in-words is to understand writing as a medium modelled on phenomenological consciousness which can only grasp its object in its momentary "this-ness" and is forced to change every moment as its object does.'[144] It is not enough, Montaigne tells us, to rely on origins, supposed universals and generalities to produce our knowledge of life: 'We confuse our thoughts with generalities, universal causes and processes which proceed quite well without us, and leave behind our own concerns for *Michel*, which touch us more intimately than Man' (p. 107). Montaigne's self-reflexivity here underlines the passion and profundity of his encounter with his own inward sense of self. Grady remarks that in the *Essays* Montaigne suggests that the self is 'not only immersed in ideology but capable of distantiating itself from it through complex, decentred interactions.'[145] For Montaigne, Grady continues, 'the self is something that is observed and experienced, something that acts and performs, and something that feels and judges. It is both in the world and withdrawn from the world.'[146] The self, as Montaigne conceives it, is not a thing but a relation to certain

---

[142] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 117.

[143] As Screech indicates, Montaigne borrows phrases from Amyot's translation of Plutarch in this passage, which suggests that some of these ideas have classical roots as well.

[144] Antonia Szabari, '"Parler seulement de moy": The Disposition of the Subject in Montaigne's Essay "De l'art de conferer"', *MLN,* 116:5 (2001), p. 1001.

[145] Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne*, p. 121.

[146] *Ibid*., p. 121.

dimensions of existence - the world, other human beings, and our own experience of ourselves.

Montaigne's use of water imagery to describe his transitory sense of self calls to mind Antony's distressing sense of subjective dissolution at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*. 'My good knave Eros, now thy captain is / Even such a body. Here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave' (IV.xv.12-4) he says, utterly bewildered by the experience of pure subjective contingency. Antony's external identity and his inward sense of self have become unhinged from one another, and this makes him feel as 'indistinct / As water is in water' (IV.xv.10-11). And yet, paradoxically, even though his identity has been obliterated and this has produced a painful feeling of self-loss and subjective indeterminacy, Antony continues to experience himself as an existential intensity. Lee notes that the force and potency of this self-experience are 'dominant over his sense of his own corporeality'.[147] Antony's fluid subjectivity is expressed rhetorically by Shakespeare's repetition of the phrase 'my knave'. In the first instance, Antony uses the phrase to refer to his servant Eros. But the phrase is quickly employed again ambiguously to designate both Eros and his dissolving sense of self: 'here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape, my knave'. By sandwiching this moment of subjective unravelling between a clear-cut and an equivocal use of the phrase, Shakespeare destabilises its primary meaning. Selfhood was once something Antony employed, something he owned: it was his servant. The second usage of 'my knave', as an appositional phrase qualifying 'this visible shape', plays on the term's slippery meaning. In different contexts it can be used to describe someone who is deceitful and crafty or someone who is jocular and familiar. Like the word 'knave' itself, Antony's insubordinate subjectivity constantly calls itself into question and harbours diverse meanings. He no longer coincides with himself. N. K. Sugimura rightly notes that in this respect Antony's speech 'feels like a description [of] an Existentialist crisis straight out of modern literature.'[148]

It is the Kierkegaardian rather than the Machiavellian model of individuality that best fits Antony's perplexing sense of self. In *Repetition* Kierkegaard argues that

> the individual is not an actual shape but a shadow, or, more correctly, the actual shape is invisibly present and therefore is not satisfied to cast one shadow, but

[147] Lee, *Hamlet and the Controversies of Self*, p. 219.
[148] N. K. Sugimura, 'Two Concepts of Reality in *Anthony and Cleopatra*', in *Thinking With Shakespeare: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Essays for A. D. Nuttall*, ed. William Poole and Richard Scholar (London: Legenda, 2007), p. 74.

> the individual has a variety of shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself. As yet the personality is not discerned, and its energy is betokened only in the passion of possibility . . . each of its possibilities is an audible shadow.[149]

In Kierkegaard's mind, the self is a site of constant dialectical conflict and contradiction. Selfhood can never be achieved or possessed. Simon Palfrey notes that the Danish writer was attracted to Shakespearean inwardness because 'it is a familiarity rooted in dispossession, fracture, and above all *process*'.[150] It is evident, then, that the Renaissance individual can be viewed as a harbinger of the existential individual. Both Renaissance thinkers and existentialist philosophers employ the metaphor of water to describe the fluctuating, dynamic, irresolvable nature of human subjectivity. 'One who is existing', writes Kierkegaard,

> is continually in the process of becoming: the actually existing subjective thinker, thinking, continually reproduces this in his existence and invests all his thinking in becoming. . . . Only he really has style who is never finished with something but *stirs the water of language* whenever he begins, so that to him the most ordinary expression comes into expression with newborn originality.[151] (my italics)

Similarly, Albert Camus asks his reader in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: 'Of whom and of what indeed can I say: "I know that!" This heart within me I can feel, and I can judge that it exists. . . . There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction. For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarise it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers.'[152] The water imagery Shakespeare employs to describe Antony's selfhood is a remarkable forerunner of these later existentialist formulations.

Shakespeare's philosophical engagement with water imagery is also found in *The Comedy of Errors* when the despondent Antipholus of Syracuse describes his overwhelming feelings of self-loss:

> *Antipholus of Syracuse.* I will go lose myself,
> And wander up and down to view the city.
> *Merchant of Ephesus.* Sir, I commend you to your own content. *Exit*

[149] Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 155.
[150] Simon Palfrey, 'Macbeth and Kierkegaard', *Shakespeare Survey*, 57 (2004), p. 98.
[151] Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, p. 86.
[152] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 17.

Antipholus of Syracuse. He that commends me to mine own content
Commends me to the thing I cannot get.
I to the world am like a drop of water
That in the ocean seeks another drop,
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.
So I, to find a mother and a brother,
In quest of them, unhappy, lose myself.
(I.ii.30-40)

Antipholus is intentionally paradoxical in this passage. He must lose himself (in both the literal and the metaphorical sense) in order to find his family. But he also implies that familial reunion will help him reconnect with his own subjectivity, a suggestion that is heightened dramatically and philosophically by the fact that he is searching for his identical twin brother. Once again, the image of water is evoked. Lee observes: 'Most important and dramatic . . . is the intense fragility conferred upon identity by picturing it as a construct of water, as the world as ocean threatens to submerge, or render it indistinct.'[153] The use of water imagery intensifies the philosophical power of the passage. Sartre discusses a similar idea in more recognisably theoretical language: 'the individual - questioned questioner, *is* I, and is no one. . . . We can see clearly how *I* am dissolved [je me dissous] practically in the human adventure.'[154] In Camus' novel *The Outsider*, Meursault notices that during his trial the prosecuting lawyer repeatedly uses the first-person pronoun 'I' and speaks as if he were Meursault himself. As the trial continues, the reduction of Meursault's significance and the constant discussion of the nature of his 'soul', leads him to remark: 'I had the impression I was drowning in some colourless liquid.'[155] Both Antipholus and Meursault evoke the idea of self-loss and subjective dissolution through the imagery of drowning and liquefaction.

Ideas about the quest for, or limits of, self-knowledge were prevalent in Renaissance writings. The highly charged Delphic injunction '*Nosce te ipsum*' or 'know thyself' commonly headed chapters in books on health, ethics, religion, politics, even books for school children.[156] Although Anne Ferry argues that this was in fact straightforward guidance that promoted a limited and one-dimensional form of personal sincerity, there is evidence that early modern thinkers were troubled by the problem of

[153] Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self*, p. 217.
[154] Quoted and translated by Christina Howells, 'Conclusion: Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 342.
[155] Albert Camus, *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin, 2000), p.101.
[156] Anne Ferry, *The Inward Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare and Donne* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), p. 40.

self-knowledge. Socrates explains in Plato's *Phaedrus*: 'I am still unable to do as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. This is why I do not concern myself with them. I accept what is generally believed, and I look not into them but into my own self.'[157] Self-examination, Socrates tells us, is a difficult philosophical project. This awareness of the obscure and inaccessible nature of the self is also found in Renaissance thought. One particularly illuminating example is found in the Venetian reformer Gasparo Contarini's letter to Tommaso Giustiniani in 1511, where he writes: 'if you were to know me from within [*nell'intrinseco*], as I really am (but even I do not know myself well), you would not make such a judgment about me'.[158] Drawing on this example, John Martin notes: 'One of the most striking features of Renaissance notions of the self was an explicitly layered quality, which represented a sense not only of inwardness or interiority but also of mystery about what Renaissance writers . . . imagined as their inner selves.'[159]

Shakespeare's and Montaigne's descriptions of the vicissitudes of human subjectivity were followed a few years later by John Donne's depiction of the unreliable, mysterious and contingent nature of both self and world in his poem 'The Second Anniversary':

> And what essential joy canst thou expect
> Here upon Earth, what permanent effect
> Of transitory causes? Dost thou love
> Beauty (and beauty worthiest is to move)
> Poor cozened cozener! That she and that thou
> Which did begin to love, are neither now:
> You are both fluid, changed since yesterday.
> Next day repairs (but ill) last dayes decay. (lines 387-93)[160]

[157] Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), p. 510.
[158] Contarini quoted in Hubert Jedin (ed.), *Contarini und Camaldoli* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1953), p. 13. These letters were originally published in the form of a fascicle of 67 folio pages and were later republished in the *Archivo italiano per la storia della pieta*, vol. 2 (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1959). The translation of these particular lines is taken from John Martin, 'Investing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe', *The American Historical Review*, 102:5 (1997), p. 1321.
[159] Martin, 'Investing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe', p. 1321.
[160] John Donne, *The Complete Poems of John Donne: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Robbins (Harlow: Longman, 2010).

Donne's poem captures the interdependence of the changing world and the changing self. Neither aspect of life can be fixed, and this jeopardises any belief in firm identities. Shakespeare, Donne, and Montaigne all present the self as a bewildering and largely undefinable 'feeling' or 'sensation' that is truly experienced but cannot be locked down in definite terms.

The Authentic Self: The Ideal of Sincerity in the Renaissance

For existentialists and Renaissance thinkers alike, the concepts of 'individualism' and 'authenticity' go hand in hand. Of course, these exact words and their modern meanings were not available in the Renaissance, but the ideas they signify certainly existed before the formulation of such terminology. Peter Holbrook asserts that 'the drive towards authenticity is not only a nineteenth-century or post-Romantic phenomenon. It has a Classical and Renaissance dimension.'[161] There is plenty of evidence to suggest that concerns about sincerity, integrity, self-realisation and authenticity surfaced well before such notions were explicitly theorised and critiqued in the Romantic period. Indeed, Renaissance writers and thinkers were obsessed with the perilous task of 'being true to oneself'. Hamlet's claim that he has 'that within which passes show' (*Hamlet,* I.ii.85) juxtaposes what Maus calls an 'inner invisible anguish' with false indicators of grief.[162] For the existentially intuitive Hamlet, authenticity and inwardness are inextricably bound together. He places great importance on the self he feels himself to be. To adopt Kierkegaard's phrase, his authentic self is 'invisibly present'. This 'something' is unnamable and even unknowable. Yet he fiercely defends its existence and integrity. Maus continues: 'Hamlet's conviction that truth is unspeakable implicitly devalues any attempts to express or communicate it.'[163] His sense of authentic being stands in direct contrast to Polonius' commending of authenticity to Laertes before he leaves for France. On the surface, Polonius appears to advocate a strategically straightforward and one-dimensional form of authenticity. Yet, as Holbrook notes, the lines 'to thine own self be true / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man' (I.iii.79-9) are confusing and even contradictory.[164] The Machiavellian circumspection that Polonius advises Laertes to adopt jars with his ideal of truthfulness to oneself.

[161] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 139.
[162] Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance*, p. 1.
[163] *Ibid*., p. 1.
[164] Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism*, p. 81.

Paradoxically, the affirmation of authenticity opens up the possibility of inauthenticity and self-betrayal. The famous imperative 'to thine own self be true' is challenged in the play, not only by Hamlet's agonised self-consciousness, but also by the hard truth that 'there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'[165]

In *Renaissance Man*, Agnes Heller notes that 'With the Renaissance . . . the *self-realization and self-enjoyment of the personality became a goal*.'[166] But she also notes that there was a '"separating out" of particular aspirations from the general concept of self-realization.'[167] Many Renaissance writers show a deep sensitivity to the complex and multifaceted notion of authenticity. The Puritan moralist Daniell Dyke's book *The Mystery Of Selfe-Deceiving. Or A Discovrse and Discouery of the Deceitfullnesse of Mans Heart* is a particularly good example of the Renaissance awareness of the difficulties of self-scrutiny. He claims that

> *Surely wee neuer beginne to know* Diuinitie *or* Religion*, till wee come to know our selues : our selues wee cannot know, till wee know our hearts. I but, our hearts are deceitfull aboue all things, who can know them? They who with diligence shall peruse this present treatise shall with Gods blessing be able in some good measure to know them. Here shall they find that dangerous Art of Selfe-Sophistry displayed, by which millions of soules are enwrapped in the snares of Satan. And so by seeing their selfe-deceit, shall come to selfe-knowledge. A knowledge never more neglected*.[168]

Echoing John Calvin's assertion that 'the human heart has so many crannies where vanity hides, so many holes where falsehood lurks, is so decked out with deceiving hypocrisy, that it often dupes itself',[169] Dyke proceeds to catalogue the forms and varieties of self-deception. But what is most interesting in this Renaissance text is the anticipation of the existentialist distinction between different modes of authenticity. In existentialist philosophy, sincerity is actually a more subtle and inconspicuous form of inauthenticity that operates under the veil of idiosyncrasy.[170] Lionel Trilling explains that in a state of sincerity 'we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part

---

[165] These lines are omitted from the 2006 Arden edition of *Hamlet* and placed in Appendix 1, p. 466.
[166] Agnes Heller, *Renaissance Man*, trans. Richard E. Allen (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 200.
[167] *Ibid*., p. 201.
[168] Daniell Dyke, *Dedication to The Mystery Of Selfe-Deceiving. Or A Discovrse and Discouery of the Deceitfullnesse of Mans Heart* (London: Printed by Edward Griffin, 1614), n.pag.
[169] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (London: S.C.M. Press, 1960), vol. 1, p. 554.
[170] See Heidegger's chapter 'Dasein's Attestation of an Authentic Potentiality-for-Being, and Resoluteness', in *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).

of the sincere person, with the result that a judgement may be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic.'[171] Dyke distinguishes sincerity or being true to oneself from self-sophistry. But perhaps even more striking is Dyke's suggestion that an individual '*by seeing their selfe-deceit, shall come to self-knowledge'*. The path to genuine self-knowledge requires a recognition of one's inauthentic and self-deceiving ways. This is an idea not entirely dissimilar to the dialectic of authenticity set out by Heidegger. In *Being and Time* Heidegger suggests that *Verfallenheit* or 'fallenness' is a necessary precondition for the struggle towards self-actualised subjectivity. He writes: 'Authentic existence is not something which floats above falling everydayness; existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon.'[172] A loss of self is a necessary precondition for the repossession of self. This idea is also hinted at in Biron's 'Let us once lose our oaths to find ourselves, / Or else we lose ourselves to keep our oaths' in *Love's Labour's Lost* (IV.iii.335-6). Mousley observes that this sentiment 'nudges the play into becoming an existential quest narrative, whereby an inauthentic self is shed in favour of a more authentic one.'[173] Even Shakespeare's tight manipulation of line-structure suggests that the acts of losing oneself and finding oneself are symbiotically related. But John D. Cox reminds us that the play deliberately sets the issue of authenticity in quotation marks. He writes: 'What is comically doubted in *Love's Labor's Lost*, then, is not knowledge itself, as in skepticism, but human beings' (especially young men's) ability to know themselves – that is, to understand their fallibility, the restrictions of their social perspective, . . . [and] their obligations to others.'[174] In successive scenes, claims Cox, the lovers in the play fail to realise their own deficiencies and shortcomings, and thus reveal the ease with which human beings indulge in acts of self-deception.

Discovering and preserving individual sincerity in the Renaissance was as much about being alert to simulation and hypocrisy as it was about speaking truthfully from the soul. The complexity of the issue of sincerity is documented in the work of Francis Bacon. He writes: 'The discovery of a man's self by the tracts of his countenance is a great weakness and betraying.'[175] He continues to argue that inauthentic feigning is

[171] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 11.
[172] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 224.
[173] Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, pp. 134-5.
[174] John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 19.
[175] Francis Bacon, *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 77.

dangerous because 'it depriveth a man of one of the principal instruments for action; which is trust and belief.'[176] He outlines three main forms of self-deception:

> There be three degrees of this hiding and veiling of a man's self. The first: closeness, reservation, and secrecy, when a man leaveth himself without observation or without hold to be taken what he is. The second: dissimulation, in the negative, when a man lets fall signs and arguments that he is not that he is. And the third: simulation, in the affirmative, when a man industriously and expressly feigns and pretends to be that he is not.[177]

An individual may slide between all three categories, Bacon explains. It is not just conscious dissemblers or individuals deliberately manipulating their identities who are recognised as being insincere. Bacon also notes the different gradations of inauthenticity, from a lack of self-awareness to total self-feigning. As Heller notes, Bacon shows that 'if we constantly adjust our principles and practices to "other people", without ever asking whether they are right and without ever seeking to realize ourselves in our principles and practice, then the separation of appearance and essence must follow.'[178] This gap between inward self and outward identity produces a number of ontological and epistemological anxieties, so much so that it becomes almost impossible to determine the boundaries of authenticity. Once again, the mingling of authenticity and inauthenticity is stressed when Bacon writes: 'it is a good shrewd proverb of the Spaniard, *Tell a lie and find a troth*; as if there were no way of discovery but by simulation.'[179]

Montaigne is also deeply interested in the notion of authenticity and, like Dyke, he is aware of the complexity of the issue. Montaigne's idea of 'authentic' selfhood does not equate to straightforward integrity or self-truthfulness. He acknowledges that genuine self-understanding does not involve resorting to a fixed or immutable identity. In 'On Three Kinds of Social Discourse' he writes: 'Life is a rough, irregular process with a multitude of forms. It is to be no friend of yourself - and even less master of yourself - to be a slave endlessly following yourself, so beholden to your predispositions that you cannot stray from them or bend them' (pp. 922-3). Montaigne stresses this difference even more intently when he writes: 'To keep ourselves to the bonds of necessity to one single way of life is to be, but not to live' (p. 922). The kind of authentic 'living' that Montaigne endorses is precarious and vulnerable because it

[176] *Ibid*., p. 78.
[177] *Ibid*., p. 77.
[178] Heller, *Renaissance Man*, p. 210.
[179] Bacon, *The Essays*, p. 78.

involves being true to oneself in a deeper and more profound sense. It also involves an acceptance of the ambiguities and messy inconsistencies that form human existence. Montaigne's understanding of the baffling changeability of men's choices, desires and qualities allows him to be radically self-reflective in his own writing: 'I, who am monarch of the subject which I treat and not accountable for it to anyone, do not for all that believe everything I say. Sometimes my mind launches out with paradoxes which I mistrust and with verbal subtleties that make me shake my head' (p. 1068). And yet, in spite of subjective 'dissension and discord' (p. 979), Montaigne repeatedly emphasises the importance of authentically becoming oneself. In an astonishing prefiguration of Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence,[180] Montaigne writes: 'If had to live again, I would live as I have done; I neither regret the past nor fear the future' (p. 920). According to Nietzsche, an individual's willed succession of each moment of time is the only way to overcome the scattered possibilities of human existence. Zarathustra declares: 'To redeem that which has passed away and to re-create all "It was" into a "Thus I willed it!" – that alone should I call redemption.'[181] Montaigne's penetrating grasp of the particularities of his existence strikes a chord with Zarathustra's wilful desire to relive every moment of being.

The authenticity that Montaigne champions in the *Essays* had important consequences for his thoughts on human ethics. Montaigne suggests that personal and ethical direction comes from within: 'Provided that he listen to himself there is no one who does not discover in himself a form entirely his own, a master form which struggles against his education' (p. 914). In his essay 'Montaigne on Moral Philosophy and the Good Life', J. B. Scheenwind argues that '[Montaigne] constructed an indirect and quite novel mode of exemplarity. Its key feature is that each person can and should find his own guidance within himself.'[182] For existentialists, to live ethically and authentically, human beings must assume the ambiguity of their existence. Montaigne too is suspicious of normative ethics and prescriptive morality, and instead posits a more open and personal notion of self-governance: 'We must establish an inner model to serve as a touchstone of our actions, by which we at times favour ourselves or flog ourselves' (p. 911). Human beings, according to Montaigne, are endowed with a personal, intuitive grasp of morality. This idea develops more fully in the eighteenth

[180] As Holbrook points out in *Shakespeare's Individualism*, p. 191.
[181] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, trans. Graham Parkes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 121.
[182] J. B. Scheenwind, 'Montaigne on Moral Philosophy and the Good Life', in *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, ed. U. Langer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 219.

century, especially in the work of Rousseau. But the Renaissance is also an important intellectual source for what Taylor dubs 'the ethic of authenticity'.[183] With heavy existential overtones, Taylor offers a definition of this ethic: 'Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realising a potentiality that is properly my own.'[184] Montaigne's reflexive self-awareness and explicit suggestion that morality is inwardly anchored proves that these ideas were very much part of early modern thinking. In what sounds like an extremely modern ethic of the self, he writes: 'I live from day to day; and, saving your reverence, I live only for myself' (p. 934). The culture of authenticity was as important in the Renaissance as it is to our current debates about subjectivity and selfhood.

The Self in Crisis: Early Modern Versions of Existential Angst

The experience of angst has a pivotal place in existentialist thought. Heidegger refers to it as a mental state which 'provides the phenomenal basis for explicitly grasping Dasein's primordial totality of being.'[185] By this he means that in a state of angst man recognises the nothingness that is at the heart of being. He becomes aware that there is no essential core of being, no ontological safe-ground. The experience is agonising and traumatic and often pushes an individual to the point of self-destruction. As a result, a person will endeavour to avoid the feeling of angst by fleeing into bad faith. But, at the same time, angst has a capacity to make man feel 'individualised'. In a strange and paradoxical way, the experience of self-crisis produced by angst is also vivifying and exhilarating because it is a condition which discloses an individual's existential potentiality. In moments of angst, one's public persona or socially identified self melts away and leaves behind pure, contingent, subjective possibility - an ultimate freedom to shape the significance of one's own life. George Goodwin's *Automachia, or the Self-Conflict of a Christian* is an extremely important early modern prefiguration of existential angst:

[183] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1991).
[184] *Ibid*., p. 29.
[185] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 227.

My Selfe at-once I both displease and please:
Without my Selfe my Selfe I faine would sease:
For, my too-much of Mee, mee much annoyes;
And my Selfe's Plentie my poore Selfe destroyes.
Who seeks mee in Mee, in mee shall not finde
Mee as my Selfe: *Hermaphrodite*, in minde
I am at-once Male, Female, Neuter: yet
What e'er I am, I am not Mine (I weet):
I am not with my Selfe (as I conceive)
Wretch that I am; my Selfe my Selfe deceive:
Unto my Selfe, my Selfe my Selfe betray:
I from my Selfe banish my Selfe away:
My Selfe agree not with my Selfe a iot:
Know not my Selfe; I have my Selfe forgot: . . .
I can not live with nor without my Selfe.[186]

Eric Langley observes that Goodwin is 'not simply making manifest an internal discordance, but allowing geminative rhetoric to structure ontological awareness and provide structure for formative reflexivity.'[187] The manically anaphoric phrase 'my Selfe' that punctuates almost every line not only mirrors the poet's obsessive self-absorption, but also creates a 'paradoxical dynamic of oscillatory presence and absence'.[188] The crucial lines are: 'Who seeks mee in Mee, in mee shall not finde / Mee as my Selfe'. Goodwin's hermaphroditic self is neither total presence nor total absence. When Sartre writes that angst 'means that man is always separated by a nothingness from his essence and that 'the self . . . exists in the perpetual mode of detachment from what is,' he suggests that, at its most profound level, angst reveals the self to be an ultimate nothingness.[189] Yet it is at this point of realisation that an individual feels most himself. Goodwin's chronic self-reflexivity discloses the ontological nothingness at the heart of being. He is like a Renaissance version of Dostoevsky's Underground Man. 'To be excessively conscious is a disease, a real, full-blown disease,' cries the Underground Man as he battles with his volatile and deeply conflicting emotions.[190] For both Goodwin and Dostoevsky's notorious malcontent, self-laceration is perversely enjoyable, because it has an individualising power. In both texts, genuine existential

[186] George Goodwin, *Automachia, or the Self-Conflict of a Christian*, trans. Josuah Sylvester (London: Printed by Melch Bradwood for Edward Blovnt, 1607), n. pag.
[187] Eric Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 239.
[188] *Ibid*., p. 245.
[189] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 59.
[190] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground and The Double*, trans. Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 6.

trauma and disingenuous histrionics seem to cancel one another out at one moment, and to intensify each other's effect at the next. In his extreme self-reflexivity, Goodwin's interiority mingles real suffering and melodramatic self-indulgence.

Like Goodwin, Shakespeare was fascinated by the dramatisation of the self in crisis. According to Barker, rather than fixing selfhood in conventional models, Shakespeare's characters enact 'a dispersal of self among patterns of likeness – comparison – and representation'.[191] Barker draws attention to the deeply troubling deracination of selfhood in Macbeth's reflection, 'To know my deed 'twere best not know myself' (II.ii.71). With action no longer functioning as a way of affirming identity, Macbeth's deed splits off the knowing self from the self that is known. There is a whole range of other examples in Shakespeare's plays where subjectivity and social identity seem to be torn away from each other. Despairing over Rosaline, Romeo says: 'I have lost myself. I am not here. / This is not Romeo; he's some other where' (*Romeo and Juliet,* I.i.190-1). As Troilus watches Cressida's betrayal, he declares: 'I will not be myself, nor have cognition / Of what I feel. I am all patience' (*Troilus and Cressida,* V.ii.62-3). This total rejection of selfhood is a very unsettling statement, which ramifies Cressida's earlier question: 'Who shall be true to us, / When we are so unsecret to ourselves?' (III.ii.113-4). Again and again, Shakespeare challenges and rejects normative structures of identity. Reflecting on the character of Kent in *King Lear*, Barker argues that

> disguise is more than a convention here; it is a necessity and, paradoxically, a form of being, both more and less than usual. He can only be what, as it were, he truly is, by not being himself . . . . Simulation and dissimulation are structural to *Lear*'s representations, and especially to its thus damaged capacity to represent the authentic and the individual.[192]

With characters such as Kent or the Duke in *Measure for Measure* suspending the revelation of their identity for as long as possible, and with others uttering such aporetic remarks as 'I am not what I am' (*Othello*, I.i.65; *Twelfth Night*, III.i.132), we are repeatedly confronted with selves which are dislocated from what they are. In short, for Shakespeare, selfhood is more accurately articulated as the displacement of identity. Two stanzas of this enigmatic poem 'The Phoenix and Turtle' provide an even more succinct confirmation of Shakespeare's interest in anguished subjectivity:

---

[191] Barker, *The Culture of Violence*, p. 54.
[192] *Ibid*., pp. 8-9.

> Property was thus appalled
> That the self was not the same.
> Single nature's double name
> Neither two nor one was called.
>
> Reason, in itself confounded,
> Saw division grow together
> To themselves, yet either neither,
> Simple were so well compounded
>
> ('The Phoenix and the Turtle', lines 37-44)

Ryan argues that these lines imply that 'the self, far from possessing a "single nature", is a diverse, discontinuous entity, and thus a scandalous affront to the belief that a person's distinctive quality - what makes them different - is a fixed, inalienable "property" that they own.'[193] For Shakespeare and existentialists, the existing self struggles in the gap between subjective loss and subjective realisation. At moments of crisis, Shakespeare's characters become 'unidentical' with themselves, radically split off from the singular social identity they had previously thought of as their 'true' self.

As well as angst, existentialist writers have devoted much attention to other liminal human experiences such as death, nausea and boredom. Our moods and intuitions, they claim, are more accurate and revealing than conceptual knowledge. But long before Sartre asserted that individuals have an intuitive knowledge of 'the phenomenon of being' or that 'being will be disclosed to us by some kind of immediate access',[194] Renaissance writers were experimenting with the same ideas. In *Spira Respirans: Or, The Way to the Kingdom of Heaven by the Gates of Hell; In an Extraordinary Example*, Francesco Spira describes his near-death experience:

> Then was I struck with an exceeding Agony and Terror on my Soul, by the fearful Apprehension of Imminent Death, my Conscience being awakned, and I seeing my unpreparedness for it. Then was I seized with pale Despair, then was I filled with that Anguish, which I think it impossible for me to make the unexperienced conceive the like of. . . . [I] have suffered a total Dissolution, my Mind being then capable of nothing but my Sorrow.[195]

With great candour, Spira documents how his experience of 'the greatness of the

[193] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 263.
[194] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 4.
[195] Francesco Spira, *Spira Respirans: Or, The Way to the Kingdom of Heaven by the Gates of Hell; In an Extraordinary Example* (London: T. Stowe, 1695), p. 9.

affections of the mind' finally lead to a religious epiphany.[196] In Heidegger's mind, death is 'one's ownmost possibility'.[197] As the ultimate limit of human existence, death thus functions as a means of individuation and becomes the very stuff of existential authenticity. Like Isabella's observation that 'The sense of death is most in apprehension' (*Measure for Measure*, III.i.76), Spira's explanation of how he comes to live in relation to the prospect of his own death strikes an important chord with existentialism. But perhaps even more striking is the fact that Spira's writing provides evidence of an emerging existentialist vocabulary in the Renaissance. Words and phrases like 'despair', 'anguish', 'the apprehension of death', and 'the manners of being' punctuate the whole of his text. The wording and vocabulary of this early modern work thus undermine Ferry's argument that 'If . . . some poets of the period held conceptions of internal experience comparable to those implied by our language about an *inner life* or a *real self*, they did not have our ways of phrasing them.'[198] On the contrary, early modern thinkers and writers were using the same existentialist language to describe their most intimate existential experiences. 'There can be no doubt', writes Udo Thiel, 'that self-consciousness and personal identity in the form in which they are so widely discussed today originate in the rich debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'.[199] Anthony Low goes even further, provocatively arguing that 'there was nothing altogether new in the stunning early-modernist sense of a vast, inner world of the self that is exemplified most famously in Hamlet', because 'consciousness of an inner self has always been an aspect of human experience.'[200]

There is more evidence of an early modern understanding of death in a philosophical sense in Montaigne's essay, 'To philosophize is to learn how to die'. Montaigne is frank about the realities of human finitude: 'The end of the course is death. It is the objective necessarily within our sights. If death frightens us how can we go one step forward without anguish? For ordinary people the remedy is not to think about it; but what brutish insensitivity can produce so gross a blindness?' (p. 92). He asks: 'How can we ever rid ourselves of thoughts of death or stop imagining that death has us by the scruff of the neck at every moment?' (p. 95). Death, Montaigne reasons, is an unavoidable part of life, and although human beings may try to flee from the anguish

[196] *Ibid*., p. 16.
[197] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 308.
[198] Ferry, *The Inward Language*, p. 7.
[199] Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 2.
[200] Anthony Low, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003), pp. ix-x.

produced by death, they must realise that 'To practise death is to practise freedom' (p. 96). This argument put forward by Montaigne and his association of death with freedom is almost identical to Heidegger's later theory. Indeed, it is perhaps Montaigne who articulates the notion more succinctly. He writes: 'Death is one of the attributes you were created with; death is a part of you; you are running away from yourself; this *being* you enjoy is equally divided between death and life' (p. 103). Montaigne's thoughts in this essay constitute another compelling example of early modern interest in the notion of existential angst.

Montaigne has a skill for lucidly expressing difficult existential ideas. Take, for example, the following passage from the essay, 'Our emotions get carried away beyond us':

> We are never 'at home': we are always outside ourselves. . . . Whoever would do what he has to do would see that the first thing he must learn is to know what he is and what is properly his. And whoever does know himself never considers external things to be his; above all other things, he loves and cultivates himself. (p. 11)

Montaigne is describing here the inherent self-alienation human beings experience when they reflect on their own subjectivity. Heidegger's describes a similar sensation and employs the same terminology in *Being in Time*: 'In anxiety one feels "*uncanny*". Here the particular indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to expression: the "nothing and nowhere". But here "uncanniness" also means "not being at home" [das Nichtzuhause-sein].'[201] It seems that, in some cases, Renaissance thinkers articulate their thoughts on fundamental existentialist ideas in a more accurate and more intelligible way than existentialists themselves. As I shall argue in the next chapter, an awareness of the form and language of philosophy is an area of common interest in both Renaissance and existentialist thought.

The Self as a Project: Renaissance Self-Becoming

Pico della Mirandola's *On the Dignity of Man* (1486) has often been regarded as the manifesto of Renaissance humanism. Stevie Davies, like many critics, has concluded that 'it pours out the philosopher's delight in his conclusion that man is free as air to be

[201] Heidegger, *Being in Time,* p. 233.

whatever he likes, making him potentially not just the equal but the superior of any other created being.'[202] This is one of the memorable passages from the text, and one many critics cite as evidence of Pico's humanistic philosophy:

> Therefore [God] took up man, a work of indeterminate form; and placing him at the midpoint of the world, He spoke to him as follows:
>
> 'We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift particularly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgement, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the moulder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer.[203]

Pico's intellectual and philosophical curiosity in this text is much more complex and radical than many critics have suggested. Ernst Cassirer argues that for Pico 'It is not being that prescribes once and for all the lasting direction which the mode of action will take; rather, the original direction of action determines and places being', and therefore *On the Dignity of Man* constitutes a prefiguration of the existentialist mantra 'existence precedes essence'.[204] According to Dollimore, Pico's work is important because it is evidence of anti-essentialist thought in the Renaissance, proof that Renaissance thinkers understood that man is made 'without a fixed identity'.[205] But Pico is not an anti-essentialist: he is a proto-existentialist. In this passage, he emphasises the individual's capacity to 'sculpt' and 'mould' their own existence. Paul J. W. Miller accurately observes that there is an uncanny resemblance to modern theories of subjectivity in Pico's work: 'The most remarkable contribution he makes is the notion that the root of man's excellence and dignity lies in the fact that man is the maker of his own nature.

---

[202] Stevie Davies, *Renaissance Views of Man* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), pp. 62-3.
[203] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, and Heptaplus*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis et al. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), pp. 4-5.
[204] Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy,* trans. Mario Domandi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 84.
[205] Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 169.

Man may be what he wishes to be; he makes himself what he chooses.'[206] He goes on to argue that in Pico's philosophy '[Man] gives himself his nature, as a sculptor gives form to a statue. This does not mean that man is an absolute creator of himself, for the making activity of man operates upon potencies which are already given.'[207] Pico suggests that an individual must negotiate the creation of his own existential self. It is not surprising, then, that Pico's iconic text resonates profoundly with Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism,* in which the twentieth-century philosopher claims: 'Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing - as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.'[208] Of course, although the passage from Pico quoted above certainly *seems* to promote an anti-essentialist view of man, it would be misleading to suggest that Pico was part of a subversive, anti-essentialist tradition. He still thinks of man, society and the cosmos in statified terms, as specifically positioned in the Renaissance chain of being. In many ways, he is still a conventional essentialist thinker. But he anticipates the existentialist view that human subjectivity is realised through action and interaction with the world. Referring directly to the passage from Pico above, Taylor observes that it 'seems to prepare the way, even while remaining within the Renaissance Platonic order of ontic logos, for a later decisive break with it. It seems to prepare a way for a stage where the ends of human life will no longer be defined in relation to a cosmic order at all, but must be discovered (or chosen) within.'[209]

As we saw in his explanation of the way man must 'cultivate himself' (p. 11), Montaigne was clearly another early modern thinker interested in the idea of self-becoming. Although Grady implicitly recognises the 'existential' subjectivity that lies at the heart of the *Essays*, his analysis does not extend far enough to show how Montaigne is specifically interested in the idea of self-becoming, which can be seen in Montaigne's famous description of his frustratingly fluctuating self:

> I am unable to stabilise my subject: it staggers confusedly along with a natural drunkenness. I grasp it as it is now, at this moment when I am lingering over it. I am not portraying being but becoming: not a passage from one age to another . . . but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must adapt this account of

[206] Paul J. W. Miller, Introduction to *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One, and Heptaplus*, p. xiv.
[207] *Ibid*., p. xv.
[208] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 28.
[209] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 200.

> myself to the passing hour. I shall perhaps change soon, not accidentally but intentionally. (pp. 907-8)

Montaigne's selfhood is precariously in flux because it is subject to the volatilities of the external world. Yet it is also something which he has the power to change 'intentionally'. Montaigne thus regards himself as an active participant in the process of existing. He recognises his own individual power to shape his subjectivity. As Holbrook observes, 'Montaigne repeatedly insists on the preeminent importance of this project of becoming oneself. It is a *project* . . . because of the array and tenacity of the forces seeking to draw one away from one's true self - to tempt one into the sin of self-forgetting.'[210] Selfhood, according to Montaigne, is a constant and turbulent striving.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre claims that 'each person is an absolute choice of self from the standpoint of a world of knowledges and techniques which this choice both assumes and illumines.'[211] Human beings can surpass and reformulate these 'knowledges and techniques' by realising their existential freedom. This is the core of Sartre's concept of human agency: individuals can make the world mean something to them. This is an idea that is also absolutely crucial in the Renaissance. Again and again, early modern thinkers and writers implore their readers to engage actively in the process of self-becoming. Sugimura observes that there is a special correlation between Renaissance Stoicism and 'its modern cousin, existentialism.'[212] In Stoicism, as in existentialism, selfhood and identity are constructed through choice, through an active engagement with the surrounding world. Edmund Calamy's *The Monster of Sinful Self-Seeking; Anatomized., Together with A Description of the Heavenly and Blessed Selfe-Seeking* is an excellent example of this. He writes:

> Qu. *What is this heavenly and blessed selfe-seeking?*
> Ans. To understand this aright, is a point of great concernment. For the more we know of this *Divine selfe-seeking*, the more we will shun and abhor the *sinfull self-seeking*. . . . *He that denyeth his sinfull selfe most, seeketh himselfe most.* He that hates himselfe as corrupted by *Adams* fall, and seeketh the utter ruine and extirpation of the old *Adam* within him, this man doth truly love himself. This is divine self-seeking, to kill thy sins, that thy sins may not kill thy soule.[213]

---

[210] *Ibid*., p. 189.
[211] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 575.
[212] Sugimura, 'Two Concepts of Reality in *Anthony and Cleopatra*', p. 77.
[213] Edmund Calamy, *The Monster of Sinful Self-Seeking; Anatomized., Together with A Description of the Heavenly and Blessed Selfe-Seeking* (London: 1654), pp. 8-9.

The phrase 'selfe-seeking' sounds like a contradiction. How can you seek yourself? For this to be possible, there must be a dimension of consciousness that makes one capable of self-differentiation. True 'selfe-seeking' is presented by Calamy not as aggressive or heroic individualism but as something which needs to be asserted against such forces. Those human beings, he tells us, who deny and reject their inauthentic sinful ways, in so doing actualise their authentic inner self.

Jacques Abbadie's religious treaty *The Art of Knowing One-Self: or, An Enquiry into the Sources of Morality* (first English translation published in 1695) is another example of a Renaissance text which considers self-creation, self-stylisation and self-experimentation to be ethical imperatives. By claiming that man must be 'a Lover of himself',[214] Abbadie saw how moral behaviour could stem from a realisation of one's existential responsibilities. Like Calamy and Donne, he was also aware that dangerous and corrupted forms of self-love threaten the process of authentic self-becoming. He recognised and denounced the dark side of individualism and its tendency to devalue human life by making it narrower and poorer in meaning. Nevertheless, Abbadie continues to see the benefits of taking care of oneself, writing: 'as Self-love is the general Source of those Motives which determine our Heart, so 'tis Self-love, as it looks towards Eternity, that makes all the strength we have to raise ourselves above the Confines of the World.'[215] Consciousness, as a way of relating to one's own self, was deeply imbedded in the idea of ethics in the early modern period. Thiel points out that the words 'consciousness' and 'conscience' are etymologically related (deriving from the Latin 'conscientia'). In the seventeenth century, the term 'conscience' shifted from meaning knowledge shared with someone else (God) and 'came to be understood in a self-relating sense.'[216] Early modern thinkers such as Abbadie recognised that human beings have the capacity to ethically assess their selves and their actions, and their writings support Donald R. Wehrs' claims that early modern individuals demonstrated 'an ethical responsiveness to lived, felt experience.'[217]

It is worth commenting on another of Pico's texts in order to assess how important the ideas of self-becoming and Christian self-becoming were in the Renaissance. In *Being and the One* Pico attempts to show that the distinction between God and human beings hinges on the difference between the transitive and the

[214] Jacques Abbadie, *The Art of Knowing Oneself: or, An Enquiry into the Sources of Morality* (Oxford: Leonard Lichfield, 1695), p. 43.
[215] *Ibid*., p. 48.
[216] Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject*, p. 8.
[217] Donald R. Wehrs, 'Moral Physiology, Ethical Prototypes, and the Denaturing of Sense in Shakespearean Tragedy', *College Literature*, 33:1 (2006), p. 74.

predicative senses of the verb 'to be'. Pico revises the neoplatonist view that God is an entity that is prior to being and is therefore incompatible with being. Instead, Pico argues that God is pure being: he is a mode of existence that does not participate in the process of being. He uses the relationship between being and non-being to explain his point:

> Being has the aspect of a concrete noun. *Being*, and *that which is*, are the same in meaning. This word *existence* [*esse*] seems to be the abstract form of the preceding terms. That which participates existence is called being [*ens*], just as that which light [*lux*] is called luminous, and that which has the act of seeing [*ipsum videre*] is called seeing [*videns*]. If we should look at this exact signification of being, we shall deny being not only to what is not, and to what is nothing, but to that which is to such a degree that it is existence [*ipsum esse*], which is of itself and from itself, and by participation in which all things are.[218]

Pico here articulates a distinction between being and existence. God is different from human beings because human beings exist only by virtue of their own act of existing. They actualise their existence by participating in it. Being is thus an achievement: it is something that is brought about by man himself and involves the full realisation of his formal nature, which has been bestowed on him by God. So Pico radically reverses the neoplatonist contention that God is beyond the realms of human understanding. God is not unknowable because he is beyond being. On the contrary, Pico asserts that individuals' thoughts and actions are expressions of God.

Pico's philosophical/theological writings strike a chord with Christian existentialism and most notably with the work of Søren Kierkegaard. For Kierkegaard, becoming 'religious' or the quest for a profound relationship with God is intimately bound up with the difficult task of becoming an authentic individual. For Pico, man participates in and is drawn to the life of God through divine grace. It is not surprising, then, that both Pico and Kierkegaard celebrate the figure of Abraham as the father of true Christian faith. Reflecting on how Abraham transcends conventional morality, Pico writes: 'The wise Abraham was the first founder of the true religion, the first to free himself from the law of nature and to meditate upon the divine law, the first to urge men to worship one God, the first to try to drive away the darkness and error and to declare war upon the evil demons who are called the princes of darkness.'[219] Likewise,

[218] Pico, *On Being and the One*, p. 44.
[219] Pico, *Heptaplus*, pp. 154-5.

Kierkegaard claims that Abraham's decision to sacrifice his only son to God epitomises the wholehearted, passionate commitment to a singular cause that is required for true religious experience. He achieves what Kierkegaard calls 'a teleological suspension of the ethical'.[220] But Abraham's position is paradoxical, because justifying and taking responsibility for one's actions is inextricably tied to the moral expectations of the public. Kierkegaard argues that Abraham's existential singularity at the moment he makes the decision to sacrifice his son means that he achieves a kind of absolute responsibility that transcends normative ethics. This new existential responsibility allows Abraham to enter into a deeper and more spiritually intense relationship with God. Of course, Pico and Kierkegaard do not offer identical theological arguments. However, both thinkers suggest that the experience of divinity, and the ethical implications of this experience, are integral to of the subjective experience of being human.

The Self and Others: The Ethical Dimension of Existence

With individualism emerging as a new phenomenon in the Renaissance, many writers began to express concerns about the effect of changing human relations on society. William Harrison chronicled these changes, writing: 'euerie function and seuerall vocation striueth with other, which of them should have all the water of commoditie run into hir owne cesterne.'[221] He later adds: 'the ground of the parish is gotton vp into a few mens hands, yea sometimes into the tenure of one, two or three, whereby the rest are compelled, either to be hired seruants vnto the other, or else to beg their bread in miserie from doore to doore.'[222] The pamphleteer Robert Crowley raises similar concerns:

> . . . this is a Citye
> in name, but, in dede,
> It is a packe of people
> that seke after meede;
> For Officers and al
> do seek their own gaine,
> But for the wealth of *the* commons
> not one taketh pain.
> An hell with out order,

[220] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 65.
[221] Harrison, 'A Historicall description of the Iland of Britaine', II:v, p. 163.
[222] *Ibid*., II, xiii, p. 193.

> I maye it well call,
> Where euerye man is for him selfe,
> And no manne for all.[223]

Robert Weimann uses these examples to show the dominance of the new model of individuality. He writes: 'The point that has to be made is not, of course, that acquisitive and competitive attitudes had already displaced the communal spirit but that the latter - existing side by side with the new - became increasingly vulnerable to the pressures of the former'.[224] John Stow's worries about the way the civic ethos was being threatened by the commercialisation of communal life and the rise of the urban environment are clearly apparent in *A Survey of London*. In one passage, Stow vividly describes the repeated desecration of a statue of the Virgin Mary on one of London's bustling thoroughfares. He notes that although 'proclamation was made, that whoso would betray the doers, should have forty crowns', the city authorities struggled to prevent further acts of vandalism.[225] In another chapter, Stow criticises the greed of private land-owners keen to fence off common land for their own purposes. He cites Edward Hall's recollection of the social action taken by a group of citizens in response to such practices. The erection of tall hedges around sections of land on the outskirts of the city, claims Hall,

> so grieved the Londoners, that suddenly . . . a great number of the city assembled themselves in a morning, and a turner, in a fool's coat, came crying through the city, 'Shovels and spades! Shovels and spades!' So many of the people followed, that it was a wonder to behold; and within a short space all the hedges about the city were cast down, and the ditches filled up, and everything made plain, such was the diligence of these workmen. The King's council hearing of this assembly, came to the Gray Friars, and sent for the mayor and council of the city to know the cause, which declared to them the injury and annoying done to the citizens and to their liberties, which though they would not seek disorderly to redress, yet the commonalty and young persons could not be stayed thus to remedy the same.[226]

---

[223] Robert Crowley, *The Selected Works of Robert Crowley*, ed. J. M. Cowper (London: N. Trubner, 1872), p. 11.
[224] Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 178.
[225] John Stow, *A Survey of London: Written in the Year 1598*, ed. Henry Morley (Stroud: Sutton, 1994), p. 261.
[226] Edward Hall quoted in Stow, *A Survey of London*, p. 388.

Angela Stock observes that 'both the *Survey* and London drama sought to make Londoners self-conscious: conscious of their civic heritage and of ancient rights as well as responsibilities, but also conscious of the nature of their collective relationships.'[227] But for Stow, 'stage-playing had become tainted by the habits of an emergent consumer culture . . . it was evidence of the lamentable decline of citizens' participation in communal civic culture.'[228] This nostalgic longing for a sense of community was often matched with a deep distrust of man's individualistic and self-seeking behaviour. This idea is also articulated by David Abercromby in *A Moral Discourse of the Power of Interest* (1690), in which he argues:

> We have to rid our selves of the Tyranny and Slavery of self-interest, which yet we endeavour to clear our selves of before men, by a thousand protestations of our just and fair dealings, being asham'd to be thought concern'd for our selves in what we pretend to do meerly for others. This is the Vizard we put on in all our specious pretences to Honesty and Justice, left we are at last discovered to be what we really are, and will by no means own.[229]

Abercromby urges his readers to reconsider the 'specious pretences' they use to disguise their individualistic ways. This mode of being, he argues, threatens to destroy the network of human relations which constitute society. Abercromby's work supports Low's claim that many early modern texts 'illustrate significant turns in the history of individuality and subjectivity and their relations to community and society.'[230]

Touching on the tension between the individual and the absorbing social world in existentialist thought, John Macquarrie asks: 'How do we reconcile the fact that existential analysis reveals the fundamentally communal character of existence with the equally plain fact that existentialist philosophers are in many cases individualists?'[231] The relationship between self and other is an important aspect of existential thinking. Whilst some writers such as Sartre suggest that the relationship is a site of conflict and claim that the objectifying power of other people's perceptions renders human subjectivity problematic, others such as de Beauvoir and Buber argue that authentic and mutually respectful human relations are possible. The conflict between the

---

[227] Angela Stock, 'Stow's Survey and the London Playwrights', in *John Stow and the Making of the English Past*, ed. Ian Gadd and Alexandra Gillespie (London: British Library, 2004), pp. 90-1.
[228] *Ibid*., p. 91.
[229] David Abercromby, *A Moral Discourse of the Power of Interest* (London: Printed by Tho. Hodgkin, 1690), pp. 10-11.
[230] Low, *Aspects of Subjectivity*, p. xii.
[231] John Macquarrie, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), p. 118.

individualistic and the communal imperatives of human existence was also being debated at length in the Renaissance. Donne famously writes: 'No man is an *Iland,* intire of it selfe; every man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; . . . Any mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankinde*'.[232] The well-known passage is freshly illuminated when considered alongside one of Sartre's existentialist propositions:

> What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time that we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole.[233]

In existentialist thought - particularly in its Marxist variations - individualism has an important ethical dimension. Every human choice, Sartre tells us, is a choice for all. In Donne's work we can discern an earlier prefiguration of the same idea.

Whilst some Renaissance thinkers were expressing concerns about the dangers of individualism, others were finding reason to mistrust public life. Montaigne repeatedly expresses a desire to protect his authentic individuality from the disingenuous lure of what existentialists would call the 'They-Self'. Urging himself and his reader to break free from everyday entanglements, he writes: 'let us loosen ourselves from the bonds that tie us to others', and 'let us disentangle ourselves from those violent traps which pledge us to other things and which distance us from ourselves' (p. 269). The same indignant disapproval is found in Kierkegaard's description of 'the Public' as 'an abstract void which is everything and nothing . . . the most dangerous of powers. . . . More and more individuals, owing to their bloodless indolence will aspire to being nothing at all in order to become the public'.[234] For both Montaigne and the existentialists, individuals lose their individualising sense of self when they become fixated with the abstractions, routines and common ideals of the public. But Montaigne also prefigures a very specific aspect of existentialist theory. In 'On Solitude' he writes: 'It is not enough to withdraw from the mob, not enough to go to another place: we have to withdraw from such attributes of the mob as are within us. It is our own self we have to isolate and take back into possession' (p. 269). A mere withdrawal from society will

[232] John Donne, 'Meditation XVII', in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975), p. 87.
[233] Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, p. 29.
[234] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age; and, Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 63-4.

not suffice: individuals must rid themselves of their mental shackles and reaffirm their existential responsibilities. In another essay, Montaigne explicitly outlines the issue at stake: 'I have enough to do to attend to matters which by nature belong to my own being without inviting in outsiders. Those who realise what they owe to themselves, and the great duties which bind themselves to themselves, discover that nature has made an ample enough charge' (p. 1135). A similar concern is voiced by Ben Jonson in *Discoveries*, where he suggests that 'Our whole life is like a Play: Wherein every man forgetfull of himselfe, is in travaile with expression of another. Nay, wee so insist in imitating others, as wee cannot (where it is necessary) returne to our selves . . . [we] make the habit of another nature, as it is never forgotten.'[235] This criticism of human mimicry and imitation is echoed by William Hazlitt, when he writes: 'We are something in ourselves, nothing when we try to ape others.'[236] There is strong evidence that early modern thinkers were considering at length the social and existential ramifications of a new emphasis on the individual. Their concerns were diverse and divergent, but when they are placed alongside key passages from existentialist texts, their radically modern elements come to light.

Conclusion

The extent to which existentialism brought about a radical change in academic philosophy has been a key area of debate for both the movement's original contributors and its subsequent commentators. John Wild argues that existentialist writers 'engaged in a radical venture of reconstruction rendered necessary by the breakdown of modern philosophy.'[237] Walter Kaufmann similarly describes existentialism as a revolutionary departure from previous modes of thought: 'The refusal to belong to any school of thought, the repudiation of the adequacy of any body of beliefs whatever, and especially of systems, and a marked dissatisfaction with traditional philosophy as superficial, academic, and remote from life – that is the heart of existentialism.'[238] These paradigmatic accounts show how existentialism has often been perceived as a

[235] Ben Jonson, *Discoveries 1641; Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden 1619* (London: Barnes & Noble, 1966), p. 44.
[236] William Hazlitt, *Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth Delivered at the Surrey Institution* (London: Stodart and Steuart, 1820), p. 35.
[237] John Wild, *The Challenge of Existentialism* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 9.
[238] Walter Kaufmann, *Introduction to Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 12.

reactionary revolt against the traditional, institutionalised methods of philosophy. Such views are misleading for, as this chapter has shown, the origins of existentialism can be traced back to an important group of precursors, which include Socrates, Pico, Montaigne, and Shakespeare.

Renaissance writers were fascinated by the profoundly complex existentialist question: what does it mean to exist and live as a human being in the world? This question, of course, encompasses a whole range of other interrelated issues, such as the quest for authenticity, the problem of self-neglect, the loss of selfhood in public life, and the radical reflexivity of consciousness, all of which were of interest to various early modern thinkers. However, although the Renaissance pioneered many modern existentialist ideas about subjectivity and inwardness, it would be historically inaccurate to regard the proto-existentialism of the Renaissance and formally theorised existentialism of the twentieth century as identical. Taylor warns against the temptation to read writers like Montaigne anachronistically and prefers to refer to the early modern thinker as 'a paradigm figure'.[239] This passing reference to Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm shifts helps us to reconsider the dialogue between fully-fledged existentialism and the emergence of embryonic existentialist ideas in the Renaissance. Kuhn's work helped to explain why the scientific community experiences periodic changes when anomalies and inconsistencies challenge established assumptions.[240] Instead of linear and continuous progression, he argued, paradigm shifts radically alter previously acquired knowledge and force scientists to think about antecedent information in completely different ways. Hugh Grady has used Kuhn's work as a blueprint for a reconsideration of the way critical and aesthetic domains are formulated.[241] The immediate advantage of thinking in terms of paradigms is that it allows for an understanding and appreciation of the flexible development of concepts and ideas. An understanding of the paradigmatic changes in human knowledge encourages a re-examination of some of the more forward-looking aspects of Renaissance texts. When we look at the work of Shakespeare from our present-day perspective, we can recognise that it clearly resonates with existentialism in significant respects without aggressively or anachronistically appropriating him as a modern theorist of subjectivity.

---

[239] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 184.

[240] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edn (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).

[241] Hugh Grady, *The Modernist Shakespeare: Critical Texts in a Material World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE AS PHILOSOPHY; PHILOSOPHY AS LITERATURE

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, existentialism has important early modern roots. Fundamental existentialist ideas were beginning to take shape in the rapidly evolving intellectual culture of the Renaissance. Shakespeare, I contend, was a pivotal contributor to this emerging existentialist discourse. Building on this argument, this chapter will suggest that existentialist thinkers and Shakespeare share an interest in the intimate relationship between philosophy and literature or, to put it more precisely, Shakespeare and existentialists are attracted to the idea that philosophy and literature can be articulated together in a way that intensifies both forms of thought. Shakespeare's manipulation of the terms 'philosophy' and 'philosopher', and his deep skepticism towards any single or strongly held point of view means that, in a broad and general sense, Shakespeare's plays are philosophically charged. Of course, throughout his plays, he poses – implicitly and explicitly - many important philosophical questions, which include one of the most basic of all: 'What is philosophy?'. But the polyphonic quality of dramatic form, the way Shakespeare's plays give voice to a range of competing ideas, propositions and attitudes, ensures that not only does he dramatise fundamental philosophical questions, but he also indirectly questions the nature and validity of philosophical reflection itself. This element of Shakespeare's drama resonates with existentialists' concerns about the form of philosophy. One of the most innovative elements of existentialism was the way it brought to light the literariness of philosophical writing - its textuality, its manipulation of language, and its interest in metaphor and narrative. By breaking down traditional boundaries between the two, existentialists such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Camus, Beauvoir and Sartre explore the

mutually illuminating relationship between literature and philosophy. They use literature not just as a vehicle for philosophy, but also as a way to articulate more precisely the existential immediacy and sensuous experience of human beings as they live and act in the world. Engaging directly with Shakespeare's work, many existentialists regard their Renaissance precursor as the master of intuitive existential drama. Shakespeare is an exceptionally important writer for many existentialist thinkers and his plays have had a tremendous influence on the development of key existentialist ideas. This chapter will argue that in their practical employment of philosophy in literature and the way their work brings to light the literary nature of philosophical ideas themselves, Shakespeare and existentialists allow the two forms of thinking to fuse, and thus produce an impact whose intensity is not apparent in either form alone.[242]

Shakespeare as a Philosophical Thinker

How profitable is it to read Shakespeare's plays as sources of philosophical insight? The plays are undeniably full of probing ontological, metaphysical, epistemological and ethical questions. Many commentators have suggested that Shakespeare's philosophical prowess is a fundamental reason for his continuing appeal. William Hazlitt finds in the dramatic life-force of the plays 'the spirit of a poet and the acuteness of a philosopher.'[243] Harold Bloom speaks of Shakespeare's 'cognitive acuity'.[244] However, as Agnes Heller points out, the 'dubious honorary title of philosopher' cannot be conferred on Shakespeare simply because some of his characters express philosophically couched sentiments or because there is sufficient evidence to suggest that he engaged directly with the philosophical work of Machiavelli, Plato and Montaigne.[245] Of course, Shakespeare does not dramatise a consistent or explicit philosophical creed or method; there is no clear-cut intellectual system underpinning his plays and poems. As John D. Cox puts it: 'While Shakespeare's esthetic thinking is not dogmatic, it is extraordinarily suggestive, and it enters fully into contemporary debate

[242] This argument sets my study apart from others which have approached Shakespeare as a philosophical thinker. In *Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), Morris Weitz adopts a more traditional methodology. He suggests that 'some works of literature . . . contain philosophical ideas that are as integral to these works as any other constituents' and 'there is a place in literary criticism for the aesthetic articulation of those ideas' (p. 118).

[243] William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (Boston: Wells and Lily, 1818), p. 84.

[244] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 179.

[245] Agnes Heller, *The Time is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), p. 2.

about art, theater, illusion, how we know, and the enigmatic nature of being.'[246] There is a philosophical impulse at work in his plays that can be broadly understood as 'existential' in character. Instead of conceptual or propositional knowledge, Shakespeare investigates what Leon Harold Craig calls 'experiential' knowledge, a form of understanding gained through the experience of the existential intensities of human life.[247] Shakespeare's philosophical views or ideas are always concretely situated and expressed by characters embodied in the process of existing. It is his manipulation of dramatic form and poetic phrasing that creates and enhances his plays' philosophical implications.

Before examining Shakespeare's semantic expansion of the word 'philosophy,' it is worth briefly commenting on the principal meanings of the term in the Renaissance. In its strictest sense, the word 'philosophy' meant 'natural philosophy' or 'science' in early modern England.[248] The *Oxford English Dictionary* explains that it originally referred to 'a branch of knowledge that deals with the principles governing the material universe and perception of physical phenomena.' Hamlet invokes this rational empiricism when he uses the term 'philosophy'. As he swears his oath to the ghost, he says: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy' (I.v.165-6), and later in the play, just before the players arrive, he says: 'there is something in this more than natural if philosophy could find it out' (II.ii.303-5). However, Kiernan Ryan notes that Hamlet's use of the term 'is a gentle rebuke to those who believe that the phenomenal world can be rationally explained', adding that 'the phrase "dreamt of" allows philosophy more imaginative and speculative scope than the rebuke entails.'[249] This suggestion that Renaissance thinkers were pressing for a more expansive sense of the term 'philosophy' is supported by some of Montaigne's reflections. In 'An apology for Raymond Sebond', Montaigne writes: 'Philosophers can hardly be serious when they try to introduce certainty into Law by asserting that there are so-called Natural Laws, perpetual and immutable, whose essential characteristic consists in their being imprinted upon the human race.'[250] He proposes a broader understanding of the term: 'philosophy is the art which teaches us how to live' (p. 183),

---

[246] John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 226.

[247] Leon Harold Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001), p. 19.

[248] David Crystal and Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 326.

[249] Kiernan Ryan, 'Shakespeare's Thoughtless Wisdom', Unpublished Paper, May 2010.

[250] Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 654. All subsequent citations in this chapter are from this edition and indicated by page number in brackets.

he suggests in an essay on the practices of educating children. This definition clearly resonates with a more modern and far-reaching sense of the word. By expanding the significance of the term, Montaigne implicitly suggests that it could also include other subdivisions of philosophy such as morality and ethics. This renegotiation of the boundaries of 'philosophy' is critical for Montaigne's own philosophical project in *The Essays*, and one particular passage on the subject is worth quoting at length:

> Here is a pleasant thought: when the passions bring dislocation to our reason, we become virtuous; when reason is driven out by frenzy or by sleep, that image of death, we become prophets and seers. I have never been more inclined to believe Philosophy! It was pure enthusiasm - breathed into the spirit of philosophy by Truth herself - which wrenched from her, against her normal teaching, that the tranquil state of our soul, the quiet state, the sanest state that Philosophy can obtain for her, is not her best state. Our waking sleeps more than our sleeping; our wisdom is less wise than our folly; our dreams are worth more than our discourse; and to remain inside ourselves is to adopt the worst place of all. (p. 640)

Madness has a particular aptitude for discovering truth. 'Though this be madness yet there is method in't' (*Hamlet,* II.ii.202-3), says Polonius in an aside, echoing a similar idea to Montaigne's. He continues: 'a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of' (II.ii.206-8). Shakespeare, like Montaigne, saw that knowledge about the world could be uncovered by paradoxical or unconventional means. In philosophy, to borrow another of Polonius' phrases, sometimes 'indirections find directions out' (II.i.63).

In the Renaissance, many writers expressed concerns about the dangers of philosophical abstraction. Montaigne writes: 'even among men of intelligence philosophy means something fantastical and vain, without value or usefulness, both in opinions and practice. . . . It is a great mistake to portray Philosophy with a haughty, frowning, terrifying face, or as inaccessible to the young' (p. 180). In Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, the narrator Folly mocks scholastic practices and speaks disparagingly of 'those soured individuals who are so wrapped up in their philosophic studies or some other serious, exacting affairs that they are old before they were ever young.'[251] Centuries after Montaigne and Erasmus, existentialist thinkers would similarly denounce dense theoreticism and recognise the gulf between philosophical abstractions and real, existential problems. Erasmus was particularly attracted to the idea of ethical, embodied subjectivity. In his work, as Donald R. Wehrs notes, 'The reader is forced to

[251] Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 24.

grasp ethical significance emerging naturally, spontaneously, "plainly visible to the eye" from evocations of lived experience.'[252] Camus believed that any attempt to systematise the sensuous, particular, concrete realities of human existence jeopardised the ethical obligations that accompany a human being's active involvement in the world. He wanted philosophy to be a personal, self-engaging endeavour that stems from a writer's immediate experiences.[253] Celebrating Aristotle's work, Camus writes: 'We know that the system, when it is worthwhile, cannot be separated from its author. The *Ethics* itself, in one of its aspects, is but a long and reasoned personal confession. Abstract thought returns at last to its prop of flesh.'[254] Like existentialists, Montaigne preferred practical, personal philosophy, remarking that 'When reason fails us, we make use of experience' (p. 1207). Philosophy, in the form of abstract or generalised argument, is not fit for purpose.

In several plays, Shakespeare experiments with similar ideas. When Friar Laurence relays Romeo's sentence of banishment, his response exemplifies Shakespeare's scepticism about easy rationality and systematic thought:

> *Friar*. I'll give thee armour to keep off that word—
> Adversity's sweet milk, philosophy,
> To comfort thee though thou art banishèd.
> *Romeo*. Yet 'banishèd'? Hang up philosophy!
> Unless philosophy can make a Juliet,
> Displant a town, reverse a prince's doom,
> It helps not, it prevails not. Talk no more.
>
> (*Romeo and Juliet,* III.iii.54-60)

Outraged by Claudio's allegations of his daughter's sexual infidelity, Leonato similarly reacts against stoic ideals in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Rejecting his brother's 'counsel', he says:

> I pray thee peace, I will be flesh and blood,
> For there was never yet philosopher
> That could endure the toothache patiently,
> However they have writ the style of gods,

[252] Donald R Wehrs, 'Moral Physiology, Ethical Prototypes, and the Denaturing of Sense in Shakespearean Tragedy', *College Literature*, 33:1 (2006), p. 74.
[253] It is worth noting Adorno's criticism in *The Jargon of Authenticity* that, despite existentialists' rejection of theoretical abstraction, many promulgated philosophies and ideas that were as abstruse and verbose as those they repudiated.
[254] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 97.

And made a pish at chance and sufferance.

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, V.i.34-8)

Leonato and Romeo use the word philosophy as a synonym for stoic consolation, and this clearly illustrates the semantic slippage of the term in Shakespeare's work. For Leonato and Romeo, philosophical patience is an unsustainable response to genuine human adversity.

In a number of his plays, Shakespeare brings to the fore the tension between philosophising and living. Concerns about the uses of philosophical reasoning arise in *The Winter's Tale* when Polixenes and Perdita discuss the 'streaked gillyvors, / Which some call nature's bastards' (IV.iv.82-3). Polixenes eloquently argues that art is a means of improving nature but, in doing so, his philosophising leads to abstraction. As Charles Martindale writes: 'Polixenes neatly "deconstructs" the distinction between nature and art, but at the cost of making nature a concept too all-embracing to be of much philosophical use; Perdita gamefully defends the undeconstructed distinction by an appeal to common sense and common linguistic usage, and to her own values and experiences of life.'[255] Layers of dramatic irony are deliberately built into the scene, but Stephen Orgel observes that in Polixenes' violent response to his son's fiancé Shakespeare makes the more quotidian point that 'our opinions, even philosophical ones, are not invariably consistent . . . what we believe to be right for flowers we need not necessarily believe to be right for our children.'[256] Neat philosophies and abstract generalisations, Shakespeare's plays tell us, do not always respond adequately to the vicissitudes of real life.

This renegotiation of the meaning of philosophy is also found in *King Lear.* Lear famously mistakes the madman Poor Tom for a philosopher and this dramatic technique usually elicits laughter from an audience. Once again, there is a shift in the meaning of the term 'philosopher'. Lear first addresses Poor Tom as a natural philosopher by asking him: 'What is the cause of thunder' (xi.140). But when Lear then says 'I'll talk a word with this most learnèd Theban. / What is your study?' (xi.142-3), he signals his wider understanding of Poor Tom as a philosopher of life to whom profound ethical and ontological questions can be addressed. In his essay 'Shakespeare's Foolosophy', Jonathan Bate claims that *King Lear* 'moves from a

[255] Charles Martindale, 'Shakespeare *Philosophus*', in *Thinking With Shakespeare: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Essays for A. D. Nuttall,* ed. William Poole and Richard Scholar (London: Legenda, 2007), p. 41.
[256] Stephen Orgel, Introduction to *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Stephen Orgel, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 47.

theoretical and philosophical inquiry into deep causes to a practical faith in the surface truth of human actions and a trust in the wisdom to be gained from immediate experience.'[257] Lear finds a more readily accessible form of 'philosophy' in the ramblings and visceral torments of Poor Tom. As Bate notes, Shakespeare 'always finds theory wanting in the face of action. He is more interested in how people perform than in what they profess. He was, after all, a performer himself.'[258]

Shakespeare's apparent preference for real experience over theoretical propositions can also be discerned in Corin and Touchstone's conversation about what constitutes 'a good life':

> *Touchstone*. Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. As it is a spare life, look you, it fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach. Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?
>
> *Corin*. No more but that I know the more one sickens the worse at ease he is, and that he that wants money, means, and content is without three good friends; that the property of rain is to wet and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep; and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun; that he that hath learned no wit by nature nor art may complain of good breeding or comes of a very dull kindred.
>
> *Touchstone*. Such a one is a natural philosopher.
>
> (*As You Like It,* III.ii.12-27)

Touchstone's punning use of the phrase 'natural philosopher' to refer to Corin as an imbecile - and poke fun at contemporary scientists in the process - suggests that Shakespeare was keen to challenge and deconstruct the traditional meaning of the word 'philosophy'. Touchstone's philosophy is the equivocal, punning, paradoxical wisdom of the fool; Corin's is the 'natural' wisdom of the uneducated but pragmatic common man. But Corin's down-to-earth view of life is not entirely undermined by Touchstone's sceptical relativism. Shakespeare implicitly suggests that there is something to be valued in Corin's simple and unpretentious philosophy of life. Touchstone and Corin's

[257] Jonathan Bate, 'Shakespeare's Foolosophy', in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A. Foakes*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), pp. 25-6.
[258] *Ibid*., p. 25.

exchange suggests that Shakespeare was not only sceptical about abstract philosophical contention, but also intrigued by different forms of thinking and reasoning.

Philosophy, whether it is in the form of natural science, stoic consolation or a more generalised approach to life, is treated sceptically by Shakespeare in his plays. He directly questions the validity of certain philosophical modes of thinking because of their tendency to abstract from existential experience. As Ryan explains, 'it's the creative *aesthetic* intelligence at work in the sensuous immediacies of form and phrase that forges the subsuming vision of the play, which defies accurate or complete translation into philosophical terms past or present.'[259] This is a crucial point, for Shakespeare is an existential dramatist, not an existential philosopher. But the way his plays resist philosophical reduction may in fact render them all the more philosophically powerful. Quoting Stanley Cavell, John Joughin writes:

> Rather than regarding Shakespeare as a poor unwitting adjunct of reason or as somehow subsumed within its project, the dramatist's open-ended resistance to conceptual control might finally turn out to be a far more crucial resource for critical thought. In this sense, we might say that Shakespeare unwittingly provides access to the 'literary conditions of philosophical questioning itself'.[260]

In a way that anticipates existentialists such as Camus and Sartre, Shakespeare's use of dramatic form and language probes into the nature of philosophical enquiry. In *Philosophers and Thespians*, Freddie Rokem examines 'how philosophers have tried to embrace thespian modes of expression, appropriating theatrical practices, within their own discursive fields' and 'how the philosophers' thespian partners have frequently applied philosophical tools and modes of thinking in their own work.'[261] Rokem argues that Shakespeare is attuned to the mutually illuminating relationship between the worlds of theatre and philosophy. Hamlet, Shakespeare's most philosophically sensitive protagonist, is placed in a liminal position between both discourses: 'He relies on the theatre to solve existential philosophical issues, whereas his own subjective meditations and thoughts about the meaning of life are frequently highly theatricalized.'[262] The *theatrum mundi* trope is not ornamental for Shakespeare: it is a metaphor imbued with philosophical possibility.

---

[259] Ryan, 'Shakespeare's Thoughtless Wisdom'.
[260] John J. Joughin, Introduction to *Philosophical Shakespeares*, ed. John J. Joughin (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 11.
[261] Freddie Rokem, *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 2.
[262] *Ibid*., p. 58.

Shakespeare's use of drama to explore the existential dimensions and dilemmas of human existence is complemented by Sartre's interest in the way subjectivity is galvanised in the immediate moment of action. Drama, Sartre argues, shows how being is not rooted in essence but is created through an individual's direct engagement with the world. The theatrical stage is the perfect place for demonstrating a microcosmic world of human freedom. As Sartre explains:

> Action, in the true sense of the word, is that of the character; there are no images in the theatre but the image of the act, and if one seeks the definition of the theatre one must ask what an act is, because the theatre can represent nothing but the act. Sculpture represents the form of the body; the theatre the act of this body. Consequently, what we want to recover when we go to the theatre is evidently ourselves, but ourselves, not as we are, more or less poor, more or less proud of our youth and our beauty; rather to discover ourselves as we act, as we work, as we meet difficulties, as we are men who have rules for these actions.[263]

In *What is Literature?* Sartre speaks of his preference for 'a theatre of situations' rather than 'a theatre of characters'.[264] J. S. R. Goodlad's claims that the objective of Sartre's drama is to show 'that there is no sense in life *a priori*. Life is nothing until it is lived. The individual must make sense of life by choosing what he will do and how he will live. The whole approach to existence, to "reality", is an approach from inside – an approach from the point of view of the actor as opposed to that of the observer from without.'[265] Camus similarly argues that the fleeting creation of character on stage is full of existential vitality and dynamism. The unfolding of dramatic action reveals how human existence moves from endless potentiality to immediate, embodied form. To demonstrate his point, Camus turns to Shakespeare. He observes that Shakespeare's 'impulsive drama' shows human existence actualised in the moment. The role of the actor fascinates Camus. The actor, he writes, 'outlines or sculptures [his characters] and slips into their imaginary form, transfusing his blood into their phantoms.'[266] Actor and character cannot be readily separated. Always and explicitly a human being in a state of flux, the actor epitomises the absurd by illustrating on stage 'the suggestive truth that there is no frontier between what a man wants to be and what he is'.[267] When an actor

[263] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Beyond Bourgeois Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 5:3 (1961), pp. 4-5.
[264] Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 226.
[265] J. S. R. Goodlad, *A Sociology of Popular Drama* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1971), p. 32.
[266] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 78.
[267] *Ibid*., p. 77.

finishes his performance, he may later reach for a glass and become Hamlet raising his cup once again. This leads Camus to a particularly arresting conclusion. He claims: 'I should never really understand Iago unless I played his part'.[268] Camus suggests that Iago, Shakespeare's greatest enigma, can only be understood inwardly by the actor who takes up the role. 'Knowing' the character of Iago is an ontological rather than an epistemological problem.

Sartre's and Camus's emphasis on the philosophical dimension of theatrical performance helps shed light on the existential nature of Shakespeare's plays. In *Shakespearean Metaphysics*, Michael Witmore argues that 'Shakespeare valued immanence as a way of thinking about the very nature of being - locating the actor in the action, the player in the play.'[269] He adds that this dramatisation of immanence is 'not an exercise in transcendence, but an attempt to unearth a new and different kind of materialism, one that is grounded in bodies but is emphatic in asserting the reality of their dynamic interrelations.'[270] The argument that philosophical propositions, lemmas or dialogues cannot function in the same immediate way as the actions of real human bodies on stage is also put forward by Philip Davis. He writes:

> Shakespeare's drama is indeed an original text or background script for the creation of life - an argument made not in the spirit of bardolatry, but on behalf of recognizing in the plays a genuine mental template for evolutionary creation, a linguistic equivalent to DNA. For, like DNA, the original text hidden within the workings of Shakespeare is a text not so much to be read or to be explained as to be activated in life form.[271]

Existentialists found in Shakespeare an intuitive existential thinker and a master of instinctive philosophical literature. There is no tightly configured network of existential ideas underpinning Shakespeare's plays - although there are some intriguing prefigurations of key concepts and ideas - but rather a more general existential impulse that draws out the ontological, ethical and political ramifications of human existence.

In her extensive work on the relationship between literature and philosophy, Iris Murdoch repeatedly refers to Shakespeare as a brilliant thinker. In an interview with Bryan Magee she remarks: 'Think how much original thought there is in Shakespeare

---

[268] *Ibid*., p. 79.
[269] Michael Witmore, *Shakespearean Metaphysics* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 1-2.
[270] *Ibid*., p. 2.
[271] Philip Davis, *Shakespeare Thinking* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 1.

and how divinely inconspicuous it is.'[272] She makes a similar point in a later essay: 'The pages of Shakespeare abound in free and eccentric personalities whose realities Shakespeare had apprehended and displayed as something quite separate from himself. He is the most invisible of writers, and in my sense of the word the most un-Romantic of writers.'[273] By 'un-Romantic' Murdoch means that Shakespeare presents 'a plurality of real persons more or less naturalistically presented in a large social scene, and representing mutually independent centres of significance which are those of real individuals.'[274] Shakespeare's drama gestures towards a real world inhabited by real people. It is on the border between theatre and reality that the political dimension of his work begins to unfold.

Shakespeare is an existentialist, not just because of the existential ideas he explores, but also as a writer who is always philosophically engaged in his drama and poetry. D. Nuttall neatly sums up the relationship between Shakespeare and philosophy. He writes: 'Of course he is not a systematic philosopher; he is a dramatist. But the very avoidance of system may be shrewd - even, perhaps, philosophically shrewd. He shares with the major philosophers a knack of asking fundamental (sometimes very simple) questions. . . . Because Shakespeare will question anything, he treads on the toes of *later* theorists.'[275]

Existentialist Literature: Philosophy in a Different Key

Existentialist thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus are particularly conscious of the problems of philosophical form. Because they are interested in issues such as inwardness, interiority and introspection, problematic notions that conflate the examining subject ("I") with the subject examined ("me"), they consider at length the implications of their philosophical approach and mode of expression. The form and language of philosophy are as crucial as the issues and ideas at stake. Steven Earnshaw notes that for existentialist writers, 'to speak with a "received language" would be to speak inauthentically. It would be natural then, for each

[272] Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997), p. 21.
[273] *Ibid*., p. 275.
[274] *Ibid*., p. 271.
[275] A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 378-9.

existential philosopher to create a way of speaking which can be considered unique'.[276] Imaginative literature offered existentialists a new way to explore philosophical ideas and raise fundamental questions about the relationship between philosophy and form.

On the surface, the deliberate merging of philosophy and literature seems contradictory, even disingenuous. How can literature, which thrives on opacity, ambiguity and illusion, fulfil philosophy's demand for transparency, precision and truthfulness? Murdoch clarifies the differences between the two forms of writing:

> Philosophical writing is not self-expression, it involves a disciplined removal of the personal voice. Some philosophers maintain a sort of personal presence in their work. . . . But the philosophy has a plain impersonal hardness none the less. Of course, literature too involves a control of the personal voice and its transformation. One might even set up an analogy between philosophy and poetry, which is the hardest kind of literature. Both involve a special and difficult purification of one's sentiments, of thought emerging in language. But there is a kind of self-expression, together with all the playfulness and mystification of art. The literary writer deliberately leaves a space for his reader to play in. The philosopher must not leave any space.[277]

As part of their philosophical project, existentialists endeavour to deconstruct this polarisation of literature and philosophy. The entwining of literature and philosophy in existentialist thought is not a superficial or stylistic quirk; it is absolutely crucial to their philosophical project. Existentialists seek to destabilise the category of 'philosophy' and challenge the view that there is a fixed philosophical method. We saw earlier how, like Montaigne, Camus actively encouraged a more personal approach to philosophy. In a similar way, Simone de Beauvoir presents a form of philosophy that is rooted in personal experience. In *The Second Sex*, the only answer she can find to the question 'What is a woman?' is 'I am a woman'.[278] Her subjective self remains at the heart of her philosophical questioning. She writes: 'To state the question is, to me, to suggest, at once, a preliminary answer. The fact that I ask it is itself significant. . . . If I want to define myself, I must first of all say: 'I am a woman'; on this truth must be based all further discussion.'[279] By tethering her philosophical enquiry to her ordinary, everyday experience of herself as a woman, Beauvoir's approach signals an attempt to engage

[276] Steven Earnshaw, *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), p. 10.
[277] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 5.
[278] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 15.
[279] *Ibid*., p. 15.

with philosophy in a different way. Michèle Le Doeuff argues that Beauvoir transforms existentialism 'from the status of a system (necessarily returning back on itself) to that of a point of view oriented to a theoretical intent by being trained on a determinate and partial field of experience.'[280] In *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir recalls her reaction to reading Hegel. Despite admiring the sophistication of Hegel's methods and ambitions, she insists that there can be no philosophical system that can 'upset the living certainty of "I am, I exist, here and now, I am myself."'[281]

As we can begin to appreciate, 'personal presence' is actively encouraged by existentialists and this element of their work ignites the debate about the relationship between philosophy and form. For existentialists, truth is always subjective and particular because it is a matter of inwardness. They adopt a radically anti-systematic and anti-disciplinary approach to philosophy in order to resist narrowing their work to a set body of ideas. Disciplinary consolidation goes against existentialists' understanding of human existence. For existentialists, there can be no definitive formula for existence: it is not fixed, not conceivable as a proper noun. Instead, it is rooted in contingency and process. The self is constantly and actively involved in the task of self-becoming. For this reason, existentialists are attracted to the idea of philosophically resonant literature, a form of writing they believe more fully demonstrates the ontological, ethical and political complexities of human existence. Camus says that 'the great philosophical novelists' prefer 'writing in images rather than in reasoned arguments,' because they 'are convinced of the uselessness of any principle of explanation and sure of the educative message of perceptible appearance.'[282] Literature lets us get closer to the truth about human existence, Camus insists. The style and form of philosophy are crucially important considerations for existentialists, as they were for existentialism's two great precursors, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Kierkegaard, perhaps one of the most passionate advocates of 'anti-systematic' philosophy, is deliberately ambiguous about the poetical nature of philosophy. In *Fear and Trembling*, he claims: 'I am not a poet, I practice dialectics.'[283] There is a deliberate note of irony here, as Kierkegaard is well aware of the distinctive poetic attributes of his work. In *The Point of View for My Work as an Author*, he discusses his personal engagement with his writing and states: 'I am a poet, but a very special kind, for I am

[280] Michèle Le Doeuff, 'Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism', in *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Elaine Marks (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), p. 149.
[281] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 469.
[282] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 101.
[283] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 109.

by nature dialectical, and as a rule dialectic is precisely what is alien to the poet.'[284] In his study of Kierkegaard's philosophical method, Theodor W. Adorno rejects the idea of interpreting philosophy as poetry: 'All attempts to comprehend the writings of philosophers as poetry have missed their truth content. Philosophical form requires the interpretation of the real as the binding nexus of concepts.'[285] For Adorno, Kierkegaard's flirtation with poetry undermines his important dialectical concepts. He argues that as soon as philosophy 'is tolerantly accepted as poetry, the strangeness of its ideas, in which its power over reality manifests itself, is neutralized along with the seriousness of its claim. Its dialectical concepts then serve as metaphorical decorative additions that may be arbitrarily dismissed by scientific rigor.'[286] However, Kierkegaard's contradictory statements on his status as a poet is a crucial part of his maieutic method of communication. Adorno undervalues this self-conscious element of play in Kierkegaard's reflections on the nature of his own philosophy. In his pervasive use of pseudonyms, Kierkegaard spins an argumentative web of radically diverse viewpoints and injects his work with 'the immanental forward thrust of contradiction.'[287] His aim is 'to *deceive into the truth*', to find direct communication through indirection, reflection and multiple layers of irony.[288] A true philosopher, he contends, must be able to manipulate language and use it poetically as a tool of philosophy:

> The subjective *thinker's form*, the form of his communication, is his *style*. . . . But just as he himself is not a poet, not an ethicist, not a dialectician, so also his form is none of theirs directly. His form must first and last be related to existence, and in this regard he must have at his disposal the poetic, the ethical, the dialectical, the religious.[289]

Kierkegaard's paradoxical claim that he is and is not a poet is a fundamental part of his equivocal, dialectical and conflicted passage to existential inwardness. In his essay 'Art in an Age of Reflection', George Pattison remarks that '[Kierkegaard's] own writing has a powerful imaginative and poetic character, continually challenging the

---

[284] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 162.
[285] Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Rovert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 3.
[286] *Ibid.,* p. 4.
[287] Søren Kierkegaard , 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript', in *The Essential Kierkegaard,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 226.
[288] Kierkegaard, *The Point of View*, p. 7.
[289] Kierkegaard, 'Concluding Unscientific Postscript', p. 228.

conventional boundaries between philosophy and poetry.'[290] This is absolutely crucial for Kierkegaard because, like all existentialists, the journey to philosophical conclusions is considered as important as the conclusions themselves.

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche demonstrates an awareness of the way certain philosophical presuppositions - such as the idea that philosophy must aim towards definitive, transcendental truth - are built into the very structures of philosophical questioning. Alexander Nehamas argues that Nietzsche

> looks at the world in general as if it were a sort of artwork; in particular, he looks at it as if it were a literary text. And he arrives at many of his views of the world and the things within it, including the view of human beings, by generalizing to them ideas and principles that apply almost intuitively to the literary situation, to the creation and interpretation of literary texts and characters. . . . The most obvious connection, of course, is supplied by our common view that literary texts can be interpreted in vastly different and deeply incompatible ways. Nietzsche, to whom this popular idea can in fact be traced, also holds that exactly the same is true of the world itself and all the things within it.[291]

Nietzsche's perspectivism, Nehamas claims, is the product of his interest in the literariness of the world, its status as a text-like thing that yields a range of perspectives and viewpoints. The literariness of Nietzsche's writing (or 'aestheticism' as Nehamas calls it) is a method of communication which is radically distinct from conventional philosophical investigations. Like a permanent qualifying footnote to any claim or argument, this literary approach to philosophy means that there is a constant possibility that things could be otherwise. One philosophical thesis never reigns supreme; there is always the possibility of another perspective.

Existentialist thinkers have a deep interest in the creative fusion of fiction and philosophy. They regard literature as the most faithful means of articulating the existentialist immediacy of experience and the philosophical quandaries that existence as a human being entails. Sartre writes in *Search for a Method* that 'a life develops in spirals; it passes again and again by the same points but at different levels of integration and complexity.'[292] He finds that only literature can convey the existential intensity of

---

[290] George Pattison, 'Art in an Age of Reflection', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alistair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 98.

[291] Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 3.

[292] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 106.

this process. Like Kenneth Burke, he regards literature as '*equipment for living*'.[293] But by employing the techniques of another form of writing, existentialists find they can also extend and strengthen their critical approach to philosophy. Their deconstruction of the polarisation of literature and philosophy enables existentialists to also say something about philosophy's form, language, style and textuality. As Berel Lang asserts, in such projects, 'The relation between philosophy and the means of its representation thus emerges as a philosophical as well as a literary issue.'[294] This productive interdisciplinarity benefits both fields, because it demonstrates how literature can intensify certain philosophical ideas, and how the literariness of philosophy is a significant and unavoidable philosophical concern.

In the wake of the existentialist movement, Jacques Derrida explored the relationship between literature and philosophy further. In an interview, he remarks: 'Some texts called "literary" "question" (let us not say "critique" or "deconstruct") philosophy in a sharper, or more thematic, or better informed way than others. Sometimes this questioning occurs more effectively via the actual practice of writing, the staging, the composition, the treatment of language, rhetoric, than via speculative arguments.'[295] Like existentialists, Derrida is attracted to the destabilising and arresting power of literature, its ability to question its own territory as well as that of other disciplines. That is not to say that he favours the literary over the philosophical: Derrida, like Sartre, is committed to an investigation into literature and philosophy's mutual dependency. When reading Derrida's work, claims Derek Attridge, it is necessary 'to make the attempt to grasp *together* the literature/philosophy couple, to gain a sense of their co-implication - which is also the double bind in which both are caught - as well as their distinctiveness.'[296] The form of philosophy is both a philosophical and a literary matter. Derrida's attentiveness to the nature of philosophical form originated in the writings of existentialists. He recalls that in his adolescence "Existentialism, Sartre, Camus were present everywhere',[297] which inevitably brought to the fore critical debates about the relationship between philosophy and literature. He later observes that

---

[293] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), p. 61.
[294] Berel Lang, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style: Literary Philosophy and the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford Blackwell, 1990), pp. 2-3.
[295] Jacques Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 50.
[296] Derek Attridge, 'Introduction: Derrida and the Questioning of Literature', in *Acts of Literature*, p. 13.
[297] Derrida, '"This Strange Institution Called Literature": An Interview with Jacques Derrida', p. 34.

> at the moment when I was beginning to discover this strange institution called literature, the question 'What is literature?' imposed itself upon me in its most naive form. Only a little later, this was to be the title of one of the first texts by Sartre I think I read after *La Nausée* (which had made a strong impression on me, no doubt provoking some mimetic movements in me; briefly, here was a literary fiction grounded on a philosophical 'emotion,' the feeling of existence as excess, 'being-superfluous,' the very beyond of meaning giving rise to writing).[298]

Like Sartre, Derrida is attracted to the destabilising and arresting power of literature, but that is not to say that he favours the literary over the philosophical. Instead, Derrida is committed to an investigation into the interdependence of literature and philosophy. The question 'what is philosophy?' cannot be prised apart from the question 'what is literature?', Derrida tells us. 'Philosophical' novels such as Sartre's *Nausea* demonstrate this linkage especially well.

At the end of *Nausea*, after a number of confrontations with the radical contingency of existence, the novel's narrator, Roquentin, decides to write 'another kind of book', one that he hopes will be 'beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence.'[299] In *Nausea*, it is impossible to tell whether the philosophy produces the literature or the literature produces the philosophy. Furthermore, the crisis of language revealed by a sudden experience of absurdity is presented as both a literary and a philosophical problem. When Roquentin apprehends the radical contingency of the chestnut tree, he remarks: 'I was thinking without words, *about* things, *with* things'; 'I am struggling against the words'; 'Oh, how can I put it into words'.[300] Dominick LaCapra observes that in this existentialist novel 'An enigmatic philosophical prose comes close to a strangely inverted lyricism in "representing" the workings of alienated consciousness. . . . language seems almost to go on holiday from the job-centred, work-a-day world of referential usage. It becomes what Sartre would call "poetic."'[301] When Roquentin begins writing a diary, he intends to document the way things change and 'fix the exact extent and nature of this change.'[302] His approach is that of a philosopher who must not embellish, exaggerate, or 'put strangeness where there is nothing.'[303] But his project fails almost immediately, as he finds that, instead of fixing the

[298] *Ibid*., p. 36.
[299] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 252.
[300] *Ibid*., p. 185.
[301] Dominick LaCapra, *A Preface to Sartre* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 102.
[302] *Ibid*., p. 9.
[303] *Ibid*., p. 9.

transcendental, univocal meaning of things, he can only pile up metaphors. Staring at the chestnut root, he remarks: 'Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, but that long dead snake at my feet, that wooden snake. Snake or claw or root or vulture's talon, it doesn't matter.'[304] The proliferation of metaphors in this episode takes the descriptive power of language to its limits. When Roquentin stares at objects and apprehends their brute existence, signifier and signified are ripped apart: 'Things have broken free from their names. . . . I am in the midst of Things, which cannot be given name. Alone, wordless, defenceless, they surround me, under me, behind me, above me. They demand nothing, they don't impose themselves, they are there.'[305] There is a constant battle between meaning and contingency. Zahi Zalloua asserts that instead of being a 'traditional philosopher', Roquentin 'resembles more an artist, for whom language is not something to master and efficiently use but to manipulate and poetically express. That is to say, semantic play - far from being a detriment to self-expression - reflects for Roquentin the artist the textual richness of language, the open-endness of words.'[306]

Sartre fuses philosophy and literature in *Nausea* to reveal the inextricable relationship between literary and philosophical issues. However, as Rhiannon Goldthorpe warns, 'this should not be taken to imply a closed circuit of mutual confirmation. Sartre's philosophy rejects stability and closure. His literary writing prises apart forms that on the surface may seem traditional. The interaction of literature and theory generates new questions which are themselves open-ended.'[307] *Nausea* reveals that in a philosophical novel, the dialectical interplay between literature and philosophy is always taking place, always asking new questions about the way disciplines interact. As Bernard-Henri Lévy puts it: '[Sartre] was an original novelist; an inventor of forms and styles; and an inventor of forms and styles because he was a philosopher and his philosophy impacted on his literary art.'[308] Like Derrida, Sartre is attracted to the power of the literary text to undo philosophy: to challenge, subvert and deconstruct philosophy in a way that remains potently productive for philosophy. Discussing the influence of

[304] *Ibid*., p. 185.
[305] *Ibid*., p. 180.
[306] Zahi Zalloua, 'Roquentin and the Metaphysics of Presence: Philosophy, Literature, Textual Play', *The Comparatist*, 25 (2001), p. 143.
[307] Rhiannon Goldthorpe, *Sartre: Literature and Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 3.
[308] Bernard-Henri Lévy, *The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 47.

pre-war France on the production of literary-philosophical novels such as *Nausea*, he writes:

> Since we were situated, the only novels we could dream of were novels of *situation*, without internal narrators or all-knowing witnesses. . . . [W]e had to people our books with minds that were half lucid and half overcast, some of which we might consider with more sympathy than others, but none of which would have a privileged point of view either upon the event or upon himself. We had to present creatures whose reality would be the tangled and contradictory tissue of each one's evaluations of all the other characters - himself included - and the evaluations by all the others of himself.[309]

For Sartre, the philosophical power of literature lies in its polyphonic nature, its ability to present a bewildering multiplicity of perspectives. The challenge of fiction, he claims, is 'to find an orchestration of consciousness which may permit us to render the multidimensionality of the event.'[310] Of course, philosophical concerns moulded into literature do not necessarily make successful philosophy or literature. As Camus writes: 'A novel is never anything but a philosophy expressed in images. And in a good novel the philosophy has disappeared into the images. But the philosophy need only spill over into the characters and action for it to stick out like a sore thumb, the plot to lose its authenticity, and the novel its life.'[311] According to Camus, philosophical energy in a literary work must be implicit and unobtrusive. Heavy-handed treatment of the images in the novel will damage the subtle and sensitive expression of human experience and the philosophical nuances that those images articulate. Murdoch is also aware of the potential dangers of existential philosophical literature, warning that 'as soon as the "existentialist voice" is switched on, the work of art rigidifies.'[312]

As we have seen, Shakespeare and existentialists are attracted to literature's philosophical power. We must also be aware that these examples of philosophical literature also give rise to a literary criticism that is imbued with philosophical energy. Cavell makes this clear: 'If philosophy can be thought of as the world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself, then one mode of criticism (call it philosophical criticism) can be thought of as the world of a particular work brought to

---

[309] Sartre, *What is Literature?*, pp. 172-3.
[310] *Ibid*., pp. 239-40.
[311] Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 199.
[312] Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 21.

consciousness of itself.'[313] This is the primary aim of this thesis – to draw out the existentialism in three of Shakespeare's great tragedies. It also seeks to prove how instrumental Shakespeare was in the development of existentialist thought. Existentialists looked to literary precursors such as Shakespeare for examples of intuitive philosophical literature. As the subsequent section of this chapter will outline, Shakespeare played a crucial role in the development of existentialist theories.

Early Existentialists on Shakespeare: Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

Many existentialist writers find a kindred spirit in Shakespeare. His power to confront questions of subjective inwardness and self-understanding is a privileged point of reference in existentialist writings. It is remarkable how often existentialist thinkers use Shakespeare's plays as evidence of what Nietzsche calls 'the countless forms of existence which crowd and push their way into life'.[314] Stanley Stewart argues that it is misleading to overstress Shakespeare's influence on the development of western philosophy, because 'for a century after Shakespeare achieved fame on the literary scene . . . philosophy paid no attention to him.'[315] But whilst Stewart uses this historical fact to deflate excessive statements about Shakespeare's philosophical import - like Allan Bloom's claim that 'Shakespeare was the first philosopher of history'[316] or Emmanuel Levinas' assertion that 'the whole of philosophy is only a meditation on Shakespeare'[317] - other critics recognise the profundity of many philosophers' critical encounters and direct engagement with Shakespeare and his work. In the preface to the 1997 edition of *The Anxiety of Influence,* Harold Bloom comments on the shaping power of Shakespeare's work: 'We are in an era of so-called "cultural criticism," which devalues all imaginative literature, and which particularly demotes and debases Shakespeare. . . . Shakespeare has influenced the world far more than it initially influenced Shakespeare.'[318] Marjorie Garber offers a similar line of reasoning when she observes that many philosophers feel an 'irresistible impulse to speak in and through

[313] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 84.
[314] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 91
[315] Stanley Stewart, *Shakespeare and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 21.
[316] Allan Bloom, *Shakespeare on Love and Friendship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), p. 29.
[317] Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 79.
[318] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xvi.

Shakespeare.'[319] Shakespeare's plays have shaped our modern world, she argues, because time and again, philosophical thinkers draw on his work. There is a critical reciprocity between Shakespeare and modern theorists and philosophers. In many ways, Shakespeare was *unzeitgemäss*: an untimely thinker working beyond the hegemonic cultural institutions of his day and experimenting with philosophical ideas that had yet to be fully developed intellectually. Equally, there are many significant references to Shakespeare in existentialist philosophy. In recent years, the postmodern emphasis on intertextuality has eclipsed the more basic idea of literary influence. Existentialist writers do not just voice their indebtedness to Shakespeare, nor do they solely appropriate him into their own camp. Rather Shakespeare frequently emerges in existentialist thought as a source of philosophical intensity.

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard recommends a full engagement with Shakespeare's work: 'Tax thy brain, tear off every wrapping and lay bare the viscera of feeling in your breast, demolish every fortification that separates you from the one of whom you are reading, and then read Shakespeare – you will shudder at the collisions.'[320] Shakespeare's dramatisation of existential 'collisions', the perplexing paradoxes, ambiguities and complexities of human life, helps Kierkegaard elucidate his own philosophical direction:

> Verily, we do not need Hegel, to tell us that relative contradictions can be mediated, since the fact that they can be separated is found in the ancients; and personality will protest in all eternity against the proposition that absolute contradictions can be mediated. . . . It will repeat its immortal dilemma through all eternity: 'to be or not to be, that is the question'.[321]

Simon Palfrey notes that Kierkegaard finds in the plays 'the bare forked thing of true self-exposure', which encourages him to read Shakespeare 'without protection or evasion, with a hyper-allergic sensitivity to his drama's inward intimacy.'[322] At crucial moments in his writing, Kierkegaard resorts to lines from Shakespeare's plays in order to find a better way to express his thoughts and ideas. Shakespeare offers him a new

[319] Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 2008), p. xxiv.
[320] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 161.
[321] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 74.
[322] Simon Palfrey, 'Macbeth and Kierkegaard', *Shakespeare Survey*, 57 (2004), p. 99.

language, a different - and perhaps more accurate - way of articulating philosophical thought.[323]

Kierkegaard's proclivity for Shakespeare's work is demonstrated throughout his writings. In *Fear and Trembling* he commends Shakespeare's dramatisation of the transition from intense existential despair to demoniacal self-reliance in *Richard III.* He quotes directly Richard's opening address:

> I that am rudely stamped and want love's majesty
> To strut before a wanton ambling nymph,
> I that am curtailed of this fair proportion,
> Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
> Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time
> Into this breathing world scarce half made up—
> And that so lamely and unfashionable
> That dogs bark at me as I halt by them— (*Richard III*, I.i.16-23)

Kierkegaard regards Richard's famous monologue as 'worth more than all moral systems, none of which bears a hint of the terrors of existence and of their nature'.[324] In *King Lear,* Kierkegaard is struck not by Lear's turbulent outpourings of grief and pain, but by Cordelia's passionate and defiant composure in the opening scene. Her silence and staunch conviction of her own authenticity, he argues, expresses an inward agony which transcends heroism and tragedy. For Kierkegaard, Cordelia's declaration, 'I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth' (i.82-3), constitutes the most existentially compelling moment of the play. Reticence is the only authentic expression of inwardness and Cordelia's terse answers stand in marked contrast to her sisters' empty chatter. For Kierkegaard, Cordelia's 'lips were mute when her heart was full' and this convinces us of her existential integrity.[325] As Stewart explains, 'Kierkegaard affirms the mystery of Cordelia's silence; she remains a mystery only as long as her innermost self remains in silent repose, which is its true nature. It is in her serene silence that Cordelia imparts the paradoxical sense of a mystery that is, in essence, also the solution to the mystery.'[326] In Kierkegaard's idiosyncratic sense of the word, Shakespeare's play is 'ethical', because it does not envision the realm of true, transcendental religious experience and remains resolutely focused on the immanent concerns of Lear's earthly

[323] It is significant that an important contributor to the development of Kierkegaard's existentialism was Schlegel, who studied and translated Shakespeare.
[324] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 128.
[325] *Ibid*., p. 55.
[326] Stanley Stewart, '*Lear* in Kierkegaard', in *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Kahan (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 280.

world. He regards Shakespeare's unwillingness to move beyond the domain of the ethical into the domain of the religious as a limitation of the play. But perhaps it is Shakespeare's decision to keep Cordelia's defiance of social values within the boundaries of immanent, everyday reality that makes the play so ethically compelling. Joughin suggests that 'if Shakespeare's texts are philosophical dramas, then it is because they retain an ethical dimension without transcending those social, historical and linguistic limitations, which simultaneously remain in need of redress, and actually conjure an ethical situation into being.'[327] Shakespeare generates existential intensities by constructing dramatic circumstances that give rise to existential and ethical concerns.

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche celebrates Shakespeare's philosophical receptiveness. He appropriates Shakespeare into his own philosophical discussions and closely associates himself with the Renaissance playwright. In *Ecce Homo* he writes: 'When I seek my highest formula for *Shakespeare*, I find it always in that he conceived the type of Caesar. One cannot guess at things like this - one is it or one is not. The great poet creates *only* out of his reality - to the point at which he is afterwards unable to endure his own work.'[328] He then says that when he looks at his own '*Zarathustra*', he is 'unable to master an unendurable spasm of sobbing'.[329] Employing Gilles Deleuze and Peter Klossowski's work, Scott Wilson argues that Nietzsche's slippage between the names Shakespeare, Caesar, Zarathustra and Lord Bacon in *Ecce Homo* 'betrays the traces of an impulsive intensity, the fluctuations or vacillations of the will to power.'[330] Nietzsche's oscillation between each identity is an experience of pleasure so intense that it is transformed into pain. This intensity or *jouissance* is the intensity of difference and, as Nietzsche moves through a process of displacement from one name or image to another, he marks the zone of an intense, painful experience that is linguistically irreducible. Wilson explains: 'At each point these proper names function as metaphors or, to use Klossowski's vocabulary, "simulacra": the imitative "actualization of something in itself incommunicable and nonrepresentable."'[331] The perpetual, impulsive shifting of intensity in the *Ecce Homo* passage suggests that the agonising experience of

[327] Joughin, Introduction to *Philosophical Shakespeares*, p. 10.
[328] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 28-9.
[329] *Ibid*., p. 29.
[330] Scott Wilson, 'Reading Shakespeare with Intensity: A Commentary on Some Lines from Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*', in *Philosophical Shakespeares*, ed. John Joughin (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 90.
[331] *Ibid.,* p. 90.

reading Shakespeare 'marks the limit of Nietzsche and himself, or at least his work.'[332] Nietzsche's various responses to Shakespeare are complex and multi-levelled but, like Kierkegaard, his engagement with Shakespeare is always personal and philosophically enlightening.

According to Nietzsche, human beings must embrace the intensifying contradictions of existence in order to achieve authentic existential fulfilment. He finds the affirmation of this life force perfectly articulated in Shakespearean drama. Macbeth's 'demonic attraction' is his dangerous assertion of forces that have been repressed by conventional morality. Thus Nietzsche finds it absurd to think that Shakespeare conforms to black and white moral criteria. To the contrary, he argues that the energy of the plays is produced when characters affirm and indulge the 'black and deep desires' (*Macbeth*, I.iv.51) that lurk at the heart of human nature. He writes: 'Do you suppose Tristan and Isolde are preaching against adultery when they both perish by it? This would be to stand the poets on their head: they, and especially Shakespeare, are enamoured of the passions as such and not least of their death-welcoming moods.'[333] Shakespeare's dramatisation of the suffering, self-destructive state of Dionysian man is extremely important for Nietzsche. Jonathan Dollimore explains how Nietzsche finds in Shakespeare 'another kind of knowledge, one which does not consolidate civilisation, but threatens it', and this knowledge exposes the terrible truth 'that civilisation is at heart illusory'.[334] This is the essence of Nietzsche's reading of *Hamlet.* Hamlet is allowed to 'cast a true glance into the essence of things' and this lifting of 'the veil of illusion' kills the impetus of action and leaves Hamlet tormented by depression and inertia.[335] For Nietzsche, Shakespeare is an irreligious and anti-systematic thinker.

French Existentialists and Shakespeare: Gide, Camus and Sartre

The history of Shakespeare's French reception is long and varied. John Pemble notes how, for the first half of the twentieth century, 'The French habitually either automatically prostrated themselves before Shakespeare, or automatically recoiled' but after the Second World War, 'they became fully involved in the interpretation and

[332] *Ibid*., p. 92.
[333] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 140.
[334] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. xxxi.
[335] Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 46.

interrogation of his work.'[336] Pemble cites François Mauriac's description of Shakespeare as 'terriblement actuel', 'a poet and dramatist not of periods but of epochs' whose drama spoke directly to the 'survivors struggling on the surface of a Europe three-quarters destroyed'[337] as evidence of a new French understanding of Shakespeare as modern and culturally relevant. Since then, as Richard Wilson notes, the Bard has exerted tremendous influence on the development of French theory, particularly on the work of Bourdieu, Foucault and Kristeva. The use of Shakespeare as a repeated point of departure in French thought, however, does not mean that we must think of 'French theories as mere shadows of Shakespeare'.[338] Not only has Shakespeare creatively and surprisingly informed French theory, but the French attraction to Shakespeare's 'emancipatory promise' has also freed Shakespeare from 'the Anglo-Saxon prison-house' and allowed for new, revitalised readings of the plays themselves.[339] This dialectical rapport has positively benefited both fields of research, claims Wilson. As theoretically and philosophically fertile texts, Shakespeare's plays open themselves up to an assortment of 'French' interpretations and this receptive variety produces 'a Bardolatry ironically at odds with the iconoclasm of those Anglo-American critics who do apply "French theory" to the *Works*.'[340] Wilson's argument can be extended to include French existentialist thinkers such as Gide, Camus and Sartre.

In his research into the appropriation of Shakespeare by antinomian rebels and sexual non-conformists like Wilde, Swinburne and Emerson, Peter Holbrook also includes André Gide. As a thinker who promoted an ethic of authenticity and individuality, Gide was also an important contributor to French existentialism. Holbrook notes that, like other existentialists, Gide objected to theoreticism. Speaking of Marxism, Gide writes in his journals: 'There is something lacking, some ozone layer or other that is essential to keep my mind breathing. . . . I think that what especially bothers me is the very theory, with everything, if not exactly irrational, at least artificial, . . . fallacious and inhuman it contains'.[341] The existential intensity of real life is lost in theoretical abstraction. Instead, Gide turns to 'the vigorous writers and especially the

[336] John Pemble, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2005), p. xix.
[337] François Mauriac quoted in *Shakespeare Goes to Paris*, p. 155.
[338] Richard Wilson, *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 3.
[339] *Ibid*., pp. 21, 23.
[340] *Ibid*., p. 22.
[341] André Gide, *The Journals of André Gide: Volume III:1928-1939*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949), pp. 375-6.

most virile: Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Rabelais.'[342] Like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard before him, Gide saw Shakespeare as an anti-didactic writer, a playwright who instead presented the variety and vitality of human life. Holbrook suggests that for these thinkers 'Shakespeare is on the side of existence rather than (to put the case in Nietzschean terms) moral slanders of it; on the side of individuality . . . as against universal norms.'[343] But individuality, for Gide as well as for Shakespeare, is a troubling aspect of any existential dilemma. Both writers are interested in the way human beings persistently and inexplicably act against their own interests. In *All's Well that Ends Well*, when Bertram chooses to flee his new wife and attempts to corrupt a young woman in Florence, the First Lord is bemused by his behaviour. He exclaims: 'As we are ourselves, what things we are', to which the second Lord replies: 'Merely are own traitors' (*All's Well that Ends Well*, IV.iii.19-21). As human beings, we are constantly betraying ourselves and our intentions. In a similar way, Troilus wonders why 'sometimes we are devils to ourselves' (*Troilus and Cressida*, IV.v.95). Gide's life-long admiration for Shakespeare was 'a means of subtly justifying dissident and non-conformist identities', writes Holbrook.[344] His bardolatry is born of his understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare as a particular type of philosophical thinker: a thinker who chooses life over theory.

Shakespeare was also an important influence on Camus' philosophical thought and intellectual development.[345] Like Gide, Camus is less interested in traditional, clearly explained readings or interpretations of the plays and far more enthusiastic about the way Shakespearean drama offers a particular fusion of literature and philosophical thought. Sometimes something as fleeting as a single line or scene ignites Camus' thinking; at other times, the content of Shakespeare's plays feeds subtly into his questions about the nature of human existence. The opening of a chapter entitled 'Drama' in *The Myth of Sisyphus* is a good example of his passing references to Shakespeare. Camus writes:

---

[342] *Ibid*., vol. I, p. 11.

[343] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 146.

[344] *Ibid*., p. 137.

[345] In the early stages of his career, when Camus established a theatre company for working-class people, he produced some amateur translations of Shakespeare's works, which were never published. Later in life, Camus helped prepare French versions of *Timon of Athens* and the *Sonnets* for publication. According to Camus' biographer, Herbert R. Lottmann, when the young writer died in a tragic car accident in 1960, he was carrying in his briefcase his personal journal, a manuscript of *Le Premier Homme*, a copy of Nietzsche's *The Joyful Wisdom* and a French translation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (*Albert Camus: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979), p. 1.).

> ‘The play’s the thing,’ says Hamlet, ‘wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.’ Catch is indeed the word. For conscience moves swiftly or withdraws within itself. It has to be caught on the wing, at the barely perceptible moment when it glances fleetingly at itself. The everyday man does not enjoy tarrying. Everything, on the contrary, hurries him onward. But at the same time nothing interests him more than himself, especially his potentialities. Whence his interest in the theatre, in the show, where so many fates are offered him.[346]

This reading of one line from *Hamlet* leads on to a more general consideration of the nature of theatre. Camus comes to the conclusion that tragedy represents the absurdity of human existence. He contends: ‘The actor has three hours to be Iago or Alceste, Phèdre or Gloucester. In that short space of time he makes them come to life and die on fifty square yards of board. Never has the absurd ever been so well illustrated or at such length’.[347] Camus allows his imagination to dwell on Shakespeare’s work and allows his literary reflections to penetrate his own philosophical perspective.

Another instance of Shakespeare’s strange, contagious power can be found in a collection of essays entitled ‘Nuptials’. Camus notes that during a visit to Pisa he experienced human life swarming around him at a busy railway station. For some time he lingered in the town. Eventually, the shops and cafés closed and everyone returned home, leaving Camus wandering the silent, empty streets alone. Struck by a sudden feeling of absurdity, he writes:

> ‘In such a night as this, Jessica!’ Here, on this singular stage, gods appear with the voices of Shakespeare’s lovers. We must learn how to lend ourselves to dreams when dreams lend themselves to us. . . . But this evening I am a god among gods, and as Jessica flies off ‘on the swift steps of love’, I mingle my voice with that of Lorenzo. But Jessica is only a pretext, and this upsurge of love goes beyond her. Yes, I believe that Lorenzo is less in love with her than grateful to her for allowing him to love. But why should I dream this evening of the lovers of Venice and forget Verona? Because there is nothing here to invite us to cherish unhappy lovers. Nothing is vainer than to die for love. What we ought to do is live. And a living Lorenzo is better than a Romeo in his grave.[348]

[346] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 75
[347] *Ibid*., p. 76.
[348] Albert Camus, *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Philip Thody (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 94-5.

This passage shows the intensity of Camus' personal appropriation of Shakespeare.[349] He lives out this passion, speaking and thinking as if he were Lorenzo himself. Shakespeare's play allows him to come to the conclusion that an authentic apprehension of the absurd enables an individual to affirm life. Moreover, there is also something remarkably 'Shakespearean' about the energy, intensity and immediacy of Camus' sudden turn to Shakespeare because, like Camus, Shakespeare is fascinated by the way 'thought and consciousness arise amidst the tight configurations of the world.'[350] As Philip Davis notes, Shakespeare 'thinks quickly and powerfully and intuitively because he thinks in terms of spaces and places and shapes, long before he thinks of humans or morals or principles.'[351] Consequently, claims Davis, Shakespearean drama is a 'form of creative thinking' that is 'deeply involved in the processes of life'.[352] In Camus' brief reflection, there is a consciously felt affinity between the philosophical power of Shakespeare and the literary form of existentialist thought. Camus's intention is not to examine Shakespeare methodologically or to achieve specific interpretive ends but to extract and employ the force and passion that emerges from the plays in his own work.

In contrast to Camus, Sartre rarely refers to Shakespeare in his philosophical or literary works, and when he does, the comments are fleeting and incidental rather than sustained and penetrating.[353] But there is one key existentialist concept that Sartre finds brilliantly dramatised in numerous Shakespeare plays: the degrading and disintegrating effect of the gaze of other people on individual subjectivity. According to Sartre, our view of ourselves is mediated by the consciousness of others: 'The Other is the indispensable mediator between myself and me. . . . I am put in the position of passing judgement on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other. . . . But at the same time, I need the Other in order to fully realise the structures of my being.'[354] The look of the other is subjectively corrosive but also ontologically necessary. This means that selfhood 'is like a shadow which is projected on a moving

[349] Camus' appropriation of the voice of Shakespeare's characters, his internalisation of their thoughts and feelings, is similar to Kenneth Burke's use of ventriloquism as a critical strategy. (See *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, ed. Scott L. Newstok (West Lafayette: Palor Press, 2007)).

[350] Philip Davis*, Sudden Shakespeare: The Shaping of Shakespeare's Creative Thought* (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 35.

[351] *Ibid.,* p. 35.

[352] *Ibid*., pp. 3-4.

[353] The one exception here is Sartre's reading of *King Lear*, which will be explained more fully in Chapter Five.

[354] Jean- Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 295.

and unpredictable material such that no table of reference can be provided for calculating the distortions resulting from these movements'.[355]

In *Kean*, a play which delves into the deeply ambiguous relationship between man, actor and social role, Sartre draws directly on Shakespeare in order to examine the idea of existential otherness in greater detail. Kean is a famous Shakespearean actor, a man who is unable to detach his perception of himself from other people's opinions about him. He discovers that selfhood is an illusory entity, something dependent on and alienated by the consciousness of others. Sartre makes the connection to Shakespeare obvious in Kean's conversation with his female counterpart, Elena:

> *Kean.* We are three victims. You, because you were born a woman - [the Prince] because he was too highly born, and I, because I was a bastard. The result is you enjoy your beauty through the eyes of others, and I discover my genius through their applause. As for him, he is a flower. For him to feel he is a prince he has to be admired. . . . We all three live on the love of others, and we are all three incapable of loving ourselves. . . . Why do you laugh?
> *Elena.* Because I was thinking of Shakespeare.[356]

According to Sartre, this objectifying gaze of another person, which takes an individual beyond the limits of their world, is an 'internal haemorrhage' of being.[357] But even though the judgements of others are often passionately interiorized, 'objective' social values such as bravery, intelligence or beauty cannot function as intrinsic, independent values. Human beings are thus forever troubled by a limited and estranged form of self-knowledge, because the other's view of them dwells deep within their consciousness.

At the end of the play, during the botched performance of Desdemona's death scene, both Kean and his fellow actress forget their lines and are forced to extemporise. The result is a strange concoction of Shakespearean verse and Sartrean philosophy. Kean asks the audience: 'Who calls me Othello? Who thinks I am Othello? (*Pointing to himself.*) Is this Othello?'[358] Louise Fiber Luce observes how Sartre 'inserts segments of Shakespearean dialogue throughout his entire script in such a manner that the bard's discourse now erupts into Sartre's.'[359] Sartre appropriates Shakespeare, but the resulting

---

[355] *Ibid*., pp. 285-6.
[356] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Kean; or, Disorder and Genius*, trans. Kitty Black (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1954), p. 134.
[357] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 285.
[358] Sartre, *Kean*, p. 114.
[359] Louise Luce, 'Alex Dumas's *Kean*: An Adaptation by Jean-Paul Sartre', *Modern Drama*, 28:3 (1985), p. 359.

drama is damaged by his obtrusive philosophical agenda. His 'existentialist voice', to borrow Murdoch's phrase, is too loud. However, Sartre does begin to tease out an important existentialist idea in Shakespeare's drama. Shakespeare is fascinated by the way human beings view themselves obliquely, by how their perception of themselves is always tainted by or confused with the judgements of others. Brutus says in *Julius Caesar*, 'the eye sees not itself / But by reflection, by some other things' (I.ii.54-5). The Sartrean idea is duplicated even more precisely a few lines later, when Cassius retorts: 'since you know you cannot see yourself / So well as by reflection, I, your glass, / Will modestly discover to yourself / That of yourself which you yet know not of' (I.ii.69-72). Cassius knows that he is not a mirror that simply reflects back Brutus' self-image. As a mediating other, he also actively dictates what Brutus will become. Cassius' eye is the portal through which Brutus grasps his own self-objectified appearance. Shakespeare's Roman plays, plays that constantly contest the idea that the self possesses an intrinsic value, lend themselves particularly well to this element of Sartrean ontology.[360] Antony's sense of self is almost entirely constructed through his inward appropriation of external or outward influences. 'If I lose my honour, / I lose myself' (*Antony and Cleopatra,* III.iv.22-3), he declares to Octavia, anticipating the dissolution of his identity at the end of the play. N. K. Sugimura observes that 'Shakespeare grants Anthony a psychological, "free-floating ego", which is able to observe the bifurcation between the objective and subjective "I". . . [I]t is precisely this role of consciousness in relation to being - which is so important to Sartre - that Shakespeare puts on stage.'[361] In *Troilus and Cressida,* Shakespeare also intensifies this element of his drama by making his characters aware of their dependence on the views of other people. Achilles recognises that his self-worth is 'read in the eyes of others' (III.iii.71), and that 'not a man, for being simply man, / Hath any honour, but honour for those honours / That are without him' (III.iii.74-6). Human beings exert a tremendous influence on each other's subjectivity, says Achilles:

> The beauty that is borne here in the face
> The bearer knows not, but commends itself

[360] Other early modern dramatists show an interest in this aspect of human existence. In John Webster's play, *Appius and Virginia,* when Icilius is showered with praise, he says: 'You give me (noble Lord) that character / Which I cood never yet read in my selfe' (I.i.7-8). See *The Works of John Webster*, vol. 2, ed. David Gunby, David Carnegie and MacDonald P. Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[361] N. K. Sugimura, 'Two concepts of Reality in *Antony and Cleopatra*', in *Thinking With Shakespeare: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Essays for A. D. Nuttall*, ed. William Poole and Richard Scholar (London: Legenda, 2007), p. 75.

To others' eyes. Nor doth the eye itself,
That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
Not going from itself; but eye to eye opposed
Salutes each other with each other's form.
For speculation turns not to itself
Till it hath travelled and is mirrored there
Where it may see itself.

(*Troilus and Cressida*, III.iii.98-106)

Throughout this play, Shakespeare is fascinated by how an individual's subjectivity is shaped by the objectifying subjectivity of other beings. In *Nausea*, Roquentin observes that 'people who live in society have learnt how to see themselves in mirrors, as they appear to their friends.'[362] We can see the same complex ontological arguments being anticipated by Shakespeare.[363]

Advancing a similar argument, Joel Fineman observes that 'Sartre developed a psychology of imagination whose logic and figurality very much resemble the paranoiac visionary thematics of at least some of Shakespeare's young man sonnets.'[364] Fineman finds in tightly structured formations like 'thou mine, I thine' (Sonnet 108, 7) an anticipation of the 'subjective optics of the Sartrian "gaze" and its melodrama of mutually persecutory master-slave relations.'[365] 'Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest / Now is the time that face should form another' (Sonnet 3, 1-2), says Shakespeare's poetic persona as he conflates visual imagery with the imagery of vision. The effect is even more apparent in the first Quarto, which instead of 'another' reads 'an other' and thus allows the line to signify not just a new face, but also a distinct 'other' person. The ethical relationship between self and other is foregrounded throughout Shakespeare's sonnets. Sonnet 121 is another excellent example of Shakespeare's attentiveness to the ontologically disturbing power of the Other's gaze:

'Tis better to be vile than vile esteemed,
When not to be receives reproach of being,
And the just pleasure lost, which is so deemed

[362] Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 32.
[363] In his Lacanian psychoanalytic reading, Philip Armstrong argues that Shakespeare's plays 'typify the conflicted and emergent nature of the geometrical visual order and of the subjectivity associated with it' (*Shakespeare's Visual Regime: Tragedy, Psychoanalysis and the Gaze* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. 3.). Although this is an excellent exploration of Shakespeare's depiction of 'scopic order', Armstrong does not acknowledge the critical intersection of Lacan's study of the gaze with Sartre's theories of Being-for-Others.
[364] Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 45.
[365] *Ibid*., p. 45.

Not by our feeling but by others' seeing.
For why should others' false adulterate eyes
Give salutation to my sportive blood?
Or on my frailties why are frailer spies,
Which in their wills count bad what I think good?
No, I am that I am, and they that level
At my abuses reckon up their own; (Sonnet 121, 1-10)

In light of Sartre's theory of being-for-others, the crucial lines 'the just pleasure lost which is so deemed / Not by our feeling, but by others' seeing' suggest that the integrity of an individual's inward feeling is jeopardised and corrupted by observers who project their judgements upon it. A legitimate, pleasurable feeling of vileness is denied when the term is applied by others.

Shakespeare's playful exploration of paranoiac optics and Sartre's theory of being-for-others are, of course, not one and the same. It would be reckless to disregard the historical difference between Renaissance England and post-war France. However, by highlighting the critically neglected relationship between Sartrean existentialism and Shakespeare's poetry, the mutually illuminating aspects of both become apparent. We can trace the imprint of Shakespeare in existentialist thought; we can read Shakespeare through the lens of existentialism. And it may also be possible to read existentialism back through Shakespeare, and thus allow Shakespeare's dramatisation of existential ideas to shed new light on the movement. Through this dialectical process, Shakespeare may reinvigorate key existentialist ideas as well as freshly illuminate some of the debates within existentialism.

Existentialism and Tragedy

Before I present three existentialist readings of Shakespearean tragedies, it is worth considering more generally the relationship between existentialism and tragedy. Existentialists have long been fascinated by the idea of tragedy. The two discourses are mutually compatible, with one often employed to illuminate the other. Existentialist philosophy marries well with the ontological seriousness and intensity of tragedy. The agonies of the individual, the conflict between self and society, the relationship between freedom and necessity, the ethics of action: these are just a few of the broadly existentialist themes and issues that arise from critical debates about the nature of tragedy. But a superficial coupling of these two forms of writing cannot do justice to

the way existentialism - for better and for worse - has filtered into seminal studies on tragic form.

In his contribution to a volume of essays entitled *Rethinking Tragedy,* George Steiner stands by his original assertion in *The Death of Tragedy* that the art form is primarily concerned with man's primordial ontological homelessness, his 'alienation or ostracism from the safeguard of licensed being'.[366] Steiner contends that

> the concept of alienation has acquired a specific gravity, an ontological weight illustrated by absolute or pure tragedy. A legacy of guilt, the paradoxical, unpardonable guilt of being alive, of attaching rights and aspirations to that condition, condemns the human species to frustration and suffering, to be tied to 'a wheel of fire'. Our existence is not so much a 'tale told by an idiot' as it is a chastisement from which early death is the only logical deliverance.[367]

Steiner's gloomy vision of tragedy is essentially second-rate existentialism. In his view of tragedy's profound metaphysical pessimism, Steiner echoes the popular 'existentialist' conception of man as a being inexplicably cast into the midst of a brutal, meaningless universe. His conception of tragedy is almost identical to M. A. Gillespie's description of existentialism as 'nothing other than radical nihilism . . . the absolute negation of everything, which leaves only a chaotic and meaningless activity.'[368] Tragedy insists that man's existence is fatally doomed, argues Steiner, and this world-view thus eradicates any potential for political or social change. 'More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon,' he claims; 'social psychiatry is no answer to *Oedipus*.'[369]

In recent years, critics and theorists of tragedy have begun to reconsider and renegotiate the relationship between tragedy and politics. Terry Eagleton turns Steiner's argument on its head and argues that 'The ontological homelessness which George Steiner sees as the curse of our condition is also the source of our creativity.'[370] He elaborates his point by claiming that 'it is the lesson of a good deal of tragedy that only by an unutterably painful openness to our frailty and finitude - to the material limits of

---

[366] George Steiner, '"Tragedy," Reconsidered', in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 30-1.
[367] *Ibid*., p. 33.
[368] M. A. Gillespie, *Hegel, Heidegger and the Ground of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. 20.
[369] George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 8.
[370] Terry Eagleton, 'Commentary', in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 338.

our condition - can we have any hope of transcending it.'[371] Eagleton implicitly invokes a more nuanced and politically perceptive version of existentialism. In *Sweet Violence*, he explains his theory of tragedy in more detail. He writes:

> It is true that there is much about our species-being which is passive, constrained and inert. But this may be a source of radical politics, not an obstacle to it. Our passivity, for example, is closely bound up with our frailty and vulnerability, in which any authentic politics must be anchored. Tragedy can be among other things a symbolic coming to terms with our finitude and fragility, without which any political project is likely to founder. . . . If we can successfully confront death-dealing, oppressive forces, it is not because history is mere cultural clay in our hands, . . . [i]t is because the impulse to freedom from oppression, however that goal is culturally framed, seems as obdurate and implacable as the drive to material survival.[372]

If a recognition of the frailty, finitude and vulnerability of human beings is to lay the foundations for 'authentic politics', as Eagleton claims, then tragedy must be capable of revealing certain ontological truths. In an existentially resonant way, he implies that human beings can overcome absurdity, pessimism and nihilism when they recognise and accept the ambiguous and volatile nature of their own existence. Eagleton's concept of the tragic thus chimes with some of Camus' reflections in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to roll a rock ceaselessly to the top of a mountain. However, for Camus, it is not this senseless, repetitive task that epitomises the tragic, but rather the moment when Sisyphus' consciousness becomes heightened and he deliberately chooses to repeat the task once again. As Camus puts it, the absurd becomes tragic 'only at the rare moments it becomes conscious', and for Sisyphus, 'The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.'[373] Tragedy shows how the transcendent dimension of consciousness can project itself beyond the materiality of human existence. Political potentiality exists in the gap between what human beings are, the historical and social limits of their existence, and what they could be, the constant possibility that they can actively change those historical and social limits. Individuals can always reconfigure their human situations by thinking about them in radically new ways. When Eagleton asserts that 'Only by

---

[371] *Ibid*., p. 345. Ewan Fernie offers a similar argument when he suggests that Shakespeare presents a 'vision of shame as a painful rehearsal for the dissolution of death or an experience of dreadful metamorphosis, and yet ultimately also a liberation from the illusions of pride into truth' (*Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.).

[372] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. xv.

[373] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 117.

grasping our constraints can we act constructively',[374] he echoes some of existentialism's paradoxical statements about the correlation between historical situatedness and self-liberating choice. Sartre contends that 'Man is condemned to be free';[375] Camus states that 'the only conception of freedom' he has, 'is that of the prisoner or the individual in the midst of the state.'[376] Shakespeare also attempts to articulate the close connection between individual freedom and the social and historical conditions in which individuals find themselves. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Enobarbus reflects:

> I see men's judgements are
> A parcel of their fortunes, and things outward
> Do draw the inward quality after them
> To suffer all alike.
>
> (*Antony and Cleopatra*, III.xiii.30-3)

The Player King expresses a similar idea when he says: 'Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own' (*Hamlet*: III.ii.207). In their own ways, Sartre, Camus and Shakespeare all stress the inextricable intertwining of agency and circumstance, and as Eagleton asserts, the inseparable relationship between these two forces is an essential element of tragedy.

By bringing some of Eagleton's arguments openly into dialogue with existentialism, a renegotiation of tragedy's existentialist ethics and politics may be possible. Eagleton commends tragedy's 'revolutionary universalism', arguing that modernity's democratisation of the art form now means that 'any old body can be a tragic protagonist.'[377] Contrary to Steiner's assessment of tragedy as defunct and obsolete in our modern world, tragedy's existential depth continues to appeal to the masses. In the wake of the Second World War, existentialists such as Camus and Sartre fervently defended tragedy as an essential dramatic form.[378] They aspired to a new

---

[374] Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. xvi. Eagleton's remarks here echo the work of Schelling, who writes: 'To come to consciousness, and to be limited, are one and the same. Only that which is limited me-ward, so to speak, comes to consciousness: the limiting activity falls outside all consciousness, just because it is the cause of all limitation. The fact of limitation must appear as independent of me, since I can discern only my own limitedness, never the activity whereby it is posited.' (F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), p. 44).

[375] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 34.

[376] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 54.

[377] Eagleton, 'Commentary' in *Rethinking Tragedy*, p. 341.

[378] A notable exception here is Karl Jaspers, who argued like Steiner that tragedy 'has become a characteristic not of man, but of human aristocracy. . . . Tragic knowledge thus has its limits: it achieves no comprehensive interpretation of the world. It fails to master universal suffering; it fails to grasp the

modern sense of the tragic, one politically attuned to their own historical moment. 'Today, tragedy is collective', wrote Camus in 1945.[379] The political dimension of tragedy inheres in the way it mediates between a focus on the claims of the individual and its concern for the collective, communal needs of society. In existentialist thought, individual authenticity and the emancipation of society go hand in hand. If tragedy is pessimistic or nihilistic, it is not in the sense that it indulges in irrevocable despair. Camus writes: 'The very idea that a pessimistic philosophy is necessarily one of discouragement, is a puerile idea, but one that needs too long a refutation.'[380] Joshua Foa Dienstag picks up on this remark in his reassessment of tragedy and pessimism and claims that 'The very fact that Camus, a radical egalitarian, would defend pessimism, gives some indication of its potential to unsettle, rather than confirm, existing political arrangements.'[381] Drawing on the work of Nietzsche, Dienstag argues against the association of pessimism with quietism and antidemocratic political values and suggests that tragedy's pessimism can produce 'an energizing and even liberating ethic.'[382] This important idea is shared by existentialism and tragedy: nihilism and pessimism must be confronted, in order to be ultimately transcended, even if this is a painful and self-shattering experience.

Conclusion

As the first three chapters of this thesis have established, there are many important ways in which Shakespearean drama and existentialism identify with one another. One of the most important, as this chapter has shown, is the way both Shakespeare and existentialists regard philosophy and literature not as intellectual opponents or adversaries, but as forms of thinking that should be considered productively together. The existential philosophical impulse in Shakespeare's plays is created out of his imaginative dramatisation of action and character on stage. When his characters ponder

---

whole terror and insolubility in men's existence. . . . Misery - hopeless, meaningless, heart-rendering, destitute, and helpless misery - cries out for help. But the reality of all this misery without greatness is pushed aside as unworthy of notice by minds that are blind with exultation' (*Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore and Karl W. Deutsch (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953), pp. 99-100.). However, although Jaspers ultimately rejects the power of tragedy, his work demonstrates a real engagement with tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *Oedipus*.

[379] Albert Camus, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder*, trans. Dwight Macdonald (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2007), p. 42.

[380] Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 57.

[381] Joshua Foa Dienstag, 'Tragedy, Pessimism, Nietzsche', in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. Rita Felski (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 105.

[382] *Ibid*., p. 105.

complex philosophical ideas, they do so 'in character', as embodied human beings concretely situated in the world. By using drama and poetry, Shakespeare does philosophy in another way, one which existentialists would later choose themselves. As Shakespeare's Renaissance contemporary, Philip Sidney, writes in *A Defence of Poetry*: 'the philosopher teacheth, but he teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him, that is to say, he teacheth them that are already taught; but the Poet is food for the tenderest stomachs, the Poet is, indeed, the right popular Philosopher'.[383] Existentialists would wholeheartedly agree.

[383] Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 34.

CHAPTER FOUR

'A KIND OF FIGHTING' (V.II.4): SUBJECTIVE LIFE IN *HAMLET*

As an angst-ridden malcontent dressed in black and troubled by a lacerating self-consciousness, Hamlet has often been characterised as the archetypal existentialist. Critical of the rise of popular existentialist fiction, Charles I. Glicksberg remarked in 1953 that 'the Existentialist novelist is the philosophical Hamlet of our age, suffering from spells of nihilistic "madness," metaphysical "nausea," ontological dolour.'[384] Christine Gomez argues that Hamlet can 'be seen as an anticipation of the existential hero,' because he is 'an individual who reflects on human existence and his own predicament in the universe and becomes aware of his alienation from the human condition.'[385] Such assessments of Hamlet and existentialism as synonymous reduce and simplify both the powerful philosophical insights of existentialism and Hamlet's confrontation with complex existential issues and problems. These kinds of 'existential' assessments echo Nietzsche's problematic reading of *Hamlet*. According to Nietzsche, Hamlet gains an 'insight into the horrific truth',[386] which reveals that the world is irreparably out of joint. 'Conscious of the truth once glimpsed,' Nietzsche continues, 'man now sees all around him only the horrific or absurd aspects of existence, . . . it disgusts him.'[387] To be sure, Hamlet's corrosive lucidity allows him to see through the hypocrisy, insincerity and scheming ways of other people, but he does not experience a Schopenhauerian epiphany which shows him the way things really *are*. Hamlet is obsessed with the way things *appear* to him and with the way his consciousness attributes meaning to the world.

---

[384] Charles I. Glicksberg, 'Literary Existentialism', in *Existentialist Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. William L. McBride (New York and London: Garland, 1997), p. 39.
[385] Christine Gomez, 'Hamlet: An Early Existential Outsider?', *Hamlet Studies*, 5 (1983), p. 27.
[386] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 46.
[387] *Ibid*., p. 130.

As many critics have observed, the existential richness of the play is created by Hamlet's intense awareness of the baffling, contradictory and volatile nature of his own subjectivity. John Lee writes: 'what [Hamlet] values especially, and what he feels crucially defines his identity, is his relationship with his inner world. . . . [I]t is the "I"'s unique separateness, and its ability to be its own source of value, that the Prince asserts.'[388] But what function of human consciousness makes this inner self-relation possible? We can only properly assess the dimensions of Hamlet's subjectivity by reading the play in light of existentialism's theories of consciousness. After all, what is *Hamlet* if not a study in the motives and the movements of the human mind? When Horatio arrives to inform Hamlet of the numerous sightings of his father's ghost, Hamlet strangely pre-empts the conversation:

Ham.	My father, methinks I see my father.	
Hor.	Where, my lord?	
Ham.	In my mind's eye, Horatio.	(I.ii.183-5)

Horatio and the audience have already seen Hamlet Senior's ghost, and, for a brief moment, Horatio is startled to think it has returned. When Hamlet explains that he sees his father in his 'mind's eye', there is a disconcerting interplay between absence and presence. Hamlet is presented as a perceiving subject trying to reconcile the powers of his consciousness with the surrounding world. His apprehensions of the world are always mediated by his first-person phenomenological standpoint, his 'mind's eye'. Shakespeare is very particular about the importance of this phenomenological impulse, because he deliberately uses the phrase 'mind's eye' in two consecutive scenes. 'A mote it is to trouble the mind's eye' (I.i.111), says Horatio as he explains how the supernatural presence of the ghost disturbs and perplexes human judgement. Hamlet's use of the same phrase echoes Horatio's notion of irritated consciousness and draws attention to the way his 'mind's eye' structures the world.

There is a rapport here between Shakespeare's dramatisation of consciousness and Sartre's phenomenological ontology. Hamlet experiences himself as an individual whose sense of self is shaped by his immediate apprehensions of the world. But he also recognises that his consciousness imparts meaning to the world, and this is what allows him to have a degree of power over his own subjectivity. Shakespeare affords Hamlet this phenomenological space in order to dramatise the dialectical exchange between a

[388] John Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 195.

self that is clearly mediated by the world, and a self which is an actively mediating force, striving to make the world its own.

Subjectivity and Nothingness

'I have that within which passes show' (I.ii.85): Hamlet's troublesome interiority, the invisible inner anguish that he insists on in his first extended speech of the play, has confused and concerned critics for decades. In their investigations into the socially constructed nature of subjectivity, many new historicist and cultural materialist critics have concluded that Hamlet's self is literally 'a thing . . . / Of nothing' (IV.ii.26-8). In a much-quoted passage, Terry Eagleton suggests that 'Hamlet has no "essence" of being whatsoever, no inner sanctum to be safeguarded: he is pure deferral and diffusion, a hollow void which offers nothing determinate to be known.'[389] A gap, a vacant space, a lack, an emptiness, a void, a nothingness - these terms have become synonymous with Hamlet's subjectivity in particular and Shakespearean subjectivity in general. But could a more philosophically and existentially specific understanding of nothingness offer a fresh way of reading Hamlet's feelings of inwardness? Francis Barker inadvertently gets closer to the nub of the matter in *The Tremulous Private Body* when he writes: 'At the centre of Hamlet, in the interior of his mystery, there is, in short, nothing. A lack of subjectivity or a lack at the heart of subjectivity.'[390] 'A lack at the heart of subjectivity' does not preclude an inner relation to one's self: it is, in fact, the necessary part of consciousness that makes subjective reflection possible, existentialists tell us.

Following Husserl, existentialists such as Sartre insist that consciousness cannot be reduced to a solid, definite essence, quality or attribute. It is not a substantive entity; it is a nothingness. In *Nausea*, Roquentin remarks: 'Lucid, motionless, empty, the consciousness is situated between the walls; it perpetuates itself. Nobody inhabits it anymore. . . .This is what there is: walls, and between the walls, a small living and impersonal transparency . . . little ephemeral existences populate it like birds in branches. Populate it and disappear.'[391] Because consciousness has no innate 'ego' and exists only by virtue of the way it is directed intentionally towards the world, it constructs itself negatively. 'Nothingness', writes Sartre, 'lies coiled in the heart of

[389] Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 72.
[390] Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 37.
[391] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 241.

being - like a worm.'[392] In order for human beings to question being at all, they must have an ability to negate or 'nihilate' things around them. This power of negation, claims Sartre, refers us back to a more basic, foundational nothingness that can be seen to '*haunt* being.'[393] Nothingness, then, is not an abstract notion, nor does it exist outside of being: 'Nothingness must be given at the heart of Being, in order for us to be able to apprehend particular types of realities which we have called *négatités.*'[394] *Négatité* is the word Sartre gives to human activities and judgements that involve negativity, such as experiences involving absence, interrogation, variation and destruction (experiences that are also especially pertinent to *Hamlet*). Consciousness constantly creates itself by negating aspects of the world it comes into contact with. It demarcates being by differentiating what it is from what it is not. David Sherman explains that

> because consciousness does not contain the ego or any other substance that would cause it to be determined by the laws of nature, but is rather characterised by intentionality . . . it is 'nothing,' or, to be more precise, a 'nothingness' that perpetually transcends itself. And, in the process of transcending itself, consciousness is a 'nihilating nothingness' that gives rise to 'négatités.' In other words, this 'nothingness' is active.[395]

The example Sartre uses of looking for his friend Pierre in a café helps clarify this explanation. Because he expects to locate the presence of Pierre, says Sartre, he nihilates the fullness of the café. But if his friend does not appear, his friend's absence becomes as real and vivid as the other physical features of the café. The room becomes haunted by negation.[396] An absence was found because a presence was expected, and this is a crucial point for Sartre. The expectation of presence bonds nothingness to being.

Nothingness, Sartre claims, is the structuring principle of consciousness and this is what allows human beings to have a relationship with their self. Roquentin explains that consciousness 'dilutes itself, it scatters itself, it tries to lose itself on the brown wall, up the lamp-post, or over there in the evening mist. But it never forgets itself; it is a consciousness of being a consciousness which forgets itself.'[397] As Roquentin makes

---

[392] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 45.
[393] *Ibid*., p. 35.
[394] *Ibid*., p. 46.
[395] David Sherman, *Sartre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 112.
[396] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 34.
[397] Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 241.

clear, consciousness is never passively aware. Another subterranean, unreflective and non-positional dimension of consciousness functions at the same time as intentional consciousness. This 'pre-reflective cogito'[398] is a sort of persistent self-consciousness that means that human beings are always conscious of their acts, their intentions and their selves. This non-positional consciousness yields an intuitive, immediate 'knowledge' of positional consciousness. These two modes of consciousness fuse together to create 'an immediate non-cognitive relation of the self to itself'.[399] To put it in other terms, human beings are aware of themselves and aware of their self-awareness. Francis Jeanson neatly explains the irreparability of Sartre's decentred subject: 'If my consciousness can grasp itself only by becoming distinct from itself, if I cannot be conscious of myself without making myself double, then there must be an irreducible duality between the "I" that I am as reflecting subject and the "me" I also am as the unreflecting subject who acts and lives.'[400]

With Sartre's ideas about the nothingness of consciousness in mind, it is worth re-examining Hamlet's first extended speech. When his mother asks why his grief seems 'so particular' (I.ii.75), Hamlet replies:

> 'Seems', madam - nay it is, I know not 'seems'.
> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected havior of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
> That can denote me truly. These indeed 'seem',
> For they are actions that a man might play,
> But I have that within which passes show,
> These but the trappings and the suits of woe. (I.ii.76-86)

James L. Calderwood, one of the first critics to acknowledge Hamlet's idiosyncratic fondness for negatives and negation, writes: 'In the first 46 lines he speaks . . . one finds 18 instances of the negatives "no," "not," "nor," and "nothing"', which means that they occur in nearly forty per cent of his lines.[401] Hamlet's use of negatives is extremely significant in his first speech. At first glance, the speech seems to be a straightforward

[398] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 98.
[399] *Ibid*., p. 9.
[400] Francis Jeanson, *Sartre and the Problem of Morality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 114.
[401] James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 67.

assertion of an inward authenticity that stands opposed to 'actions that a man might play'. But by piling up negatives and double negatives, Hamlet asserts what he is by determining what he is not. He 'nihilates' elements of the external world which either do or do not 'denote [him] truly' in order to assert another dimension of being, 'that within which passes show'. Hamlet does not think of his self as a positive entity, as a 'something'; rather, his self is a 'nothingness' perpetually compelled to establish itself in the world. Colin McGinn notes how Hamlet finds 'a mysterious chasm, a gap where the simple self ought to be - a kind of throbbing nothingness.'[402] Hamlet's self is akin to the nothingness Richard feels when he is dethroned by Bolingbroke:

> my grief lies all within,
> And these external manner of laments
> Are merely shadows to the unseen grief
> That swells with silence in the tortured soul.
> There lies the substance
>
> (*Richard II*, IV.i.285-9)

Like Sartre, Shakespeare is interested in the negating effect of human absence. However, in some respects, Shakespeare offers a more complicated and arresting notion of ontological nothingness than Sartre, because in *Hamlet*, the supernatural presence (or non-presence) of the ghost dramatically heightens and intensifies the suggestion that nothingness and being are inextricably linked. The play begins with Barnardo's call 'Who's there?' and Francisco's response 'Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself' (I.i.i-2), which immediately focus an audience's attention on the relationship between presence and absence. But when Barnardo asks: 'Say, what, is Horatio there?', and Horatio replies: 'A piece of him' (I.i.18), the neat distinction between absence and presence or being and non-being is instantly compromised. Horatio is so cold that he is not entirely present, and this foreshadows the ontological liminality of the ghost. When asked 'has this thing appeared again tonight?', Barnardo replies: 'I have seen nothing' (I.i.20-1). Of course, Barnardo means that he has not seen the ghost or anything unusual. But taken literally, the remark sounds like a contradiction in terms. The notion of 'seeing nothing' implies the prior expectation of 'seeing something', and treats 'nothing' as if it were visible. From the moment the play begins, the stage is filled with the palpable absence of the ghost, much like Sartre's café when his friend is not there. But when the party encounter the spectral figure of Hamlet Senior, its presence does not

[402] Colin McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meanings Behind the Plays* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), p. 43.

produce a plenitude or fullness of being, because the imprint of the ghost's absence remains. Ewan Fernie observes that 'Shakespeare's ghost is in being but also beyond . . . the spectral hovers uncannily between presence and absence as embodied spirit. . . . It is a question not of "to be" and "not to be", then, but of *being-in-between.*'[403] This 'in-betweenness' not only refers to the ghost's spiritual liminality: it also exemplifies 'our own "lack-in-being"', writes Fernie, and therefore 'Hamlet comes face to face with *the ghastliness of his own self*.'[404] By placing a supernatural entity on stage, Shakespeare shows how being is literally haunted by non-being.

The first critic to be struck by Shakespeare's uncanny prefiguration of the existentialist theory of subjectivity as nothingness was A. D. Nuttall. In *Shakespeare the Thinker*, he writes:

> The basic notion of a walking negation that seeks a more substantial identity through role-playing is obviously close to Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism, as set out in *L'Être et le néant*. This is a chronologically scandalous thing to say, but I claim similarity only, not influence. Shakespeare has probably read Seneca and has certainly not read Sartre. But Hamlet is more like Sartre's man than he is like Seneca's.[405]

Nuttall is astonished to find such a full and precise understanding of the human self as absence or negation in a piece of drama written over three hundred years before the development of existentialist philosophy. But evidence for such a historically preposterous claim abounds in the play. Shakespeare provides another interesting portrayal of the ontological lack or nothingness at the heart of being in the closet scene. By staging the scene so that Hamlet sees the ghost but Gertrude does not, Shakespeare further intensifies the coexistence of being and nothingness:

Ghost.	Speak to her, Hamlet.
Ham.	How is it with you, lady?
Gert.	Alas, how is't with you,
	That you do bend your eye on vacancy
	And with th'incorporal air do hold discourse?
	Forth at your eyes your spirits wildly peep,
	And as the sleeping soldiers in th'alarm
	Your bedded hair like life in excrements

[403] Ewan Fernie, 'The Last Act: Presentism, Spirituality and the Politics of *Hamlet*', in *Spiritual Shakespeares*, ed. Ewan Fernie (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 193.
[404] *Ibid*., p. 193.
[405] A. D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 199.

Start up and stands an end. O gentle son,
Upon the heat and flame of thy distemper
Sprinkle cool patience. Whereon do you look?
Ham. On him, on him! Look you, how pale he glares!
His form and cause conjoined, preaching to stones
Would make them capable. [*to Ghost*] Do not look upon me
Lest with this piteous action you convert
My stern effects! Then what I have to do
Will want true colour, tears perchance for blood.
Gert. To whom do you speak this?
Ham. Do you see nothing there?
Gert. Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.
Ham. Nor did you nothing hear?
Gert. No, nothing but ourselves. (III.iv.111-31)

Howard Caygill argues that 'The role played by nothing in Shakespeare's dramas is far more equivocal than anything dreamt of in philosophy; in them Shakespeare "monsters" the equivocal spectacle of nothing, but without arriving at an affirmation of being.'[406] In the passage above, there is certainly a philosophical richness in Shakespeare's playful dramatisation of 'seeing' nothing. Caygill continues: 'Rather than convert nothing into being, Shakespeare opens an in-between state - not-nothing - which is neither being nor nothing. The negation of nothing is intrinsically equivocal, appearing at the same time as a nothing that is a thing, and a thing that is a nothing.'[407]

'To be, or not to be - that is the question' (III.i.55): Hamlet's contemplation of the difference between being and non-being is one of the most existentially intense moments of the play. But Shakespeare's famous line is perhaps more existentially sophisticated than it appears on the surface. Douglas Bruster deconstructs Hamlet's soliloquy in order to reveal the verbal ambiguity and multiple contradictions that arise from the seemingly simple opposition of being and not being. He argues that 'Rather than *only* a balanced alternative, this famous phrase could be read as combining as well as separating its items.'[408] Shakespeare's play thus poses a richer philosophical question: 'Is being all that different from not being? Can we be more certain about one than the other?'[409] The idea that nothingness is secreted at the heart of being strikes a chord with existentialist theories of consciousness. Sartre argues that 'consciousness

[406] Howard Caygill, 'Shakespeare's Monster of Nothing', in *Philosophical Shakespeares*, ed. John J. Joughin (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 105.
[407] *Ibid*., p. 109.
[408] Douglas Bruster, *To Be or Not to Be* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 52.
[409] *Ibid.,* p. 52.

does not have by itself any sufficiency of being as an absolute subjectivity.'[410] For existentialists, there is no essential, pre-social self that exists before consciousness. To put it in Shakespearean terms, the human self has a 'glassy essence' (*Measure for Measure*, II.ii.123), an ontological nothingness, which must establish itself in the world.

The suggestion that subjectivity and nothingness are intimately related is repeated and developed in a number of Shakespeare's plays. As Holbrook observes, Shakespeare 'figures the human self as a bottomless gulf.'[411] In *King Lear*, Shakespeare's interest in the notion that the human self is made of nothing is clearly apparent. The fool says to Lear: 'Thou hast pared thy wit o' both sides and left nothing in the middle', and later: 'thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art, now. I am a fool; thou art nothing' (iv.177-9, 184-6). The fool's teasing carries serious philosophical weight, for the idea of nothing in *King Lear* does not only relate to worldly nihilism: Shakespeare suggests that nothingness is important inwardly as well as externally. 'Nothing, my Lord' (i.80): This is Cordelia's simple response to her father when he asks what she has to say to show how much she loves him. In *The Myth of Sisyphus,* Camus writes:

> In certain situations, replying 'nothing' when asked what one is thinking about may well be pretence in a man. . . . But if that reply is sincere, if it symbolises the odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily expressions is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, then it is as it were the first sign of absurdity.[412]

'Nothing' ignites the action of *King Lear*. It is the word that precipitates Lear's descent into madness and his recognition of the terrible absurdity of the world. Lear asks: 'Who is it that can tell me who I am? / Lear's shadow?' (iv.222-3) A human shadow is a silhouette of the self, and if we recall Kierkegaard's suggestion that 'the individual is not an actual shape but a shadow,'[413] we can see here that the idea that the self is nothing is far more philosophically complex than the idea that the self is absolute vacancy. John Lee notes the inadequacy of certain new historicist and cultural materialist readings of Renaissance subjectivity as fictions; according to these readings, 'Identity, . . . whether produced in the Renaissance or in the present, is always and everywhere expressive of the external factors which created it, and into which it always

[410] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 634.
[411] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 46.
[412] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 11.
[413] Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 155.

threatens to bring it down; the answer to "who's there" is always either "no body" or "everything".'[414] But, as we see in the Fool's understanding of Lear's 'shadowy' self or in Edgar's unsettling deracination of selfhood, 'Edgar I nothing am' (xii.21), Shakespeare fuses being and nothingness in a way that suggests that his thoughts about subjectivity are philosophically far more advanced than that. Lee later explains that in Shakespeare's drama, 'the answer to "who's there" is not "no one" or "every one" or even "power", but versions of "I am".'[415] Versions of 'I am', it would seem, but also versions of 'I am not'.

This negation of being can also be found when a shamed and disgraced Othello stages his own suicide. 'Speak of me as I am' (*Othello*, V.ii.351), he says before trying to determine exactly what sort of individual he should be faithfully remembered as:

> Then must you speak
> Of one that loved not wisely but too well,
> Of one not easily jealous but, being wrought,
> Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
> Albeit unusèd to the melting mood,
> Drops tears as fast as the Arabian trees
> Their medicinable gum. Set you down this,
> And say besides that in Aleppo once,
> Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcisèd dog
> And smote him thus. *He stabs himself*
>
> (*Othello*, V.ii.352-65)

Othello moves through a series of displaced identities - 'the base Indian, 'a turbaned Turk', 'a Venetian', 'the circumcisèd dog'. It is an experience of unbearable agony: Othello casts himself implicitly as all these metaphorical figures and this prevents him from forming a definitive, unambiguous self. Like the tears of his 'melting mood', his contradictory identities mingle together in a way that is existentially traumatic. And yet, when Othello uses the first-person pronoun before killing himself, there is a sense that the 'I' has been emptied of all its previous identities and has left behind some other pure, contingent intensity, not a self in any formal or recognisable sense, but a kind of intuitive pre-self or non-self. Debora Kuller Shuger hints at something similar when she

[414] Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self*, p. 53.
[415] *Ibid*., p. 84.

suggests that the Renaissance self is 'not a "thing" or agent or individuality but the locus of presence . . . not a bounded *ego* but a space - a void, if you like.'[416] When Lodovico asks, 'Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?', Othello answers: 'That's he that was Othello. Here I am' (V.ii.290). Othello, at this point in the play, is *something else.* The potentiality of this severed stream of consciousness, revealed only when all other familiar ideas of selfhood have been abandoned, is both tragic and heroic. As soon as the original potential of Othello's intuitive sense of self is brought into the social world, it becomes shaped and circumscribed by social structures, values, assumptions and ideologies.

In *Coriolanus,* when Cominius returns to Rome after his failed attempts to appeal to his former general, he reports:

> 'Coriolanus'
> He would not answer to, forbade all names;
> He was a kind of nothing, titleless,
> Till he had forged himself a name o'th' fire
> Of burning Rome. (*Coriolanus,* V.i.11-15)

Nuttall writes: 'Coriolanus' character is one of great pathos. The pathos lies in the fact that he has no inside . . . what existentialists say of man in general is certainly true of Coriolanus in particular - namely, that in himself he is a kind of nothing and acquires what positive nature he possesses by adventurous role-adoption.'[417] Shakespeare's character is thus a precursor, claims Nuttall, of 'the existentialist idea that man's original nature lies in the negation of all essence'.[418] Philip Davis argues in a similar vein when he suggests that 'the kind of nothing which Coriolanus feels himself to be when he is existentially off duty is still - as the Hamlet part of Shakespeare's twisting and turning mind would be quick to realise - something that does exist.'[419] Coriolanus spends most of the play trying to define himself through action. But in the fifth act, subjectivity tears away from social identity and produces in Coriolanus an experience of pure nothingness.

---

[416] Debora Kuller Shuger, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 100.
[417] A. D. Nuttall, 'Shakespeare's Imitation of the World', in *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's Coriolanus*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), pp. 94-5.
[418] *Ibid*., p. 95.
[419] Philip Davis, *Sudden Shakespeare: The Shaping of Shakespeare's Creative Thought* (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 28

Incarcerated in prison, Richard II employs a similar rhetoric of nothingness when he considers the possibility of a subjectivity made up of several identities:

> Thus play I in one person many people,
> And none contented. Sometimes am I king;
> Then treason makes me wish myself a beggar,
> And so I am. Then crushing penury
> Persuades me I was better when a king.
> Then am I kinged again, and by and by
> Think that I am unkinged by Bolingbroke,
> And straight am nothing. But whate'er I be,
> Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
> With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased
> With being nothing. (*Richard II*, V.v.31-41)

Hugh Grady notes that the last lines of this speech hints at 'the hitherto unthinkable idea that nothingness (the possibilities of a self freed from its original insertion into a social order) could become easeful, no longer a crisis of non-being but a precondition for personal and societal change.'[420] Richard's subjectivity is still anchored in the world and confined by its ideological boundaries. But, once again, Shakespeare also suggests that there is a dimension of human consciousness that allows individuals to loosen themselves from their social identities but still be self-aware, an aspect of selfhood that is 'eased / With being nothing'. Grady suggests that in such moments '"nothing" turns out to have suggestive positive coloration, once the initial disorientation of the identity crisis is overcome.'[421] Can there be a subjectivity of absence? Shakespeare seems to point in this direction, and suggest that human beings are literally things 'Of nothing' (*Hamlet*, IV.ii.25). At the close of many of Shakespeare's great tragedies, there is a sense that being nothing is acceptable and perhaps even preferable to identifying oneself solely with a formal social identity. As Shakespeare's tragic heroes show, an apprehension of the nothingness at the heart of being can give rise to considerable existential anxiety, but it can also be the source of great existential strength.

The idea that consciousness is a nothingness that persistently establishes its existence in the world is an important philosophical premise for a great deal of subsequent existential thought. Shakespeare too is clearly interested in the relationship between consciousness and self, thought and subjectivity. Part of the energy and excitement of *Hamlet* is generated by Shakespeare's dramatisation of the movements of

[420] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 107.
[421] *Ibid*., p. 102.

consciousness. Nowhere is this better seen than in Hamlet's speech to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II:

> I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame the earth seems to me a sterile promontory, this most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What a piece of work is a man - how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals. And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (II.ii.261-74)

Shakespeare draws attention here to the immediate, existential nature of human thought. Davis's suggestion that there is 'a bursting feeling about [Shakespeare's] plays' is powerfully demonstrated in this speech.[422] The sense that so much is going on even when the action is paused is largely created by the explosive resonance of certain phrases, and 'the tacit thought-movements' between words.[423] At one point in *Nausea,* Roquentin observes: 'My thought is me: that is why I can't stop. I exist by what I think . . . and I can't prevent myself from thinking . . . If I give way, they'll come here in front, between my eyes - and I go on giving way, the thought grows and grows and here it is, huge, filling me completely and renewing my existence.'[424] There is a parallel here with Hamlet. His mind wanders in different directions and almost surprises itself with the connections it makes and the conclusions it draws. His consciousness has an intuitive, impulsive quality about it, which gives the impression that his self, like his thoughts, springs into being and changes from moment to moment. Macbeth tells us that it is 'the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy' (III.ii.23-4). Harvey Birenhaum argues that *Macbeth* is a 'devastating study of the restless world within and the indifferent world without, for this is a tragedy of consciousness . . . the struggle between *the spontaneous consciousness* - the life that erupts of itself - and *the reflective consciousness* - the mind observing feelings, confounded by the eruptive energy driving against it.'[425] The same could be said of Hamlet, whose mind never stays still and whose sense of self remains vulnerable to the ebb and flow of consciousness.

---

[422] Davis, *Sudden Shakespeare*, p. 1.
[423] *Ibid*., p. 38.
[424] Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 145.
[425] Harvey Birenhaum, 'Consciousness and Responsibility in Macbeth', *Mosaic*, 15:2 (1982), p. 23.

Hamlet is one of the most self-aware and self-questioning characters in the whole of Shakespeare's canon. When he is alone with the audience for the first time, he expresses a desire for bodily disintegration: 'O that this too too solid flesh would melt, / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew' (I.ii.129-30). Once again, Shakespeare uses aqueous imagery as an existentially powerful metaphor. But unlike Antony, whose subjective dissolution, the feeling of being as 'indistinct / As water is in water' (*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.xv.10-1), is the painful result of a series of identity crises, Hamlet eagerly yearns for such an experience. If Antony 'cannot hold [his] visible shape' (IV.xv.13) at the end of the play, Hamlet cannot do so from the outset. He would rather think of his self as condensed vapour than as any kind of hardened substance. He sees the boundaries of the self as permeable and fluid. Andy Mousley writes: 'Rather than acting as sources of identification, human nature and human existence become the site, for Hamlet, of uncertainties and questions. He is exposed to a variety of beliefs and behaviours, each with its own assumptions about what it is to be a human, but as a disengaged, disenchanted sceptic he remains at a critical distance from them.'[426] But Hamlet also deliberately distances himself from himself in order to investigate how his consciousness and self-consciousness function. He is fascinated by the experiences of self-forgetting and self-estrangement. 'Horatio, or I do forget myself' (I.ii.161), he says as his friends arrive. After his furious confrontation with Laertes in the graveyard, he speaks of his so-called 'madness' as if it were another self:

> Was't Hamlet wronged Laertes? Never Hamlet.
> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not; Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged –
> His madness is poor Hamlet's enemy. (V.ii.211-17)

While Claudius wonders 'What it should be, / . . . that thus hath put him / So much from th'understanding of himself' (II.ii.7-9), the audience is aware that Hamlet's self-distancing is, at least, partially intentional. His 'madness' is designed as a conscious act of self-estrangement. The purpose of 'such ambiguous giving out' is that others 'know aught of [him]' (I.v.176-7). But the erratic, disjointed nature of Hamlet's 'antic disposition' speech, the excessive repetition of 'doubtful' phrases, and the unusual

[426] Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 33.

choice of words and grammar suggest that he is also genuinely overwhelmed with passion. His strange, eccentric behaviour is not entirely a sham: it hovers somewhere between authenticity and inauthenticity. Hamlet's parting gesture, 'I do commend me to you' (I.v.181), at the end of the scene is a standard expression of devotion that means 'I entrust myself to you', yet the phrase also harbours the sense that Hamlet consigns a part of himself to his companions. Time and again, he stretches the distance between his socially moulded identity and his inwardly experienced subjectivity in order to open up the nothingness that exists at the heart of his being. It is as if, paradoxically, Hamlet must become distanced from himself in order to fully realise how fragile and vulnerable 'selfhood' really is. He reveals the irreducible duality of human consciousness: consciousness can only grasp itself by becoming distinct from itself. Perhaps Ophelia's reply to Hamlet after he makes a series of lewd jibes at her expense during the performance of The Mousetrap, 'You are naught, you are naught' (III.ii.140), not only means that Hamlet is being 'improper' or 'offensive', but also invites a more literal reading. Like so many lines in *Hamlet,* the remark transcends its immediate context and reverberates across the play. Hamlet is permanently divided from himself in a way that reveals that he is 'naught'. And it is not just Hamlet who is self-divided. When Laertes sees Ophelia who, in a state of madness, has become 'Divided from herself and her fair judgement' (IV.v.85), he remarks: 'Nature is fine in love, and where 'tis fine / It sends some precious instance of itself / After the thing it loves' (IV.v).[427] Davis finds these lines particularly interesting and claims that the 'it' Laertes refers to is 'an earlier almost pre-human force within the human set-up: an "it" in us that sends "some instance of itself" after the thing it loves.'[428] This 'pre-human force' is not a self but an impulse of consciousness that comes into the world.

In *Shakespeare and the Reason*, Terence Hawkes notes that ideas about intellect, reason and the mental faculties of the human mind underwent considerable revision during the Renaissance. He writes: 'The old view, well expressed by Aquinas, had conceived of the mind as a unity whose faculties were interdependent and moved in complementary directions to perform the single function which was *ratio*. The Renaissance view, however, was of a divided mind whose faculties were opposed to each other because they moved in directions which were mutually contradictory. . . . Division had replaced unity.'[429] In existentialist thought, because nothingness exists at

[427] These lines are in Appendix 1 in the 2006 Arden edition, p. 471.
[428] Philip Davis, *Shakespeare Thinking* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 8.
[429] Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare and the Reason: A Study of the Tragedies and the Problem Plays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 37.

the heart of being, consciousness is engaged in a never-ending process of self-creation. Human beings, the existentialists argue, thus find themselves in a perpetual state of existential restlessness. 'Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting / That would not let me sleep' (V.ii.4-5), Hamlet says to Horatio at the end of the play. It seems fitting that this crucial line should be uttered at the denouement of the play. For the first four acts of the play, Hamlet agonises over the nature of selfhood before he finally comes to the realisation that his 'self' is not really a self but 'a kind of fighting' within consciousness. It is the uneasy, agitated and ultimately futile attempt of consciousness to stabilise itself.

By exploring existentialist ideas about nothingness and consciousness, we can begin to see why Hamlet's subjectivity is so frustratingly inaccessible for both himself and an audience. We can also begin to appreciate that Hamlet's endless, unremitting pursuit of self, his existential quest for his own unique subjectivity is the life-force of the play. Grady writes:

> In short, what makes *Hamlet* suitable for our own decentred age is its insight into the constituting fissures and fictions of the tossing life raft of subjectivity to which Hamlet clings, for Hamlet is a humanist of the Montaignean sort - one who sees into the shifting, uncertain, contradictory, and unstable qualities of the self, not a humanist of the Rousseauistic school which makes of the self a fixed, essential source of unproblematic values and perceptions.[430]

Hamlet's humanism - like Montaigne's - resonates strongly with existentialist humanism, because it presents man not as a source of ultimate value, but as a being constantly involved in the process of self-becoming. Charles Taylor adopts an existentialist perspective when he writes: 'We seek self-knowledge, but this can no longer mean just impersonal lore about human nature, as it could for Plato. Each of us has to discover his or her own form. We are not looking for the universal nature; we each look for our own being.'[431] In a famous passage in *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre asserts that

> the word humanism has two very different meanings. One may understand by humanism a theory that upholds man as the end in-itself and as the supreme value. . . . That kind of humanism is absurd. . . . But there is another sense of the word, of which the fundamental meaning is this: Man is all the time outside of himself: it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that he makes

[430] Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne*, p. 261.
[431] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 181.

> man exist. . . . Since man is thus self-surpassing, and can grasp objects only in relation to his self-surpassing, he is the heart and centre of his transcendence. There is no universe other than a human universe, the universe of human subjectivity. . . . [T]his is what we call existential humanism. This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself; that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself; also because we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself, an aim which is one of liberation or of some particular realisation, that man can realise himself as truly human.[432]

As Sartre claims and Hamlet demonstrates, human beings are always to some degree outside of themselves, always capable of consciously reflecting and reconfiguring themselves and their world. This is what Nuttall hints at when he refers to Shakespeare as 'a philosopher of human possibility.'[433]

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare shows a deep interest in the structures and workings of human consciousness. We have also seen how the idea of nothingness has a philosophical specificity that is akin to later existentialist theories of subjectivity. But once Shakespeare has established Hamlet's self-relation, his exploration of human selfhood naturally opens up questions of authenticity, integrity and truthfulness to oneself. Hamlet is constantly negotiating his sense of self and this inevitably involves investigating modes of authenticity and inauthenticity. Through Hamlet, Shakespeare asks: what exactly does it mean to be 'authentic', and what are the ethical implications of personal authenticity? How can we determine firstly, which impulses are authentic, and secondly, whether or not we are being authentic if we act upon them?

Being Authentic

In Ivan Turgenev's short story, 'Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District' (1849), the narrator tells of when he once attended a dinner party at the home of a wealthy landowner. He recalls how during the occasion he came into contact with a series of would-be Hamlet figures. After his arrival, the narrator immediately notices amongst the company 'a young man of about twenty, blond and myopic, dressed from head to foot in black' and, although he appears shy and withdrawn, he continues to 'smile

[432] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1980), pp. 54-6.
[433] Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, p. 381.

venomously'.[434] The anonymous narrator is then introduced to Lupikhin, an embittered man who hides a greater personal pain under his stinging witticisms. Retiring to his shared accommodation, the narrator finally meets another clone of Hamlet with whom he happens to fall into conversation during a sleepless night. Recognising himself as a metafictional cliché, the character complains bitterly about being 'born an imitation of someone else'.[435] This eccentric caricature of Shakespeare's Danish prince boasts of his own worthlessness, exaggerates his personal humiliations and repeatedly grumbles about being 'unoriginal'. He eventually says to the narrator: 'call me Hamlet of the Shchigrovsky District. There are many such Hamlets in every district, but perhaps you haven't come across any others.'[436] Turgenev's sketch, in its creative, satirical take on Russian 'Hamletism', taps into and plays on Shakespeare's Hamlet's obsession with the notions of imitation, originality and authenticity. So, why is being original so existentially significant for the Danish Prince?

Hamlet knows that he is surrounded by 'inauthentic' people. He takes an immediate dislike to Claudius' messenger Osric, referring to him as a 'water-fly' (V.ii.69) and a 'lapwing' (V.ii165). The imagery of creatures that hover just above the water's surface aptly describes his superficial character. Osric is a man whom 'the drossy age dotes on' (V.ii.169), says Hamlet, because he plays 'the tune of the time' (V.ii.169-70). Two hundred years later, another melancholy Dane made a similar diagnosis of his society. 'The present age', writes Kierkegaard, 'is essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence*.'[437] Both Hamlet and Kierkegaard see their worlds as existentially bankrupt. Hamlet is infuriated by the inauthentic ways of others: Laertes' crocodile tears, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's surveillance work, and Polonius' obsequiousness are all recognised and rebuffed by him. To put it in existentialist terms, human beings conform to the inauthentic ways of the 'They-Self' (also referred to by existentialists as the crowd, the public or the herd) when they unreflectively follow the norms, practices and conventions of society. When they act in this way, individuals appropriate the values of the They-self and flee from their existential responsibilities. They become absorbed in the world, convinced that their social role or identity is what

[434] Ivan Turgenev, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, trans. Richard Freeborn (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 276.
[435] *Ibid*., p. 286.
[436] *Ibid*., p. 300.
[437] Søren Kierkegaard, 'Two Ages: The Age of Revolution and The Present Age', in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 252.

makes them who they are. Hamlet is extremely cautious of this kind of existence, aware of the ease with which people - himself included - can become caught up in their everyday goals and ambitions. He is also weary of the power of what he calls 'general censure' (I.iv.35). It worries him to think that a man's character may be corrupted and compromised by common opinion. He reflects:

> So oft it chances in particular men
> That, for some vicious mole of nature in them,
> As in their birth wherein they are not guilty,
> (Since nature cannot choose his origin),
> By their o'ergrowth of some complexion
> Oft breaking down the pales and forts of reason,
> Or by some habit that too much o'erleavens
> The form of plausive manners – that these men,
> Carrying, I say, the stamp of one defect
> (Being Nature's livery or Fortune's star),
> His virtues else, be they as pure as grace,
> As infinite as man may undergo,
> Shall in the general censure take corruption
> From that particular fault: (I.iv.23-36)

This speech is rarely looked at in great detail, and is often regarded as one which Shakespeare eventually lost patience with. But there are some interesting details in this passage. Hamlet uses the image of over-risen bread – as he does when he criticises Osric for having 'a kind of yeasty collection' (V.ii.170-1) of habits and manners – to suggest that socially acceptable behaviour is often frothy and artificial. He condemns the customary wedding revelries that result in Denmark being 'traduced and taxed' (I.iv.18) by other nations. Hamlet's mind then begins to contemplate the wider issue at stake: the way a man's character can be reduced to a single, 'particular fault'. Implicitly, he recognises that human beings are complicated things made up of both faults and virtues. The thought that public opinion can rob an individual of his existential complexity troubles Hamlet a great deal. Of course, there is an element of self-conscious theatricality in the speech that foreshadows his concern for his posthumous reputation at the end of the play. Hamlet knows that the audience may judge him for his 'particular fault' - his reluctance to act. He is also aware that his sense of self is, in part, derived from the opinions of others. If we recall from Chapter Three Sartre's idea about the way human beings view their selves obliquely through the gaze of others, we can see here how Shakespeare gives the notion a metatheatrical dimension in *Hamlet*.

Hamlet hints in this speech at an awareness of the way his subjectivity is partially constituted by the audience. Ralph Berry offers a similar reading of these lines and argues that when Hamlet later tells the players that 'censure . . . must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others' (III.ii.26-8), he is also demonstrating his awareness of the judgemental powers of an audience.[438] Hamlet urges the players to judge what is fit and appropriate for their performance, and not to bend to the whims and desires of other people watching the play. If this advice is viewed in its metatheatrical context, we can see that Hamlet asserts his authenticity not only against other characters (as he does when he tells Rozencrantz and Guildernstern that he is not an instrument to be played upon (III.ii.355-63)), but also against his own audience. As existentialists would say, he struggles with the element of his existence that is 'being-for-others'.

Hamlet is largely sceptical about what he sees as the existentially degrading customs and general opinions of society. He finds it difficult to avenge his father's murder, because this action has been prescribed for him rather than authentically chosen. Yet he still feels an obligation to fulfil these expectations. Something of this idea emerges when Hamlet gives advice to his mother in the closet scene. He tells her:

> Assume a virtue if you have it not.
> That monster Custom, who all sense doth eat
> Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
> That to the use of actions fair and good
> He likewise gives a frock or livery
> That aptly is put on. (III.iv.158-63)

The argument here is a complex one. Hamlet appears to be suggesting that custom is a devilish monster who ruins human sensitivity; but it can also engender more virtuous human actions, if individuals choose to conform to it on their own terms. An individual can authentically commit to an act and take responsibility for it, even if that act has been ordered or directed by someone or something else. For Hamlet, personal authenticity is paramount. He privileges and protects his unique sense of self and regards this feeling as a source of value. 'The time is out of joint; O cursed spite / That ever I was born to set it right!' (I.v.186-7), he says as he shoulders the burden of his responsibilities. By adhering to his father's dictum and 'setting things right' in the latter's sense, Hamlet would not be acting on his own terms in his own way, and therefore would be as inauthentic and hypocritical as those around him. Instead, Hamlet has to find his own authentic way to act and exist.

[438] Ralph Berry, '"To say one": An Essay on *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 28 (1975), p. 109.

It is perhaps useful at this stage to examine the idea of existential authenticity more closely. For thinkers such as Sartre and Heidegger, authenticity is the extent to which individuals engage with and take responsibility for their life as their own. Authenticity consequently requires truthfulness and transparency, the capacity to be honest with oneself. But one of the major problems with the notion of authenticity is the way it has become mixed up with essentialist politics. As Jonathan Dollimore notes, for a long time the idea of being authentic 'has operated as a subcategory of the real, the natural, and the true.'[439] Marshall Berman's conclusions in 1970 are a good example of this, claims Dollimore. Berman writes:

> Our society is filled with people who are ardently yearning and consciously striving for authenticity: moral philosophers who are exploring the idea of 'self-realization'; psychiatrists and their patients who are working to develop and strengthen 'ego-identity'; artists and writers who gave the word 'authenticity' the cultural force it has today – some consciously influenced by existentialism, others ignorant of it, but all bent on creating works and living lives in which their deepest, truest selves will somehow be expressed . . . fighting, desperately and against all odds, simply to preserve, to feel, to be themselves.[440]

Dollimore perhaps unfairly sees Berman's view of authenticity as tantamount to an uncomplicated and achievable ideal, a direct and uncomplicated command to 'be true to oneself'. Existentialists would forcefully reject this notion that that human beings have fixed, stable selves to be true to. Indeed, they would argue that such ideas of authenticity constitute a deeper and more dangerous form of bad faith. However, it must be acknowledged that some of these problems relating to the issue of authenticity originate from existentialism itself, most notably from Heidegger's *Being and Time*.

Heidegger's philosophical project attempts to lay bare the fundamental structures of human existence. To do this, he uses the term 'Dasein' (meaning 'being-there') to show how every human being has a particular understanding of their own existence. He explains: 'Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence - in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. . . . Dasein decides its existence, whether it

[439] Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 43.
[440] Marshall Berman, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (London and New York: Verso, 1970), p. 325.

does so by taking hold or by neglecting.'[441] Adorno's criticisms of Heidegger's 'fundamental ontology' in *The Jargon of Authenticity* and *Negative Dialectics* help to explain how Heidegger's problematic use of language has undermined some of his philosophical arguments. Heidegger sought to use idiosyncratic language that would transcend the presuppositions of Western metaphysics and enable him to return to 'the question of the meaning of Being.'[442] But Adorno points out that the terms Heidegger uses to explain his philosophical insights cannot be severed from sociohistorically engendered meanings: 'When [Heidegger's jargon of authenticity] dresses empirical words with aura, it exaggerates general concepts and ideas of philosophy - for instance the concept of being - so grossly that their conceptual essence, the mediation through the thinking subject, disappears completely under the varnish.'[443] According to Adorno, Heidegger's 'bad form of language' is best demonstrated by his misuse of the concepts 'Being', 'death' and 'authenticity'.[444] More specifically, Heidegger misemploys the word "is". Adorno argues that the meaning of this verb is 'fulfilled only in the relation between subject and predicate. It is not independent.'[445] So when Heidegger refuses to use the word in its general, everyday sense and adopts it in a more idiosyncratic sense, he ends up objectifying Being; that is, he transforms Being, against his best intentions, into a fixed, definite state that can be analysed and explained, rather than regarding it as a fluid, open process that resists reduction and simplification. These problems continue in Heidegger's writings on authenticity and death. In Heidegger's mind, death is absolutely alien to human beings and it therefore individualises them. An apprehension of death, he claims, produces a realisation of 'one's ownmost possibility', in the sense that it forces an individual to come to terms with their own finitude.[446] But Adorno argues that by making the apprehension of death the ground of authentic transcendence, Heidegger hypostatises being. His view of death thus

> robs the subject of its moment of freedom and spontaneity: it completely freezes, like the Heideggerian states of mind, into something like an attribute of the substance 'existence'. Hatred toward reifying psychology removes from the living

[441] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 33.
[442] *Ibid*. p. 21.
[443] Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 12.
[444] *Ibid*., p. xx.
[445] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1992), p. 101.
[446] Heidegger, *Being in Time*, p. 307.

> that which would make them other than reified. Authenticity . . . is made into an object.[447]

Authenticity thus becomes a model of reification. In other words, it becomes an essentialised state of existence, a form of being that relates to a fixed or presupposed self. Sherman notes that Heidegger's philosophy ultimately produces 'a more invidious identity theory than those against which it rebels.'[448] The idea of authenticity in *Being and Time* is difficult, because it takes away from the individual the opportunity to engage with the process of becoming authentic. In Heidegger's mind, authenticity is something thrust upon one at the moment when one realises the inevitability of one's own death, whereas for other existentialist thinkers, the troublesome path towards authenticity is something an individual has to carve out for himself. As critics such as Adorno and Sherman contend, Heidegger inadvertently undermines his own philosophical agenda. Of course, others disagree with this view of Heideggerian authenticity. Taylor Carmen argues that Heidegger's idea of authentic existence 'is above all a conception of the first-person perspective I have on myself and its irreducibility to any third-person point of view, no matter how descriptively thorough or accurate it may be'.[449] He suggests that it is wrong to view Heidegger's notion of authenticity as a normative ideal of integrated selfhood, because Dasein can never apprehend itself as a complete and unified entity. It perpetually falls short of total self-understanding, because it cannot view being from an objective third-person perspective.

Although it is necessary to understand and appreciate the criticism of authenticity as a philosophical notion, it is also important to stress that the idea - with and without its limitations - was as important in Renaissance England, *mutatis mutandis*, as it continues to be in our contemporary world. For existentialists, the idea that individuals can have an intimate and authentic relationship with themselves is a vital one. In order for human beings to engage actively with the process of self-becoming, it is crucial that there is no fixed, predetermined, *a priori* self. Eric Langley underlines the importance of this notion in Renaissance literature. He writes: 'Authenticity (being autocratic self-authorization, etymologically speaking) should not be mistaken for subject-seeking essentialism, and thereby should not be displayed like a trophy or a quantity, but as a process should be heard in the echo between words or in the vacancies that impel these

[447] Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, p. 127.
[448] Sherman, *Sartre and Adorno*, p. 45.
[449] Taylor Carmen, 'Authenticity', in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), p. 290.

narratives of self.'[450] For existentialists and for Hamlet, an essentialised model of authenticity is not possible. However, this renders the notion of authenticity vulnerable and unstable, for if the self is always in a state of flux, how can an individual be true to it? As we shall see, this is the heart of Hamlet's existential dilemma.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare is acutely aware of the complexity of the issue of individual authenticity, and, as I suggested in Chapter Two, he is particularly conscious of the interplay between authenticity and inauthenticity. Polonius' advice to Laertes as he leaves for France epitomises the way a subtle and more self-deceiving form of inauthenticity can work under the veneer of idiosyncrasy and personal self-assertion:

> Be thou familiar but by no means vulgar;
> Those friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
> Grapple them unto thy soul with hoops of steel,
> But do not dull thy palm with entertainment
> Of each new-hatched, unfledged courage. . . .
> This above all, to thine own self be true. (I.iii.60-4, 77)

Polonius' recommendation of fidelity to one's best interests and advantage is a good example of a devious, inauthentic claim to authenticity. Kierkegaard explains that this type of human agency and action is 'only the movement of abstraction within the concretions of individuality.'[451] Paradoxically, human beings do not act in their own authentic, individual way when they assert the kind of individuality Polonius advocates, because they are simply conforming to the practices of society; they think they are acting for themselves, when they are in fact only replicating the desires and normative ideals prescribed by others. In short, they are not conscious of their own inauthenticity. So how do human beings, who (according to the existentialists) have an immediate and particular understanding of their own being, so thoroughly misunderstand the nature of their own existence? As Stephen Mulhall explains, 'if Dasein typically loses itself in the "they", it will understand both its world and itself in the terms that "they" make available to it, and so will interpret its own nature in terms of the categories that lie closest to hand in popular culture; and they will be as inauthentic as their creators.'[452]

Against the insincerity and inauthenticity of others, Hamlet asserts what existentialists would call an individualising sense of 'mineness'. Lee notes how

---

[450] Eric Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 251.
[451] Søren Kierkegaard, 'Two Ages: A Literary Review', in *The Essential Kierkegaard*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 261.
[452] Stephen Mulhall, *Heidegger and Being in Time* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 69.

important the phrase 'to me' is for the Danish Prince: '"To me" is the Prince's own tag; it reflects his awareness that he is construing and his concern with the activity and the transformative nature of his understanding.'[453] Hamlet is profoundly interested in the way the world discloses itself to his consciousness. 'How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!' (I.ii.133-4), he says as he agonises over his mother's hasty marriage. McGinn observes that Hamlet's 'despair seems existential, not occasional, a matter of how he looks at the world rather than what the world throws specifically at him.'[454] The fact that Hamlet apprehends the world around him in a distinctive way gives the impression that he is more authentically self-aware than other characters in the play. Holbrook writes:

> We don't think Hamlet is inferior to Fortinbras, the energetic future leader of Denmark. We know there are types of worldly success that constitute existential failure. Hamlet refuses to become like Kierkegaard's 'the others' or Heidegger's 'the they'. He holds himself back from the world, or 'fails' in it, if you like - but from a certain perspective this failure looks like high success, like freedom.[455]

To a certain extent, Holbrook is correct. Hamlet does distance himself from those who have 'got the tune of the time' (V.ii.169-70). On hearing the distant wedding revelries, Horatio asks: 'Is it a custom?' (I.iv.12), to which Hamlet replies: 'Ay, marry is't, / But to my mind, though I am native here / And to the manner born, it is a custom / More honoured in the breach than the observance' (I.iv.13-6). Hamlet suggests that it would be more honourable to break with tradition than to observe it; more authentic not to engage with inauthentic habits and conventions. But Hamlet also recognises that the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity is not easy to determine, even inwardly. Hamlet challenges certain notions of authenticity while simultaneously affirming others. Mousley suggests: 'A role for Hamlet is a possible self, or possibly even an anti-self masquerading as a self, but it is never merely a role.'[456] Roles always have existential significance for Hamlet, and this introduces the problem of what it means to be an authentic self. Acting and theatricality make Hamlet ponder the question 'what is authenticity?'. He is outraged that the player's speech can so convincingly simulate genuine emotion:

---

[453] Lee, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self*, p. 195.
[454] McGinn, *Shakespeare's Philosophy*, p. 44.
[455] Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism*, p. 50.
[456] Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, p. 38.

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
Could force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage wanned
– Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit – and all for nothing –
For Hecuba?
What's Hecuba to him, or he to her,
That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and that for passion
That I have? (II.ii.486-97)

Mousley notes that, for Hamlet, 'theatrical language is a signifier of both authenticity and inauthenticity: the player's imitation of heroic passion is an inauthentic simulation of authentic passion.'[457] The blurring of these states in the theatre makes it harder for Hamlet to determine what constitutes an authentic course of action.

We can also trace the dialectic of authenticity at work when Hamlet confronts Laertes in the graveyard. René Girard argues that Laertes provides a mimetic model for Hamlet: 'He is trying to be a normal man himself; he is aping the well-adjusted personality of Laertes, a man who can draw his sword when he should and who can jump into his sister's grave when he should without looking like an idiot.'[458] For Girard, Hamlet's language during the scene reveals the importance of mimetic rivalry:

'Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.
Woul't weep, woul't fight, woul't fast, woul't tear thyself,
Woul't drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
I'll do't. Dost thou come here to whine,
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I. . . .
I'll rant as well as thou. (V.i.263-8, 273)

When Hamlet later admits that 'the bravery of [Laertes'] grief did put me / Into a towering passion' (V.ii),[459] the interdependence of self and other becomes even more apparent. As sons of murdered fathers seeking revenge, Laertes and Hamlet should be identical doubles. But the closer Hamlet gets to Laertes, the more different and distinct he seems. In the graveyard, it is as if Hamlet is trying out another role, mimicking the

[457] *Ibid*., p. 38.
[458] René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 279.
[459] These lines are in Appendix 1 in the 2006 Arden edition, p.473.

inauthenticity of Laertes in order to discard it for a more authentic way of being. His hyperbolic outburst, like his self-remonstrations and feigned madness, lingers in the existential no-man's-land between authenticity and inauthenticity.

'I do not know / Why yet I live to say this thing's to do, / Sith I have cause and will and strength and means / To do't' (IV.iv.42-5): Hamlet is thoroughly perplexed by his inability to act in accordance with the orders of his father's ghost. His dilemma over action is a specifically existential problem. When Sartre discusses the problem of 'bad faith', he gives the example of a man who is a waiter in a café. He 'can not be immediately a café waiter' because role and self cannot perfectly coincide.[460] In this situation, Sartre suggests,

> it is precisely this person *who I have to be* (if I am the waiter in question) and who I am not. It is not that I do not wish to be this person or that I want this person to be different. But rather there is no common measure between his being and mine. . . . I can not be he, I can only play at *being* him; that is, imagine myself that I am he. . . . In vain do I fulfill the functions of a café waiter. I can only be in a neutralized mode, as the actor is Hamlet, by mechanically making the *typical gestures* of my state and by aiming at myself as an imaginary café waiter.[461]

The passing reference to Hamlet in this passage is not coincidental. Like Sartre's waiter, Hamlet knows he cannot 'find himself' in the role he has been assigned. Sartre continues: 'We are dealing with more than mere social positions; I am never any one of my attitudes, any one of my actions. . . . I can not say either that I *am* here or I *am* not here, in the sense that we can say "that box of matches is on the table;" . . . On all sides I escape being and yet - I am.'[462] Here, Sartre begins to consider the difficulty of thinking of authenticity as a state of being, as something that can be affirmed and sustained.

There has been much debate about the room Sartre leaves for the possibility of 'good faith'. Sherman rejects the suggestion outright: 'on Sartre's account the phenomenon of bad faith is unavoidable for ontological reasons: human beings can never entirely overcome it.'[463] Because human consciousness is divided and non-identical, 'it is what it is not', it cannot ever repair the rupture in being that allows it to come into existence in the first place, Sherman explains. But Sartre does gesture

[460] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 83.
[461] *Ibid*., p. 83.
[462] *Ibid*., p. 84.
[463] Sherman, *Sartre and Adorno*, p. 136.

towards the possibility of good faith and authenticity. In *Notebooks for an Ethics*, he suggests that authenticity is the degree to which an individual reflectively participates in their life as their own. He writes: 'Authenticity has to do with what I will. Sincerity presents itself as contemplation and an announcement of what I am.'[464] This argument prompts Ronald E. Santoni to assert that

> it is a misreading of Sartre to conclude, as too many interpreters do, that Sartre's philosophy condemns us irreversibly to bad faith and Sartrean hell. *Notebooks for an Ethics* makes this unequivocal. Although, for Sartre, authenticity may not give us the security and foundation for which we may be looking, it gives us an exit from the torment that comes from the futile attempt to secure ourselves in being, things, objects, and the world. We may not be able to suppress our tendency to want this grounding, but we can free ourselves from the hell of pursuing it.[465]

Most existentialists concur that a large portion of human existence is lived inauthentically or in bad faith. Perhaps Shakespeare would agree with the suggestion that human beings find self-truth difficult, perhaps even impossible. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Balthasar sings: 'Men were deceivers ever, / One foot in sea, and one on shore, / To one thing constant never' (II.iii.57-9). Authenticity, for existentialists, involves a recognition of the unavoidably inauthentic quality of life, an awareness that we are all drawn into the world and cannot disassociate ourselves from it. This point becomes increasingly important for existentialists as they broaden their enquiry by examining the ethical and political dimensions of human existence.

So what does it mean to say that Hamlet is more 'authentic' than the other characters in the play? When Hamlet declares, 'This is I, / Hamlet the Dane' (V.i.245-6), there is the sense that he is asserting his own kind of authenticity. He is moving when he says this line: the stage direction '[*Advancing*]' makes this clear. Hamlet becomes the person he is by defining himself in the heat of action; he engages in the process of self-becoming. Fernie suggests that 'Shakespeare's play improvises a new ontology of being-in-action',[466] and that this gives the play its distinct existential intensity. The nothingness within consciousness allows Hamlet to transcend the givens of his situation and accept responsibility for his own life.

---

[464] Jean-Paul Sartre, *A Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 479.
[465] Ronald E. Santoni, *Bad Faith, Good Faith and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 189.
[466] Fernie, 'The Last Act: Presentism, Spirituality and the Politics of *Hamlet*', p. 208.

Hamlet's Freedom

We have seen that Hamlet is deeply concerned with two broadly existential issues: consciousness and authenticity. Shakespeare's explorations of these philosophically rich ideas play a vital part in generating the energy and intensity of the play. Hamlet's anxiety about consciousness and authenticity is created by his contemplation of another fundamentally existential dilemma: how to act. In fact, the problem of action engenders a series of inextricably connected existential dilemmas. Hamlet asks himself: should I act at all? If I act, when and how should I do so? Is this particular act of revenge an authentic act? Is it morally justifiable to act? Will I be plagued by my conscience once I have acted? Will this course of action confirm or call into question my sense of who I am? The ontological and ethical implications of action leave Hamlet utterly angst-ridden. He realises that he is compelled to choose; that he cannot not choose. There is no escaping freedom - even the decision *not* to act is a self-defining choice. By acknowledging the importance of action, he ups the existential stakes and shows the audience that the freedom to act or not act is an inescapable part of being human.

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare suggests that in order to understand freedom, we must confront the realities of death and human finitude. From the outset of the play, Hamlet contemplates the meaning of suicide. His father's unexpected death and his mother's swift marriage have led him to think about 'self-slaughter' (I.ii.132). Death - his own and that of others - is never far from his mind. It infiltrates his language and imagery. He teasingly speaks of walking out of the air and 'into [his] grave' (II.ii.204) with Polonius. He is astonished by the men in Fortinbras' army, who can 'Go to their graves like beds' (IV.iv.61) for a plot of land that would not be big enough to bury them all in. In his soliloquy beginning 'To be or not to be', in which he meditates on the desirability and the fear of death, Hamlet suggests that reflection is the adversary of suicide:

> To be, or not to be – that is the question;
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them; to die: to sleep –
> No more, and by a sleep to say we end
> The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wished – to die: to sleep –
> To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub,

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin. Who would fardels bear
To grunt and sweat under a weary life
But that the dread of something after death
(The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns) puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all –
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action. (III.i.55-87)

Hamlet no longer wants to endure the traumatic 'whips and scorns of time', no longer wishes 'To grunt and sweat under a weary life'. The world he sees is painfully pointless, and this is what entices him to contemplate suicide. Bruster, however, calls this interpretation into question, arguing that 'Hamlet's regret over the role thinking takes in our life offers a more painful insight into the human condition. Hamlet's inward guest works as a kind of grinning skull that mocks human achievement and ability. Far from being a hymn to self-consciousness, Hamlet's soliloquy expresses profound misgivings about the process of thinking "too much."'[467] While it is certainly true that the speech branches out beyond the issue of suicide and feeds into other concerns such as the afterlife, conscience and action, it is important not to overlook the philosophical seriousness of Hamlet's suicidal deliberations. The question 'Why should I continue to live?' is what Camus calls the 'one truly serious philosophical problem.'[468] He rejects the suggestion that the corrosive anguish produced by an apprehension of the absurdity of the world leaves no other choice but an act of suicide. Instead, the thought of killing oneself gives rise to a lucid awareness of one's existence. Consciousness, being irritated

[467] Bruster, *To Be or Not to Be*, pp. 102-3.
[468] Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, p. 1.

in the extreme by the thought of non-existence, is thus passionately intensified by the prospect of death. The logic of suicide, claims Camus, is not that it devalues life, but that paradoxically it makes life all the more worth living: 'The return to consciousness, the escape from everyday sleep represents the first steps of absurd freedom.'[469] The more Hamlet thinks about ending his life and freeing himself from being mentally tortured by the meaninglessness and irrationality of the world, the more alive and individualised he feels, which instantly disarms his suicidal impulse.

In the graveyard scene, Hamlet literally comes face to face with death. The anxiety produced by such a vivid apprehension of death manifests itself physically. When he realises that after death the well-bred bones of the skeletal remains before him are now good for nothing but playing at 'loggets', he confesses: 'Mine ache to think on't' (V.i.87-8). When he takes Yorick's skull in his hands, he says: 'Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio. A fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath bore me on his back a thousand times, and now how abhorred in my imagination it is. My gorge rises at it' (V.i.174-7). In the next scene, he tells Horatio: 'Thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart' (V.ii.190-1). The swell of existential nausea Hamlet feels is an immediate, physiological reaction to the finitude of human existence. Roquentin calls the sensation 'a sort of sweet disgust', 'a host of little metamorphoses', 'an abstract change which settles on nothing.'[470] In a similar way, Hamlet's physical nausea is the symptom of a consciousness that is ill at ease with itself. Hamlet comes to realise that he exists in a crudely basic sense of the word: as a material being, he has a fundamental and irreducible corporeality. But he also understands that he exists in another way: his consciousness allows him to go beyond the givens of his existence. This space between what existentialists call facticity and transcendence or between essence and existence is where the possibility of freedom resides. Ophelia, in a state of pitiful madness, hints at the same idea when she says: 'Lord, we know what we are but know not what we may be' (IV.v.43-4).

In the graveyard scene, Hamlet's confrontation with death - his 'existential tremble'[471] as Mousley calls it - allows him to understand human freedom in a radically different way. This is most powerfully dramatised in the final act of the play, when Hamlet becomes imbued with a curious spirituality. He tells Horatio that 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will' (V.ii.10-1), and that 'We defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow' (V.ii.197-8). As Fernie

[469] *Ibid*., p. 57.
[470] Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 22, 14, 14.
[471] Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, p. 45.

reminds us, Hamlet is overcome by 'a strange spirit of passive readiness.'[472] As Hamlet comes to terms with the practical constraints of his situation, he finds that he is released to act. This freedom *in his situation* can be seen in the circumlocutory way Hamlet agrees to Claudius' rigged sword fight. Answering Osric, he says: 'Sir, I will walk here in the hall. If it please his majesty, it is the breathing time of day with me. Let the foils be brought, the gentleman willing and the King hold his purpose – I will win for him an I can; if not, I will gain nothing but my shame and the odd hits' (V.ii.154-8). Hamlet's use of the conditional mood jars with the firmness and repetition of the future indicative phrase 'I will'. The same tension can be discerned when Hamlet adds: 'I am constant to my purposes. They follow the King's pleasure. If his fitness speaks, mine is ready. Now or whensoever, provided I be so able as now' (V.ii.179-81). By choosing to agree to the challenge, Hamlet consciously decides to throw himself back into the fray: he chooses to act on his terms. If Hamlet is an existential 'hero' like Meursault or Roquentin, it is because he finds a paradoxical and unconventional way to assert his freedom.

'Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself. The being which is what it is can not be free. Freedom is precisely the nothingness which is *made-to-be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality *to make itself* instead of *to be*.'[473] By this, Sartre means that because human beings can question themselves (as a result of the divided nature of consciousness), they are always actively engaged in the process of making themselves into the people they are. Human freedom is thus a frightening thing. Roquentin observes: 'I am free: I haven't a single reason for living left, all the ones I have tried have given way and I can't imagine any more. . . . Alone and free. But this freedom is rather like death.'[474] Hamlet recognises and asserts this ontological freedom in the last act. An existentially resonant passage in one of Mikhail Bakhtin's neglected texts, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, further illuminates this idea. Bakhtin claims that there is 'no alibi in existence', because every human individual is responsible for making a contribution to 'the ongoing event of being.'[475] An act, he explains,

> in a non-fused yet undivided form is both the moment of my passivity and the moment of my self-activity: I find myself in Being (passivity) and I actively participate in it; both that which is given to me and that which is yet to be achieved by me: my own uniqueness is given, yet at the same time it exists only

[472] Fernie, 'The Last Act: Presentism, Spirituality and the Politics of *Hamlet*', p. 198.
[473] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 462-3.
[474] Sartre, *Nausea*, p. 223.
[475] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 42.

> to the extent to which it is really actualised by me as uniqueness - it is always in the act, in the performed deed.[476]

Bakhtin draws attention to the two senses of the verb 'to be'. Human beings can exist passively (existentialists choose to capitalise this form of 'Being'), but they can also 'be something' by actively engaging in the process of existing (what existentialists call 'being'). Hamlet expresses a similar understanding of the convergence of action and passivity in being: 'If it be, 'tis not to come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all, since no man of aught he leaves knows what is't to leave betimes. Let be' (V.ii.198-202). Hamlet here is talking euphemistically about death, which shows that he is still afraid to confront it directly. In the New Cambridge edition, Philip Edwards understands the sentence 'Since no man of aught he leaves knows, what is't to leave betimes?' (V.ii.195-6), to mean, 'Since no man has any knowledge of the life he leaves behind him, what does it matter if one dies early?'[477] But the folio reads: 'The readiness is all. Since no man has ought of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?'[478] In this version, Hamlet seems to be saying: 'Being ready for death is all that matters. Since no one *possesses* anything, including their own life, no one *loses* anything by dying, either sooner or later. So death is nothing to be afraid of because there's *nothing to lose by it*.' Hamlet cannot own his life or possess it in a way he feels he should be able to. But this frees him to act by liberating him from the illusion that life is something he can lose. He comes to realise that he must reconcile himself to his fluctuating, unstable existence by focusing on the present moment, the here and now of the time he finds himself in. Hamlet tells us that 'we defy augury' (V.ii.197). We cannot look for signs of the future and act accordingly: we must take responsibility for the here and now of our existence, accept what the world throws at us and try to respond in the most authentic way we can. As Hamlet puts it, 'the readiness is all' (V.ii.200). The 'all' here has a touch of ambiguity as well. Being 'ready' for the world is the *most important* thing to do and the *only* thing he can do. Hamlet's eventual killing of Claudius is a rash, spontaneous act, but it is committed in a mood of energising acceptance. Freedom and necessity intensify each other in the denouement of the play. Under the mounting pressure of his situation, Hamlet

---

[476] *Ibid*., p. 41.
[477] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Philip Edwards, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 234.
[478] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Cengage Learning, 2006).

understands the existential immensity of his freedom to commit himself authentically to his situation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored at length the existential nature of Hamlet's subjectivity. As an agent of self-differentiation, Hamlet is constantly aware of his capacity to reconfigure his sense of self. The existential intensity of Hamlet's character, his confrontation with powerful questions about what it means to exist as a human being, elicits pity and empathy from an audience. In this respect, the play functions as a terrifying reminder of our own existential fragility and vulnerability. This is what Hazlitt means when he remarks that the speeches and sayings of Hamlet are 'as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is *we* who are Hamlet.'[479] Harold Bloom makes a similar point when he insists that 'We need to assert ourselves and read Shakespeare as strenuously as we can, while knowing that his plays will read us more energetically still. They read us definitively.'[480] Shakespeare's interest in existential concerns is a fundamental aspect of his continuing appeal. His plays have something to say about the experience of being human, and we have something to learn from such existential explorations.

[479] William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (Boston: Wells and Lily, 1818), p. 115.
[480] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. xx.

CHAPTER FIVE

'NOT / OF STRONGER EARTH THAN OTHERS' (V.III.28-9): ETHICAL LIFE IN *CORIOLANUS*

Early on in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir discusses the main charge levelled at existentialism - that it is a philosophy that repudiates all ethics and commends amorality. Critics of the philosophy, explains Beauvoir, reason that 'if man is free to define for himself the conditions of a life which is valid in his own eyes, can he not choose whatever he likes and act however he likes?'[481] Beauvoir's resounding answer to this question is no. Human existence is always ethically charged because it is situated and embodied, and the suggestion that human beings must take responsibility for the formation and development of their own subjectivity functions as an ethical imperative in existentialist thought. But the texture of this argument becomes more intricate and complex as existentialists begin to examine the deep ambiguity that arises when an individual realises that they are not only a perceiving subject, but also an object perceived by other people. 'I concern others and they concern me', writes Beauvoir, and that is 'an irreducible truth.'[482] For human beings, the simultaneity of their subject and object status continually threatens their sense of autonomy, freedom and individuality. As a result, Sartre sees the relationship between one person and another as a site of conflict, because an individual's sense of their intuitive, existential selfhood is always liable to feel threatened and alienated by the visual power of other people. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes: 'While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me.'[483] As we saw in Chapter Three, Shakespeare

[481] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), p. 15.
[482] *Ibid*., p. 72.
[483] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 386.

similarly presents the objectifying and alienating gaze of others as subjectively disorientating in his plays and poetry. But in *Coriolanus*, Shakespeare explores the ethical impact the relationship between self and other[484] has on human subjectivity in a way that resonates powerfully with the work of existential ethicists such as Beauvoir and Martin Buber. Although Beauvoir concurs with Sartre's view that the consciousness of others is an ontological problem and recognises that individuals 'are separate, even opposed',[485] she insists that beneath the opposition between self and other there is a connection that constitutes the basis of relational life. Others are part of my existence and I am part of their existence, and this means that there is a basic bond between us, even if that bond is fraught with tension, conflict and friction. Beauvoir suggests that the fundamental linkage between self and other, the necessary reciprocity of that relationship, opens up the possibility of an ethics based on mutuality, solidarity and cooperation.

I want to argue in this chapter that Shakespeare is an existential ethicist *avant la lettre*, a writer whose drama envisages a relative ethics grounded in human understanding, love, sympathy, compassion and consideration. But it must be added that it is an existential ethics that refuses to be distilled into fixed moral precepts. Throughout this chapter, 'morality' and 'moral' are terms used to denote prescriptive codes of conduct, conventions and rules that dictate how human beings should behave within society. The terms 'ethics' and 'ethical', in contrast, are used to refer to situations in which human beings are aware of how their actions affect not only their own subjectivity, but also the lives of other people, in ways that conventional codes of conduct cannot accommodate. Ethical moments in Shakespeare's plays are so vivid and intense that they resist being shaped into, or judged according to, established, moral principles. Rather than staging didactic moral lessons, Shakespeare's plays invite us to appreciate the importance of ethical life and the existential necessity of respect for and openness towards others. *Coriolanus* reveals the momentous impact of this ethical approach on human subjectivity. Like Hamlet, Coriolanus is fixated on the idea of living authentically. In a perfect instance of a conflict between an individual ethical code of authenticity and a collective social morality, he describes himself as a man who would 'rather be their servant in [his] way / Than sway with them in theirs' (II.i.199-

[484] Although Sartre chooses to capitalise the word 'other' in order to designate it as an abstract notion (he sees 'the Other' almost as a transcendental, faceless power that negatively effects human subjectivity), I have decided not to follow suit, as I believe that the conventional, everyday sense of the word is not only more philosophically significant, but also resonates more accurately with Shakespeare's broader concerns with the relationship between self and others.

[485] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 73.

200). The idea of individual authenticity is developed and ramified in this play, submerged by Shakespeare in an intensely socialised setting in order to show the tension between general morals and personal ethics. Slowly and painfully, Coriolanus comes to see that detachment from the world and others brings terrible existential consequences. However, when he realises that he is a being that exists for others as well as for himself, his subjectivity is not damaged but paradoxically enhanced by his experience of self-loss. The new, unstable, vulnerable authenticity that suddenly becomes apparent as Shakespeare stages the transformation of Coriolanus's perspective at the end of the play underscores the ethical power of subjectively identifying with other beings. By giving the idea of authenticity an ethical edge, Shakespeare intensifies its existential complexity and profundity.

Existential Singularity Versus Being-For-Others

Coriolanus, we are told, is a man like no other. Cominius says that he is 'like a thing / Made by some other deity than nature' (IV.vi.94-5), an individual who 'cannot in the world / Be singly counterpoised' (II.ii.84-5). After witnessing his 'strange alteration' (IV.v.149) at Aufidius' house, the first servingman remarks, 'would I were hanged but I thought there was more in him then I could think' (IV.v.160-1), to which the second servingman adds: 'He is simply the rarest man i'th' world' (IV.v.162-3). Almost every character in the play has something to say about Coriolanus' exceptional, super-human character. Even the citizens single him out, bluntly stating that 'Caius Martius is chief enemy to the people' (I.i.7-8). When one member of the congregation asks the others to consider the 'services he has done for his country' (I.i.27-8), the first citizen suggests that his pride reaches 'the altitude of his virtue' (I.i.37), which suggests that his merits and flaws keep him aloof from society and 'the commonalty' (I.i.26). Critics too have been fascinated by the way Shakespeare underscores Coriolanus' distinctiveness. In his classic reading of the play, A. C. Bradley thinks of Coriolanus as 'an impossible person', who suffers from an all-too-human quality that renders him doubly tragic, 'because it is not only his faults that make him impossible. There is bound up with them a nobleness of nature in which he surpasses everyone around him.'[486] Bradley, up to a point, is right. There is something admirable about the way he refuses to play political games and 'stoop to th' herd' (III.ii.32). In existentialist terms, Coriolanus lives by his

[486] A. C. Bradley, 'Character and the Imaginative Appeal of Tragedy in *Coriolanus*', in *Coriolanus: A Casebook*, ed. B. A. Brockman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 60, 61.

own ethic of authenticity; he makes his sense of integrity his personal ethical code. But Shakespeare manipulates the action of the play in such a way that the audience feels increasingly uncertain about Coriolanus' belief in his own existential singularity. Coriolanus is tied to the world through familial, social and political relations: he has a mother, a wife, a son, an arch-nemesis, military colleagues, close friends, and real enemies, all of whom threaten his sense of his existential uniqueness. His singularity is constantly undermined and he is painfully aware that other people have the ability to objectify him.

The impenetrability of other people's minds, the serious epistemological problem of knowing how others feel and what they think, is clearly a philosophical idea that Shakespeare was drawn to throughout his writing. He realised that the minds of other people are unfathomable and opaque, and that this has considerable consequences for a human subject's sense of self. As Duncan puts it in *Macbeth*, 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face' (I.iv.12-13). Sir Walter Raleigh's *Sceptick, or Speculations*, a text that examines the deceptive nature of sensory impressions and proposes that human consciousness has no direct access to things in themselves, is an early modern investigation into the problematic nature of the minds of other people. He writes: 'I may tell what the outward object seemeth to me; but what it seemeth to other creatures, or whether it be indeed that which it seemeth to me, or any other of them, I know not.'[487] Drawing on Raleigh's example, Katharine Maus notes that 'in the English Renaissance . . . the "problem of other minds" presents itself to thinkers and writers not so much as a question of whether those minds exist as a question of how to know what they are thinking.'[488] What Raleigh is articulating in this short treatise are his concerns about the untranslatability of the phenomenal experience. Though we may try, we simply cannot see things as others do. As James A. Knapp notes, 'To see as another, to see the other, and to see oneself as another sees you are all at the heart of the ethical aporia haunting the history of metaphysics.'[489] Unlike other characters such as Leontes or Othello, who strive to see as others do to such an extent that it brings them to the point of mental and emotional breakdown, Coriolanus refuses outright to acknowledge the sentiments, thoughts, and opinions of others. In his first vicious verbal attack on the

[487] Walter Raleigh, *Sceptick, or Speculations. And Observations of the Magnificency and Opulency of Cities. His Seat of Government. And Letters to the Kings Majestie, and others of Qualitie. Also his Demeanor before his Execution* (London: Printed by W. Bentley, 1651), p. 20.
[488] Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), p. 7.
[489] James A. Knapp, *Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), p. 105.

plebeians, he says, 'What's the matter, you dissentious rogues, / That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion, / Make yourselves scabs?' (I.i.161-3). In order to denigrate the plebeians' power to form opinions of him, Coriolanus uses a gross, degrading image, which associates the formation of judgements with bodily sores. But the assault reveals more about him then it does about the plebeians. Coriolanus would prefer think of them as wounding themselves rather than wounding him, because he is sub-consciously concerned with their ability to make opinions that could potentially challenge or threaten his subjectivity. But, as we shall see, Coriolanus's singular identity cannot sustain itself. He needs other people to reflect back a dimension of his existence that he has no immediate access to. As Sartre puts it: 'I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being.'[490] His view of himself is not enough; it must be validated through the eyes of others.

Andy Mousley argues that there is an important levelling impulse in *Coriolanus*. Coriolanus, the man praised for his supreme independence, 'is brought down to earth and obliged to recognise his "only human" humanity.'[491] 'The play', Mousley continues, 'seems to go out of its way to make vulnerable someone who seems impervious to vulnerability. This has a universalising effect: if the "more than human" Coriolanus turns out to be "only human" after all, then this shows that the "truism" that we are all only human might have some "truth" in it.'[492] This is a crucial aspect of the play. Coriolanus is forced to accept his existential frailty and dependence on others. Moreover, he is obliged to confront the fact that he plays a role within a wider society. The thought of this appals Coriolanus. As Cavell points out: 'it is irrelevant to Coriolanus whether the parable of the belly is interpreted with the patricians or with the plebeians as the belly, or as the tongue, or as any other part. What alarms him is simply being part, one member among others of the same organism.'[493] Throughout the play, Shakespeare not only humanises Coriolanus: at the level of language, Shakespeare also underscores the inescapable bonds that connect him to other beings in the world.

The relationship between Coriolanus and Aufidius is a foil for the authentic human connection between two individuals that they adumbrate. In the first act, both characters express a wish to be each other. 'I sin in envying his nobility, / And were I anything but what I am, / I would wish me only he' (I.i.228-30), says Coriolanus in the

[490] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 246.
[491] Andy Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 115.
[492] *Ibid*., p. 115.
[493] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 169.

opening scene of the play, admitting a few lines later that Aufidius 'is a lion / That [he is] proud to hunt' (I.i.233-4). Aufidius remarks: 'I would I were a Roman, for I cannot, / Being a Volsce, be that I am' (I.xi.4-5). These are strange utterances, which articulate not only a desire for self-transformation, but also, more pointedly, a desire to become one's most despised enemy. Maurice Hunt calls this 'a symbolic fusion of selves',[494] albeit a perverse and inauthentic one: each soldier makes himself the other's servant in order to venerate narcissistically a glorified version of himself. Thus what should be a relationship between self and other is reduced to a relationship between self and self. Adelman suggests that 'the noble Aufidius is Coriolanus's own invention, a reflection of his own doubts about what he is, an expression of what he would wish himself to be.'[495] But even though the bond is fraught with tension, it remains intact. When Coriolanus meets Aufidius in battle, he says, 'I'll fight with none but thee, for I do hate thee / Worse than a promise breaker' (I.ix.1-2), to which Aufidius replies, 'We hate alike' (I.ix.3). Coriolanus and Aufidius respect each other's hatred of the other. The intensity of their mutual loathing paradoxically creates a form of emotional identification, a kind of existential magnetism between the two enemies.

'If e'er again I meet him beard to beard, / He's mine, or I am his!' (I.xi.11-12), says Aufidius, exemplifying the play's obsession with the rhetorical technique of antithesis. Closely related to oxymoron, contradiction and paradox, antithesis is a literary device that positions structurally symmetrical yet opposing propositions next to one another. In the context of the play's fascination with relationships between individuals, the pervasiveness of antithetical linguistic formulations is highly suggestive. Antithesis sets up opposites in a way that underscores a degree of parallelism between two ideas.[496] It is a rhetorical convention that alternates tension and balance, manipulates contrariety and complementarity in a way that hints at some form of dialectical connection. The plebeians use the device repeatedly in their opening speeches:

---

[494] Maurice Hunt, '"Violent'st" Complementarity: The Double Warriors of *Coriolanus'*, *Studies in English Literature*, 31:2 (1991), p. 310.

[495] Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 156.

[496] My understanding of antithesis differs from that of R. F. Hill, who argues that 'The antithesis only superficially suggests the thrust and parry of debate, for there is no proper engagement or analysis of thought, but only a blank facing of entrenched positions' ('*Coriolanus*: Violentest Contrariety', *Essays and Studies*, 17 (1964), p. 23.).

Second Citizen. One word, good citizens.

First Citizen. We are accounted poor citizens, the patricians good. What authority surfeits on would relieve us. . . . Let us revenge this with our pikes ere we become rakes; for the gods know, I speak this in hunger for bread, not in thirst for revenge. (I.i.13-23)

The underlying principle of antithesis, strengthened by the use of wordplay in this passage, is the positioning of difference within similarity and similarity within difference. John Roe, in his essay 'Rhetoric, Style and Poetic Form', draws attention to the importance of antithesis in Shakespeare's sonnets and narrative poems, and argues that 'antithesis is central to human experience, which finds itself readily reflected, with varying degrees of subtlety.'[497] Furthermore, claims Roe, poetry's rhetorical design brings to the fore ethical considerations, because techniques such as antithesis juxtapose *and* connect ethical positions in a way that makes their effect more powerful. Shakespeare uses antithesis to draw out the ethical dimension of human existence in Coriolanus's speech before he enters Antium:

O world, thy slippery turns! Friends now fast sworn,
Whose double bosoms seem to wear one heart,
Whose hours, whose bed, whose meal and exercise
Are still together, who twin as 'twere in love
Unseparable, shall within this hour,
On a dissension of a doit, break out
To bitterest enmity. So fellest foes,
Whose passions and whose plots have broke their sleep
To take the one the other, by some chance,
Some trick not worth an egg, shall grow dear friends
And interjoin their issues. So with me.
My birthplace hate I, and my love's upon
This enemy town. I'll enter. If he slay me,
He does fair justice; if he give me way,
I'll do his country service. (IV.iv.12-26)

The antithesis here, the contrast between friends and foes, is intensified by the use of fricative alliteration. Coriolanus is thoroughly mystified by the frailty of human

[497] John Roe, 'Rhetoric, Style and Poetic Form', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 51.

relationships. Allegiances can be transformed within the space of an hour. But the larger idea in this speech is the suggestion that individuals are inevitably tied to others, whether in friendship or in enmity. Through Coriolanus's perplexity, Shakespeare asks: how do human beings 'interjoin' and what is ethically at stake when these relationships break down?

As I have begun to demonstrate, Coriolanus's attempt to demarcate the boundary between his self and the selves of others is constantly undermined in the play. When Coriolanus is fighting alone in Corioles, Larius says of his military leader: 'A carbuncle entire, as big as thou art, / Were not so rich a jewel' (I.v.28-9). The image functions on two levels. A carbuncle is a fiery red precious stone, which conveys the energy and intensity of Coriolanus's temperament and fighting style. But a carbuncle is also a growth or a cancerous lump,[498] which instantly calls to mind Coriolanus's particular preference for imagery of infection and disease. Only a few lines earlier, Coriolanus screams abuse at his Roman deserters, calling them a 'herd of—Boils and plagues' (I.v.2). But his own imagery turns against him when Sicinius later claims that Coriolanus 'is a disease that must be cut away' (III.i.297) and that 'The service of the foot, / Being once gangrened, is not then respected / For what before it was' (III.i.308-10). The way the imagery in the play cuts both ways, subtly calling attention to Coriolanus's ties to other individuals and society in general, is significant. Mousley observes that 'the play keeps reminding us of Coriolanus's ordinary humanity even as he repudiates it. The hero is, after all, of this world.'[499] Of course, as Cavell observes, Coriolanus is disgusted by the way he must use the same words as others, 'he has a horror of putting in his mouth what . . . comes out of the mouths of others.'[500] He spits out his words as if they are bits of food he cannot bear to swallow. The contagious echoing of language is nowhere better demonstrated than in Coriolanus's petulant reply to his sentencing of banishment: 'I banish you!' (III.iii.124).

The tension between Coriolanus' sense of his own individuality and his unavoidable relations with others can also be discerned in the war scenes in Act I. Coriolanus likes to think of himself as a one-man army, a ferocious lone soldier 'Who sensibly outdares his senseless sword' (I.v.26). For the first part of the action, he fights for himself, by himself. The inhabitants of Corioles shut the gate and leave him 'alone to answer all the city' (I.v.24-5), and it is in this state that he feels most self-assured.

[498] David Crystal and Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 64.
[499] Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, p. 121.
[500] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 169.

Coriolanus is Hamlet's polar opposite. Hamlet is all thought and reflection; Coriolanus all action and activity. Philip Davis argues that Coriolanus 'does not believe that character primarily exists *before* the moment of acting, any more than on the other hand he believes that character is created *by* the moment of acting. But, in between the two, character for him is forged *in* the very heat of action.'[501] Shakespeare makes it clear, however, that Coriolanus's singularity is unsustainable. When he retreats to the Roman camp, he says to Cominius:

> O, let me clip ye
> In arms as sound as when I wooed, in heart
> As merry as when our nuptial day was done,
> And tapers burnt to bedward!
> [*They embrace*] (I.xii.29-32)

These lines, which invoke imagery of marriage and are sealed with a physical embrace, seem contradictory and uncharacteristic. In this momentary lapse, Coriolanus, the man who has single-handedly fought off the enemy forces, reveals his capacity to identify with another being. Shakespeare uses comparisons between the martial and the marital realms throughout the play. When Aufidius welcomes Coriolanus into his house, he says: 'Let me twine / Mine arms about that body where-against / My grainèd ash an hundred times hath broke, / And scarred the moon with splinters' (IV.v.107-10), and a few lines later: 'that I see thee here, / Thou noble thing, more dances my rapt heart / Than when I first my wedded mistress saw / Bestride my threshold' (IV.v.116-9). Ironically, when his wife kisses him at the end of the play, he can think only of war and revenge. Shakespeare fuses the imagery of marriage and war in the play to strengthen the suggestion that the same bonds between human beings have the potential to be both conflictual and harmonious.

Until Coriolanus realises his ethical obligations to others in the final act, he continually mingles claims of reciprocity and mutuality with assertions of his singular existence. As he rallies his soldiers before they charge into battle, he says:

> I do beseech you
> By all the battles wherein we have fought,
> By th' blood we have shed together,
> By th' vows we have made
> To endure friends, that you directly set me

[501] Philip Davis, *Sudden Shakespeare: The Shaping of Shakespeare's Creative Thought* (London: Athlone, 1996), p. 26.

> Against Aufidius and his Antiates,
> And that you not delay the present, but,
> Filling the air with swords advanced and darts,
> We prove this very hour. . . .
> . . .if any fear
> Lesser his person than an ill report;
> If any think brave death outweighs bad life,
> And that his country's dearer than himself,
> Let him alone, or so many so minded,
> Wave thus to express his disposition,
> And follow Martius.
> [*He waves his sword.*] *They all shout and wave their swords, take him up in their arms and cast up their caps.*
> O, me alone! Make you a sword of me? (I.xii.55-77)

This speech is not beautiful or poetic; it is not filled with evocative imagery. Indeed, it may be a passage that is easily skimmed over. But here Shakespeare offers a philosophically sophisticated understanding of human existence by juxtaposing what existentialists would call Coriolanus's existential singularity with his being-for-others. Coriolanus underscores the mutual nature of their relationship by reminding his soldiers of their battles together, their blood shed in war, their vows (perhaps also another subtle hint at the affinity between marital and military relations) and their friendships. Ironically, he uses these ideas as the basis of his argument for why he should be allowed to face Aufidius alone. It is clear that being and acting alone are crucial for Coriolanus. He goes on to suggest that those who are brave enough can either follow him 'alone' or with others that are of a similar mind-set. The speech climaxes with his exultant line: 'O, me alone!' Even though Coriolanus is clearly aware of the value of human solidarity, he resists embracing that aspect of his existence and is wary of losing his individuality in the crowd.

When the fighting is over, Coriolanus returns to the camp a hero. He is honoured with a new title and warmly welcomed by the other soldiers. But while others praise his heroic feats, Coriolanus offers a modest and understated view of his achievements, declaring: 'I have done as you have done, that's what I can; / . . . He that has but effected his good will / Hath overta'en mine act' (I.x.16-9). Coriolanus is effectively suggesting that an individual who lives up to his own good intentions achieves a greater form of success than himself. So why does Coriolanus so adamantly oppose the discussion or celebration of his successes? We are repeatedly told that Coriolanus is a proud man, 'topping all others in boasting' (II.i.19), but this is clearly untrue. In fact, in terms of the existential significance of the play, Coriolanus's reluctance to be showered

'In acclamations hyperbolical' or 'praises sauced with lies' (I.x.51, 53) is far more telling. Coriolanus does not want his deeds acknowledged because, as Hans-Jürgen Weckermann notes, this 'would render them no longer his own exclusive property but the common possession of all the people of Rome by integrating his actions into a common cause.'[502] To put it another way, praise would also entail recognising his need of others.

At the end of Act I, Coriolanus makes a strange request of Cominius:

> *Coriolanus.* I sometime lay here in Corioles,
> At a poor man's house. He used me kindly.
> He cried to me; I saw him prisoner;
> But then Aufidius was within my view,
> And wrath o'erwhelmed my pity. I request you
> To give my poor host freedom.
> *Cominius.* O, well begged!
> Were he the butcher of my son, he should
> Be free as is the wind. Deliver him, Titus.
> *Lartius.* Martius, his name?
> *Coriolanus.* By Jupiter, forgot!
> I am weary, yea, my memory is tired. (I.x.82-91)

This is an attempt by Coriolanus at genuine fellow feeling and human empathy. He remembers the suffering of another and tries to have the prisoner released. But the moment of kindness is instantly punctured by Coriolanus's forgetfulness. His memory fails because of fatigue, another ordinary symptom of being human. By making the man Coriolanus forget a prisoner of war, Shakespeare links the notion of otherness with the notion of freedom. In *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* Beauvoir writes:

> All men are free, and as soon as we have anything to do with other people, we experience their freedom. If we want to disregard these dangerous free beings, we have to turn away from mankind, but at that moment our being contracts and dwindles away. Our being can only be realised by choosing to risk itself in the world, by placing itself in danger of being grasped by other alien and divided free beings.[503]

[502] Hans-Jürgen Weckermann, '*Coriolanus*: The Failure of the Autonomous Individual', in *Shakespeare*: *Text, Language, Criticism*, ed. Bernhard Fabian and Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador (New York: Olms-Weidmann, 1987), p. 340.

[503] Simone de Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944). Although some sections of this text have been translated, there is no complete English translation of this work. This passage is quoted from Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 35.

When Beauvoir claims that 'all men are free', she means that human consciousness is freely engaged in the perpetual task of self-construction. But when we acknowledge another being, we also acknowledge that they too have a consciousness that is free to form itself, and this freedom of others threatens our own sense of self, because we realise that others can freely make judgements and have opinions about us. To reject other people's freedom, claims Beauvoir, is to cause oneself to become existentially diminished. Something of this idea comes through in Coriolanus's failure to recall the name of the man who once showed him pity and compassion. The exchange crystallises the issue at stake: the necessary consideration of others and the appeal to common human feelings. It foreshadows Coriolanus' ethical identification with his own family at the end of the play.

Like their early modern precursor, Shakespeare, existentialists are interested in what Sartre calls the ethics of '*a human reality in situation*.'[504] As Christine Daigle explains, ethics for existentialists are always 'radically immanent', grounded in individual, embodied existence.[505] There are no transcendental absolutes, no definitive morality dictated by God. All exponents of existentialism agree that human beings must decide *for themselves* how to live, how to actualise their existence through 'definitive, absolute engagements.'[506] Beauvoir writes: 'for existentialism, it is not impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and irreducible as subjectivity itself.'[507] Of course, as Beauvoir acknowledges, this argument naturally leads to the following question: if ethics are based on relativism and not universalism, how can human beings establish ethical codes and practices that bind society together? She contends that, although human beings are individuals and must assert their existence on the basis of their own sense of authenticity and individuality, they are also inevitably part of a network of human relations. This is what Beauvoir calls the ambiguity of existence: it is always open to, but also potentially threatened by, the existence of others. She writes: 'An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants [*sic*] can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge

[504] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 645.
[505] Christine Daigle, 'The Problem of Ethics for Existentialism', in *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics*, ed. Christine Daigle (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), p. 14.
[506] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 16.
[507] *Ibid*., pp. 17-18.

laws valid for all.'[508] Beauvoir thus thinks of the radical individuality of the subject as existing within a collective whole. Later in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir summarises her main argument: 'Thus, we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others.'[509] She accepts that 'The idea of such a dependence is frightening, and the separation and multiplicity of existants [*sic*] raises highly disturbing problems', but ultimately concludes that there is a 'bond of each man with all others.'[510] As we can see, existentialist ethics are precariously rooted in the ambiguity of human existence.

It may not be a coincidence that *Coriolanus* resonates strongly with existentialist ethics. Before the Second World War broke out, a friend lent Beauvoir the Pléiade edition of Shakespeare's collected works translated by Victor Hugo, and in a letter dated 20 October 1939 she explains to Sartre how she was determined 'to reread the lot'.[511] After she had finished, she sent the Shakespeare collection to Sartre (without her friend's approval), and he too began carefully rereading the plays. In a letter to Beauvoir dated 22 November 1939, Sartre wrote: 'I got back to reading the first act of *Coriolanus*, which is very enjoyable. . . . I didn't know Shakespeare at all. This is a sort of discovery and it's made a strong impression.'[512] Beauvoir would later refer to this period of her life (roughly 1939-49) as her 'moral period'.[513] During this time, she produced a body of material, including both literary and philosophical texts, that tackled directly the question of existentialist ethics. The war had brought issues of human solidarity and personal responsibility more sharply into focus, and existentialism, which had previously concentrated almost entirely on the ontological condition of man, began to investigate the ethical and political dimensions of human existence. One of the most significant works from this period was Beauvoir's novel, *The Blood of Others*.[514] In *The Prime of Life,* Beauvoir describes how, whilst writing the book, she came to the understanding that 'An individual . . . only receives a human dimension by recognizing the existence of others.'[515] The book dwells on issues of human freedom and action, but

[508] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[509] *Ibid*., p. 67.
[510] *Ibid*., pp. 67, 70.
[511] Simone de Beauvoir, *Letters to Sartre*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Radius, 1991), p. 129.
[512] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Witness to my Life: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir 1926-1939*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee, ed. Simone de Beauvoir (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992), p. 356.
[513] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 547.
[514] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse (London: Penguin, 1964).
[515] Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 549.

suggests that these concepts can be fully understood only within the context of society and human relationships. The epigraph of the book is a quote from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'Each of us is responsible for everything to every human being.' Jean Blomart and Hélène Bertrand, the central figures in the novel, both come to the realisation that individual freedom must be premised on an authentic acknowledgement of other people's freedom; they understand that they exist alongside each other and therefore have a responsibility for each other. There is a good chance that *Coriolanus* was an important source of inspiration for Beauvoir's novel, as the title, *The Blood of Others*, is a phrase from the play. When Coriolanus returns from fighting in Corioles, he asks: 'Come I too late?', to which Cominius replies, 'Ay, if you come not in the blood of others, / But mantled in your own' (I.vii.27-9).[516] The lines suggest that it is impossible to distinguished between one's own blood and the blood of another human being; they are identical to the human eye. The fact that Coriolanus's blood is literally intermingled with the blood of others suggests that Shakespeare is making an important point about the ethical nature of human life. Perhaps *Coriolanus* was not far from Beauvoir's mind when she wrote, 'to suppress one's awareness of the Other's existence is mere childishness.'[517] The ethics in Beauvoir's novel may provide a key to unlock the existential concerns of Shakespeare's play.

Bleeding and Blushing

Coriolanus is ashamed of his body and fears bodily exposure. This is clearly apparent when he refuses to reveal his wounds to the citizens. He tells the senators: 'I cannot / Put on the gown, stand naked, and entreat them / For my wounds' sake to give their suffrage' (II.ii.135-7). The way Coriolanus confuses being clothed and being undressed in these lines shows his deep unease about revealing his body to the public. It is not false modesty. Ewan Fernie argues that 'there is something symptomatic in the protagonist's antipathy to nakedness and excessive sensitivity to the gaze of others.'[518] Coriolanus cannot stand the thought of other people looking at him; he is horrified to realise that his body exists as an object for other people. This aspect of the play, its obvious fascination with bodies and embodiment, is existentially significant, because it

[516] Victor Hugo's direct translation of these lines ('Oui, si vous ne revenez pas couvert du sang d'autri mais du vôtre') is significant (*Oeuvres Complètes de W. Shakespeare*, vol. 9 (Paris: Pagnerre, 1872), p. 104.). Many other French translations of the play attempt to adapt or clarify the phrase 'the blood of others' as 'du sang des ennemis'.
[517] Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, p. 546.
[518] Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 213.

suggests that human beings have a troubled relationship with this element of their existence. Two particular physical experiences, bleeding and blushing, cause a sense of alienation within an individual. Such experiences, claim existentialists, reveal that the body is divorced from consciousness. Individuals can have a relationship with their body; they can think of it as an object or a thing; they can see how it can be defined externally by others. As Sartre puts it, 'the discovery of my body as an object is indeed a revelation of its being. But the being which is thus revealed to me is its *being-for-others.*'[519] This existentialist idea of 'the body-for-others' resonates strongly with *Coriolanus*.

Coriolanus would rather have his wounds 'heal again / Than hear say how [he] got them' II.ii.67-8). He tells Cominius that 'they smart / To hear themselves remembered' (I.x.28-9). Clearly, it is an image that Shakespeare was drawn to. In *Richard III*, Lady Anne says to Richard:

> Dead Henry's wounds
> Ope their congealèd mouths and bleed afresh.
> Blush, blush, thou lump of foul deformity,
> For 'tis thy presence that ex-hales this blood
> From cold and empty veins where no blood dwells.
> (*Richard III,* I.ii.55-9)

The passage parallels another particularly grotesque image in *Coriolanus*. The citizens discuss how they must make Coriolanus's injuries meaningful because he is reluctant to do so himself: 'If he show us his wounds and tell us his deeds, we are to put our tongues into those wounds and speak for them' (II.iii.5-7). In both these examples, Shakespeare suggests that bleeding wounds can declare the truth. In Henry's case, his wounds weep with blood because his murderer stands beside his body. For Coriolanus, his lacerations and injuries bleed again because they are being talked about. As R. B. Parker notes, 'Mutilation has been converted from its painful subjective reality to a form of currency in Rome', and this is precisely why Coriolanus refuses to use them for political gain.[520] Coriolanus is disgusted by the thought that he got his wounds only to please the citizens: 'Show them th'unaching scars, which I should hide, / As if I had received them for the hire / Of their breathe only!' (II.ii.147-9). It is interesting that Coriolanus should think of his fresh wounds as 'unaching scars'. He wants his injuries to heal swiftly and

[519] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 329.
[520] R. B. Parker, 'Introduction', *Coriolanus*, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 82.

be forgotten. Bleeding is shameful, because it is one of the most basic signs of physical vulnerability and being human. He bleeds in the same way that other people bleed. When Menenius urges the senators to 'Think / Upon the wounds his body bears, which show / Like graves i'th' holy churchyard', Coriolanus quickly tells them that they are 'Scratches with briers, / Scars to move laughter only' (III.iii.47-50). If his wounds were symbolic representations of other people's graves, as Menenius suggests, they would be for the benefit of other people.

The terrible experience of watching your body bleed, Shakespeare suggests in this play, has an alienating effect on human consciousness. Coriolanus resists thinking about his own blood. He says to Aufidius, ''Tis not my blood / Wherein thou seest me masked' (I.ix.9-10), and tells Lartius, 'The blood I drop is rather physical / Than dangerous to me' (I.vi.18-9). In order to over-compensate for his anxiety about the loss of blood, Coriolanus regards bleeding as a physically restorative process, a means to enhance his strength rather than reveal his human fragility. It is important not to overlook the fact that Coriolanus is appallingly blood-soaked in this play, a fact that is made clear in a number of stage directions: '*Enter Martius,* [*bleeding*]' (I.vi) and '*Enter Martius, bloody*' (I.vii). Like a newly skinned carcass, he is literally covered from head to toe in a mixture of his own blood and 'the blood of others' (I.vii.28). He is unrecognisable. Lartius asks: 'Who's yonder, / That does appear as he were flayed?' (I.vii.21-2). The unidentifiable being 'has the stamp of Martius' (I.vii.23), but the onlookers cannot distinguish his face. In the following act, Menenius tells the senators that 'From face to foot / He was a thing of blood' (II.ii.106-7). The image perhaps also carries with it the suggestion that Coriolanus is similar to a new-born baby smeared with blood. The link between blood and childhood hovers over the play. Valeria wants Virgilia and Volumnia to accompany her on her visit to a lady who is expecting to give birth imminently. In another memorable example, Volumnia suggests that 'The breasts of Hecuba / When she did suckle Hector looked not lovelier / Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood / At Grecian sword, contemning' (I.iii.41-3). In a well-known passage, Adelman remarks: 'Blood is more beautiful than milk, the wound than the breast, warfare than peaceful feeding. . . . [Hector] is transformed immediately from infantile feeding mouth to bleeding wound.'[521] But another metaphoric process is also at work in these lines. As Cavell notes, 'the lines set up an equation between a mother's milk and man's blood',[522] which implies that man suckles blood from his mother.

[521] Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, p. 148.
[522] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 154.

Cavell explains: 'when Hector contemns Grecian swords, he is also thought of as fighting, as wielding a sword, so the mouth is transformed into, or seen as, a cutting weapon: The suckling mother is presented as being slashed by the son-hero.'[523] The image is expressed more fully later in the play when Coriolanus says to Aufidius: 'I have . . . / Drawn tuns of blood out of thy country's breast' (IV.v.99-100). This rereading of Volumnia's disturbing image still supports Adelman's overarching argument that Coriolanus, although horrified by the idea of maternal dependency, is nevertheless bound to the woman who gave him life. But a fresh view of these lines allows for a greater understanding of the existential significance of Coriolanus's anxiety about blood and bleeding.

As human beings, we are closest of all to people we share blood with. Coriolanus knows that he literally shares the same flesh and blood as his mother. When he returns from battle he confesses that 'My mother, / Who has a charter to extol her blood, / When she does praise me, grieves me' (I.x.13-5). He sees himself here, not as an individual in his own right, but as an extension of Volumnia's blood. At the end of the play, he refers to her as 'the honoured mould / Wherein this trunk was framed' (V.iii.23). This is a powerful realisation that his own body has in fact been produced from the body of someone else. The existential intensity of this statement cannot be overstated. To acknowledge that his entire existence owes itself to someone else is an astonishing climax to a play that gravitates around a man who has so passionately believed that he is *sui generis*, a singular, unique entity, incomparable to all others. The play continually hints at the idea that we all share the same blood and thus intimates the notion of a 'democratic concept of human nature',[524] to borrow Mousley's phrase. The stomach in Menenius's fable reminds the other limbs that he supplies sustenance through the rivers of blood within the body (I.i.132). Although Coriolanus would have us believe that he 'rewards / His deeds with doing them' (II.ii.125-6) and acts only for himself, the truth of the matter is that his feats have been 'Induced . . . for [his] country' (I.x.17). Before he returns to the senate, Volumnia urges her son 'to take in a town with gentle words, / Which else would put you to your fortune and / The hazard of much blood' (III.ii.61-3). Coriolanus has risked his blood for the freedom of Rome and will risk it again to betray his country.

In *The Blood of Others*, Beauvoir uses the imagery of blood to make a similar point about the ethical relationships between human beings. After having been rejected

[523] *Ibid*., p. 154.
[524] Mousley, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, p. 126.

by Jean, Hélène falls pregnant with another man's child and is consequently forced to seek an illegal abortion. The procedure is conducted at Jean's apartment, but in the following hours Hélène suffers some complications. Accepting his responsibility for the turn of events, Jean remarks: 'She moaned no longer. It was as though not a drop of blood were left in her veins . . . this fight had united us more strongly than an act of love; she was my flesh and blood. I would have given my life to save her.'[525] Jean realises that he has a responsibility to take care of Hélène, because his freedom has had an unintended impact on her life. Later on in the novel, when Hélène is dying after having been shot during a resistance mission, Jean thinks back to his childhood and remembers going to visit Louise, a family friend whose baby had died. Afterwards, he is distraught and cannot eat, but his father presses him to finish his soup. He recalls: 'I cried myself to sleep because of that thing which had poured into my throat with the tepid soup - more bitter than the sense of guilt - my sin. The sin of smiling whilst Louise was weeping, the sin of shedding my own tears and not hers. The sin of being another being.'[526] This is what existentialists refer to as a feeling of existential guilt: a realisation that you exist in the world of other people, and an acknowledgement that you cannot cross the frontiers of other people's consciousnesses. Jean cannot experience Louise's suffering as she does. This existential guilt, claims Beauvoir, is a fundamental aspect of our social and ethical lives, an ontological problem that must be respected, if an individual is to enter into a fully open relationship with another.

After his return from the battlefields, a new honorific title is bestowed on Coriolanus. He is embarrassed by the 'good addition' (I.x.72) to his formal identity and says to the crowd: 'I will go wash, / And when my face is fair you shall perceive / Whether I blush or no' (I.x.68-70). His face is still covered in blood from the battle, giving the impression that he is blushing at the accolades. Cominius also draws attention to Coriolanus's blood-stained face at the end of the scene when he remarks: 'The blood upon your visage dries; 'tis time / It should be looked to' (I.x.93-4). Blushing is a type of internal bleeding, an involuntary rush of blood to the face. As Sartre points out, it is bodily experience you cannot prevent from happening, an 'internal hemorrhage' of being.[527] Coriolanus is deeply fearful of blushing. When I realise that I am being looked at, says Sartre, my world 'bleeds' towards the Other.[528] Later, when it becomes incumbent upon Coriolanus to beg the voices of the citizens, he

[525] Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, p. 100.
[526] *Ibid*., p. 12.
[527] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 285.
[528] *Ibid*., p. 285.

says: 'It is a part / That I shall blush in acting' (II.ii.143-4). Aufidius manipulates his fear of blushing at the end of the play:

> But at his nurse's tears
> He whined and roared away your victory,
> That pages blushed at him, and men of heart
> Looked wond'ring each at others. (V.vi.99-102)

In this passage, Aufidius suggests that Coriolanus's childish emotions and dependence on his mother are so hideously embarrassing that they make others blush. Here Shakespeare implies that human beings blush not only at the realisation of their own existence, but also at the witnessing of another's humiliation and disgrace. They can internalise other people's shame. In this respect, Shakespeare advances the idea of individual existential shame by suggesting that we are ashamed not only of ourselves, but also of the fact that we exist for others and others exist for us. By doing this, he depicts the experiences of blushing and feeling ashamed from both an ontological *and* an ethical perspective.

William W. E. Slights notes that 'The rules governing concealment and revelation of inner truths were changing rapidly in the period and with them the approved but often transgressed boundaries between inner and outer, the private self and the society of others, invisibility and transparency.'[529] Coriolanus' existential panic at the idea of blushing before others is symptomatic of his wider problem with the existence of others. Sartre suggests that when an individual blushes, he 'is vividly and constantly conscious of his body not as it is for him but as it is *for the Other*.'[530] In other words, I become aware that I am an instrumental object in other people's world. He continues: 'This constant uneasiness, which is the apprehension of my body's alienation as irredeemable, can determine psychoses such as ereutophobia (a pathological fear of blushing); these are nothing but the horrified metaphysical apprehension of the existence of my body for Others.'[531] As a viscerally intense experience, blushing is simultaneously physical and psychological. It reveals that my body is '*a thing outside my subjectivity*, in the midst of the world that is not mine.'[532] This is truly terrifying for Coriolanus, an individual who wishes to assert his self-sufficiency and independence at every opportunity. He does not

[529] William W. E. Slights, *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 19-20.
[530] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 376.
[531] *Ibid*., p. 376.
[532] *Ibid*., p. 376.

want to accept that his body, wounds and blood do not only exist for him, but can also be utilised and known by others. Another of Sartre's observations rings true with *Coriolanus*. He writes: 'We often say that the shy man is "embarrassed by his own body." Actually this expression is incorrect; I can not be embarrassed by my own body as I exist it [*sic*]. It is my body as it is for the Other which may embarrass me.'[533] As we saw earlier, Coriolanus would rather show healed scars than bleeding flesh, because blood signifies that one's body is not united with one's consciousness. His anxiety about the relationship between mind and body is further evidenced when he realises that he must go and speak to the people of Rome. He declares angrily, 'I will not do't, / Lest surcease to honour mine own truth, / And by my body's action teach my mind / A most inherent baseness' (III.ii.122-5). By showing his wounds to others, Coriolanus thinks that the actions of his body will embarrass his mind. His tortured modesty is existentially revealing: his mind is alienated from his body and his body is alienated from his mind by virtue of the fact that it exists not for himself, but as an object for others.

Blushing is the manifestation of existential shame, the shame of one's own existence. 'Shame', Sartre suggests, 'is intentional; it is a shameful apprehension *of* something and this something is *me*. I am ashamed of what I *am*. . . . Shame is by nature *recognition*. I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me. . . . Shame is an immediate shudder which runs through me from head to foot without any discursive preparation.'[534] Unsurprisingly, Coriolanus wishes to be 'to shame unvulnerable' (V.iii.73). To admit that he is vulnerable to shame would be to admit that he is ethically and existentially tied to other people. 'I'll never / Be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand / As if a man were author of himself / And knew no other kin' (V.iii.34-6): this is Coriolanus's fantasy of self-reliance and absolute independence. But, as Fernie notes, 'Given the contradiction between his own self-reliant strictness and his susceptibility to his mother, it is only a matter of time before Coriolanus is forced to take shame, and it creates much of the dramatic tension in this play.'[535] As he watches the retreating dissenters in the Roman army scurry back to their trenches, Coriolanus calls them 'shames of Rome!' (I.v.2), foreshadowing his own shameful banishment from the city. At the end of the play, Coriolanus is shamed into acknowledging the existence of his family. '[L]et us shame him with our knees' (V.iii.170), says Volumnia as she kneels before her son. Shame here is not the subjectively corrosive experience that Coriolanus

[533] *Ibid*., p. 377.
[534] *Ibid*., pp. 245-6.
[535] Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare*, p. 218.

so fears. In this scene, it has the more existentially regenerative power to allow human beings to see that they exist in a world with other people.

In some respects, Shakespeare goes further than Sartre by suggesting that one can be not only ashamed of one's individual existence, but also ashamed that other people exist. The play hints at the idea of a circle of shame: I am ashamed that I exist for others and ashamed that others exist for me. After Coriolanus's banishment, Sicinius asks Volumnia, 'Are you mankind?' and Volumnia replies, 'Ay, fool. Is that a shame?' (IV.ii.18-9). Sicinius is playing on the sense of the word, implying that Volumnia has manly characteristics. But Volumnia chooses to interpret 'mankind' as meaning 'humanity' or 'belonging to the human race'. Her following question, 'Is that a shame?', gestures towards a notion of existential guilt.

Coriolanus's Freedom

'Hell is - other people!': This is Garcin's notorious utterance in Sartre's play *No Exit*, which has often been used to sum up the existentialist's conception of being-for-others.[536] As we have seen, for Sartre, the look of the other is a subjectively threatening and unsettling experience. It challenges an individual's sense of his or her own freedom. Garcin cannot compel Estelle and Inez to see him in the distorted way he sees himself; likewise, Estelle cannot compel Garcin and Inez to love her in a way that will confirm her narcissistic impulses. The problem of the intractability of other people's consciousness cannot be surmounted: it leaves the characters in Sartre's play torturously fearful of the people who surround them. According to Sartre, the look of the other 'makes me be beyond my being in this world and puts me in the midst of the world which is at once *this world* and beyond this world.'[537] The look is part of the world an individual shares with the other, but it also transports that individual beyond the ontological security of their own world and into a strange territory over which they have no control. It is a new world that is occupied and known only by another. In other words, when I see people looking at me, I recognise that other people are free to regard me as they wish; I cannot directly access their consciousness and control their perception of me. Sartre insists that the relationship between self and other is antagonistic, a power struggle which causes deep feelings of existential insecurity

[536] Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Lionel Abel (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 45.
[537] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 285.

within an individual.[538] Clearly, this Sartrean idea resonates with *Coriolanus*. However, towards the end of the play, Shakespeare moves from an examination of Coriolanus's hostile relationship with others towards a consideration of the mutually beneficial nature of an authentic encounter with others. In this play, Shakespeare suggests that individual freedom must acknowledge the freedom of others, if it is to form the basis of ethical life.

Beauvoir, unlike Sartre, emphasises the mutual ethical obligations that underpin the relationship between self and other. Rather than focusing solely on what other people takes away from an individual, she examines what an individual stands to gain from an encounter with other people. In fact, Beauvoir goes so far as to suggest that an individual can assert his or her own freedom only if they simultaneously realise the freedom of others. Whereas Sartre ultimately sees the other as having a restrictive influence on human freedom and producing a relationship based on subordination and conflict, Beauvoir insists that the other serves a validating function: he is a guarantor of individual freedom. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she writes: 'It is not true that the recognition of the freedom of others limits my own freedom: to be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the given towards an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom.'[539] Like Beauvoir, Shakespeare allows us to glimpse the possibility of an existentialist ethics whereby authentic human existence is based on reciprocity and mutuality.

Beauvoir's ideas about the relationship between self-consciousness and otherness owe a great deal to Hegel's account of self-consciousness's ambiguous journey away from itself when it is faced by the existence of another consciousness. He writes:

> First, [self-consciousness] must proceed to supersede the *other* independent being in order thereby to become certain of *itself* as the essential being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its *own* self, for this other is itself. This ambiguous supersession of its ambiguous otherness is equally an ambiguous return *into itself*. For first, through the supersession, it receives back its own self, because, by superseding *its* otherness, it again becomes equal to itself; but secondly, the other self-consciousness equally gives it back again to itself, for it saw itself in the other, but supersedes this being of

[538] T. Storm Heter argues that in his later works 'Sartre develops the idea that ethical relations must be based on intersubjective recognition' ('Authenticity and Others: Sartre's Ethics of Recognition', *Sartre Studies International*, 12:2 (2006), p. 17). There are good grounds for this argument. However, Heter does not adequately credit Beauvoir and the influence of her much earlier work on Sartre's ethical thinking.

[539] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 91.

itself in the other and thus lets the other again go free.[540]

Like Sartre, Hegel does insist on an epic and enduring struggle between self and other. But in accordance with his dialectical logic, self-consciousness is transformed by an encounter with another being. This ambiguous confrontation is, in fact, a positive and necessary part of authenticity, a way for self-consciousness to become more familiar with itself by venturing outside itself. It is a movement of self-discovery that involves self-loss; self-alienation paves the way for authentic self-knowledge. This crucially important understanding of the ontological necessity of a journey away from oneself in order to return to oneself resonates deeply with *Coriolanus*. As Nancy Selleck observes in *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne, and Early Modern Culture*, 'The selves coined by Renaissance speakers and writers are various, but they share a tendency to locate selfhood beyond subjective experience, in the experience of an *other*.'[541]

As he acknowledges that his betrayal of Rome will inevitably have life-threatening consequences for his family, Coriolanus says: 'it is no little thing to make / Mine eyes to sweat compassion' (V.iii.196-7). Interestingly, Volumnia invokes an image of imprisonment to persuade her son to recognise her existence. She says: 'There's no man in the world / More bound to's mother, yet here he lets me prate / Like one i'th' stocks' (V.iii.159-61). In an attempt to use reverse psychology, Volumnia envisages herself as a vagabond who is confined to the stocks and ignored by passers-by. The technique works to great effect: Coriolanus is forced to acknowledge his mother, as indicated by the stage direction: '*He holds her by the hand, silent*' (V.iii). Holding hands is a powerful symbol of unity and mutual respect in Shakespearean drama. In the final lines of *The Comedy of Errors*, Dromio of Ephesus says: 'We came into the world like brother and brother, / And now let's go hand in hand, not one before another' (V.i.426-7). Kiernan Ryan suggests that this egalitarian sentiment, voiced by a character who has been subjected to repeated beatings in the play, epitomises Shakespearean comedy's levelling and liberating spirit.[542] Coriolanus's touching of others is significant. In II.i, he leaves the scene in a childlike position, holding hands with his mother and his wife. The physical linking of hands symbolises human solidarity. Like the physical embraces noted earlier, hand clasps carry the simple, yet

[540] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 111.
[541] Nancy Selleck, *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne, and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-2.
[542] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 18.

ethically important suggestion that human beings are connected to one another. In this respect, Shakespeare differs from Sartre, who focuses on the radically distinct experiences of touching and being touched, and writes: 'I see my hand touching objects, but do not *know* it in the act of touching them. . . . For my hand reveals to me the resistance of objects, their hardness or softness, but not *itself*.'[543] The experience of touching another person, Shakespeare's play implies, draws an individual into the realm of a common, shared humanity. Human beings need comfort, recognition and affection. When Coriolanus holds Volumnia's hand, he is not sealing a pact, as he does when he shakes hands with Aufidius in IV.v. Instead, he silently affirms the existence of his family.

Earlier in the play, Brutus informs the audience of Coriolanus's deep disrespect for the freedom of the citizens. He remarks:

> [Coriolanus] would
> Have made them mules, silenced their pleaders,
> And dispropertied their freedoms, holding them
> In human action and capacity
> Of no more soul nor fitness for the world
> Than camels in the war, who have their provand
> Only for bearing burdens, and sore blows
> For sinking under them. (II.i.242-9)

This assessment of Coriolanus's treatment of others in the past perhaps does not come as a surprise. The citizens are angry because they have not been treated 'humanely' (I.i.17). They laugh at the suggestion that the patricians have cared for them 'like fathers' (I.i.74). Coriolanus shows his forgetfulness of others when he fails to remember the name of the prisoner who helped him in Corioles. He shies away from revealing his wounds to others, because he does not want to accept that he is an object for others in the same way that they are objects for him. Coriolanus's astonishing change in attitude towards his family in the identification scene is a remarkable affirmation of his basic link with others. The transformation is considerable. 'These eyes are not the same I wore in Rome' (V.iii.38), he tells his family, signalling a change in his fundamental understanding of his relationship with the people closest to him. We know that Coriolanus has previously sought 'Not to be other than one thing' (IV.vii.42). When he confesses, 'I melt, and am not / Of stronger earth than others' (V.iii.28-9), we sense the beginning of an ethical conversion in Coriolanus. It is a tremendously unsettling

[543] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 328.

experience. Once again, Shakespeare employs deliquescent imagery as a metaphor for subjective dissolution. Coriolanus acknowledges the unavoidably social nature of human existence and realises that his freedom can only be meaningful, if it is asserted on behalf of another.

Charles Taylor's argument in *The Ethics of Authenticity* resonates with the existentialist ethics in *Coriolanus*. Taylor writes: 'If authenticity is being true to ourselves, is recovering our own "sentiment de l'existence," then perhaps we can only achieve it integrally if we recognize that this sentiment connects us to a wider whole. . . . Perhaps the loss of a sense of belonging through a publicly defined order needs to be compensated by a stronger, more inner sense of linkage.'[544] Taylor directly confronts the problem of the notion of authenticity: if we consider authenticity to be our highest existential value, and thus follow our desires and impulses at all costs, we risk losing sight of our responsibilities and moral obligations to the communities in which we live. In *Coriolanus*, we can see Shakespeare anticipating this concern by dramatising the dangers of believing too firmly in one's existential singularity. Volumnia stresses her belief that the fates of human beings are bound together. She says to Coriolanus:

> Thou barr'st us
> Our prayers to the gods, which is a comfort
> That all but we enjoy. For how can we,
> Alas, how can we for our country pray,
> Whereto we are bound, together with thy victory,
> Whereto we are bound? Alack, or we must lose
> The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person,
> Our comfort in the country. We must find
> An evident calamity, though we had
> Our wish which side should win. For either thou
> Must as a foreign recreant be led
> With manacles thorough our streets, or else
> Triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin,
> And bear the palm for having bravely shed
> Thy wife and children's blood. (V.iii.105-19)

The epizeuxis in this speech, Volumnia's emotional repetition of the phrase 'Whereto we are bound', is existentially revealing. Coriolanus's treachery, she suggests, will result either in his being dragged through the streets of Rome in chains, or in Rome's

[544] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 91.

ruin and his family's death. Volumnia's speech invokes the imagery of the blood of others, specifically that of Coriolanus's wife and son, and then threatens her son with the prospect of her own suicide. Coriolanus is dumbfounded by the emotional entreaties of his family, forced to confront the reality that his actions will have devastating consequences for them. The same idea comes through in Beauvoir's existentialist novel. As he is drawn further into the activities of the resistance, Jean acknowledges that he has an ethical responsibility to act. His lover asks him, 'why should other people have rights over us?', and Jean replies: 'It's not a question of rights . . . they are there.'[545] As he waits for Hélène to die, he reflects on how he came to understand the significance of this idea: 'I was anchored to the world by tenacious roots which fed my own sap with a thousand borrowed juices; I was incapable of freeing myself so that I could soar above it, and destroy it, remake it; and I was only separated from it by a lonely anguish which bore witness to my own presence.'[546] Something of this resonates with the identification scene in *Coriolanus*. Coriolanus begins to see others not as subjectively threatening, but as individuals to whom he must choose to respond. This is Coriolanus's freedom: the freedom to choose how to reciprocate with others. By deciding to reconcile himself with Rome, he knows that he is putting the lives of his mother, wife and son before his own. Emotionally stricken, he says:

> O mother, mother!
> What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
> The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
> They laugh at. O my mother, mother, O!
> You have won a happy victory to Rome;
> But for your son, believe it, O believe it,
> Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
> If not most mortal to him. But let it come.— (V.iii.183-90)

Coriolanus is clearly not a man frightened by the prospect of death, so his claim that his mother's actions are 'most mortal to him' contains a deeper meaning. Coriolanus knows that his death will not be that of the glorious, heroic warrior, fighting alone against the world: he will sacrifice himself so that others can live. The tragic resignation here that parallels Hamlet's 'Let be' (V.ii.201-2) suggests that Coriolanus recognises the ethical and existential significance of his actions.

I have examined this crucial scene at some length, arguing that Shakespeare allows us to witness the emergence of a new ethical mode of being. This view of the

[545] Beauvoir, *The Blood of Others*, p. 137.
[546] *Ibid*., p. 132.

ethics of human life, the implication that true relationships between human beings are possible, chimes with Martin Buber's 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' formulations. In an 'I-It' position, claims Buber, an individual

> perceives what exists round about him - simply things, and beings as things; and what happens round about him - simply events, and actions as events; things consisting of qualities, events of moments; . . . he perceives an ordered and detached world. . . . Its organisation can be surveyed and brought out again and again; gone over with closed eyes, and verified with open eyes. . . . You perceive it, take it to yourself as the 'truth', and it lets itself be taken; but it does not give itself to you. Only concerning it may you make yourself 'understood' with others; it is ready, though attached to everyone in a different way, to be an object common to you all. But you cannot meet others in it.[547]

This is the way Coriolanus previously viewed human existence: others were objects in his world and he was an object for others. This paradigm engendered conflict and distrust between individuals. Buber suggests that alternatively, in an 'I-Thou' position, an individual encounters

> each thing simply as being. . . . Nothing is present for him except this one being, but it implicates the whole world. . . . Between you and it there is mutual giving: you say *Thou* to it and give yourself to it, it says *Thou* to you and gives itself to you. You cannot make yourself understood with others concerning it, you are alone with it. But it teaches you to meet others, and to hold your ground when you meet them, Through the graciousness of its comings and the solemn sadness of its goings it leads you away to the *Thou* in which the parallel lines of relations meet.[548]

As he comes to realise the relational nature of his existence, Coriolanus moves forward in the direction of an 'I-Thou' relationship. But a caveat must be added to this argument: he remains on the brink of this new ethical existence rather than experiencing a full ethical conversion. When he faces Aufidius and the conspirators, he once again asserts his singularity: 'I / Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles. / Alone I did it, boy!' (V.vi.115-17). But perhaps Coriolanus's shortcomings make the final scenes of the play all the more ethically compelling. It is easier to believe in oneself, Shakespeare implies, than to believe that one exists for others; easier to assert individual authenticity than to accept that that sense of authenticity owes itself to the world it exists in.

---

[547] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Eastford: Martino Publishing, 2010), pp. 31-2.
[548] *Ibid*., pp. 32-3.

David Ruiter has recently suggested that Buber's understanding of the duality of relational human experience can be used to illuminate the *Henry IV* plays. Focusing on the tavern scenes and particularly on Hal's treatment of the tapster Francis, Ruiter observes that the lines 'repeatedly evoke the difference between treating others as subjective individuals or as objects to be used for one's own advantage.'[549] Ruiter celebrates Shakespeare's ability to dramatise 'the ethics of casualness, of relaxation, of contingent rather than ultimate situations that define our lives.'[550] Examining Hal's failure to recognise the ethics that underpin his relations with others, he writes: 'The pathos of this is not blunted but sharpened by the humdrum quality of a barroom encounter, which suggests that the most important issues of human ethics and ontology are dramatized and decided in the infinite series of forgettable moments that comprise the everyday.'[551] Although Shakespeare is clearly interested in situations that have an ethical ultimacy, the ethics in his plays are subtly dramatised. In *Coriolanus*, he focuses on the ethical value of a simple shift in his protagonist's attitude towards others. In doing so, he points towards a new way of existing - a more existentially fulfilling life. Openness towards others allows oneself to know oneself better.[552]

In other plays, Shakespeare also allows us to glimpse the idea of an ethics based on relational life. In *Romeo and Juliet*, when the lovers exchange vows of love and solidarity, Juliet remarks:

> *Juliet*. I gave thee mine before thou didst request it,
> And yet I would it were to give again.
> *Romeo*. Wouldst thou withdraw it? For what purpose, love?
> *Juliet*. But to be frank and give it thee again.
> And yet I wish but for the thing I have.
> My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
> My love as deep. The more I give to thee
> The more I have, for both are infinite.
>
> (II.i.170-7)

As Ryan notes, this is a description of 'a mutually enhancing, limitless love, whose value defies selfish quantification.'[553] Juliet's belief in the reciprocity of passion

[549] David Ruiter, 'Harry's (In)human Face', in *Spiritual Shakespeares*, ed. Ewan Fernie (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 57.
[550] *Ibid*., p. 57.
[551] *Ibid*., p. 54.
[552] See also Mustapha Fahmi, *The Purpose of Playing: Self-Interpretation and Ethics in Shakespeare* (Québec: Two Continents, 2008). Fahmi focuses on *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* and argues that the central characters in these plays have a strong, ethical desire for self-interpretation.
[553] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 80.

highlights the ethics that underpin sexual relationships. A similar idea is hinted at in *Much Ado About Nothing* when Claudio says: 'Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you, and dote upon the exchange' (II.i.268-70). In the twentieth century, Beauvoir theorised the existential significance of erotic love, arguing in *The Second Sex* that in the mutual generosity of an erotic experience, the ambiguity of the human condition is revealed: 'lovers can enjoy a common pleasure . . . the partners each feeling the pleasure as being his or her own but as having its source in the other.'[554] In many ways, Shakespeare's play prefigures this argument and much of the existential intensity of the tragedy is generated through this ethically rich vision of human relationships.

In *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare presents an ethics grounded in empathy and identification. As Titus confronts his savagely mutilated daughter, Lavinia, he asks:

> Shall thy good uncle, and thy brother Lucius,
> And thou, and I, sit round about some fountain,
> Looking all downwards to behold our cheeks
> How they are stained, like meadows yet not dry
> With miry slime left on them by a flood?
> And in the fountain shall we gaze so long
> Till the fresh taste be taken from that clearness,
> And made a brine pit with our bitter tears?
> Or shall we cut away our hands like thine?
> Or shall we bite our tongues, and in dumb shows
> Pass the remainder of our hateful days? (III.i.122-32)

'O, what a sympathy of woe is this—' (III.i.148), cries Titus a few lines later. His desire to cut off his limbs so that he too might experience her pain is at once pitiful and horrifying. Titus is a prototype of Lear, a man who finds that his sense of individual authenticity is intimately tied to his ability to understand and empathise with others. Offering a similar reading of Shakespearean ethics, Knapp writes: 'Ethics is invariably tied to choice, to the decision, and the concept of the ethical decision is one that necessarily involves the "sympathy" of others. Locating the meeting point at which such sympathy might be found can be understood as the challenge facing any attempt to articulate an ethics that adequately accounts for the alterity of the other person.'[555] He picks out Lysander's fleeting utopian vision in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as evidence of Shakespeare's deep interest in the ethically and politically transformative

[554] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 422.
[555] Knapp, *Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser*, pp. 101-2.

power of empathetic insight. Hermia is distraught at the prospect of having 'to choose love by another's eyes' (I.i.140), and her lover responds:

> Or if there were a sympathy of choice,
> War, death, or sickness did lay siege to it,
> Making it momentany as a sound,
> Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
> Brief as the lightening in the collied night,
> That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
> And, ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!',
> The jaws of darkness do devour it up.
> So quick bright things come to confusion. (I.i.141-9)

In this remarkable speech, Shakespeare suggests that human beings have the ability to transcend the inaccessibility of other people's minds and experience what it is to be another human being by engaging in a process of affective reciprocity. 'The ethical valence of the visual', writes Knapp, 'is a matter of how one sees rather than what one sees.'[556] William M. Hawley is also attracted to the idea of mutually enhancing ethical relationships in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and argues that by 'treating ontology and ethics as facets of the same movement,' Shakespeare 'shows ethical conflicts to be resolved relationally'.[557]

Following Knapp and Hawley, I want to stress the significance of the ethics of empathy in Shakespeare's drama. This argument takes issue with Richard Strier's suggestion that, as Shakespeare's career progressed, he 'developed more and more fully and explicitly his sense of the limitation of the moral perspective.'[558] Although there may be some truth in the suggestion that Shakespeare's plays reveal the inadequacy of moralising condemnation and insinuate that 'moral judgment, however precise, is not the way to approach even some situations to which, it seems, such judgment should apply',[559] such conclusions do not offer a comprehensive assessment of Shakespeare's interest in the ethics of human life. Shakespeare's plays are not only critiques of moralism: they also show how significant ethical decisions are felt in their fullest sense when they are regarded as internal mandates with the power to shape an individual's sense of self. My existential reading of Shakespearean ethics, which also links self-

[556] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[557] William M. Hawley, '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Relating Ethics to Mutuality', *The European Legacy*, 15:2 (2010), p. 159.
[558] Richard Strier, 'Shakespeare Against Morality', in *Reading Renaissance Ethics*, ed. Marshall Grossman (New York and London: Routledge, 2007), p. 206.
[559] *Ibid*., p. 214.

becoming with a firmer sense of collective identity, also contrasts sharply with Peter Holbrook's view of the conflict between ethics and individualism. He writes:

> The injunction of 'ethics' is that one listen to the 'Other' (defined in group terms) rather than oneself. . . . This ethical, Other-regarding turn in contemporary Western mores takes a dim view of self-expression, which comes increasingly to appear as something we need protection against: 'if a man will make curtsy and say nothing, he is virtuous' (*2 Henry IV*, II.i.124-5). To the extent Left intellectuals have taken this conformist path they have, it seems to me, badly compromised those once prominent Enlightenment and Romantic commitments that made the Left the natural defender of *individual* freedom. 'Ethics', as currently imagined, is the perfect ideology for a corporatized, networked, fundamentally illiberal social order.[560]

Holbrook does not put his best argument forward here, as he creates a false opposition between individual freedom and ethics and equates ethics with moral prescription. Ethics, if understood in a deeper, existential sense, link up to inward feelings and are therefore always incorporated into our sense of individual freedom. Contrary to Holbrook's view, existentialists claim - in a way that Taylor would later echo - that self-development, authenticity and a sense of individualism depend upon a deep, ethical respect for other people. This is the crux of Beauvoir's argument. She acknowledges that assertions of freedom inevitably come into conflict with the freedom of others; but she also suggests that these moments of conflict can in fact produce a better understanding of the way an individual's freedom is dependent on a recognition of the freedom of others. In other words, by witnessing the freedom of others, I more fully understand the importance of my own freedom. At the end of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir asks: 'Is this kind of ethics individualistic or not?' Her answer is:

> Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the individual an absolute value and that it recognizes in him alone the power of laying the foundations of his own existence. . . . But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his relationship to the world and to other individuals; he exists only by transcending himself, and his freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others. He justifies his existence by a movement which, like freedom, springs from his heart but which leads outside of him.[561]

---

[560] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 63-4.

[561] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 156.

We can see Beauvoir here using ethics as a way to broach the issue of the relationship between individual self-becoming and the politics of collective existence. In many ways, Beauvoir responds to Sartre's suggestion at the very end of *Being and Nothingness* that there are many questions about the nature of human existence that 'can find their reply only on the ethical plane.'[562]

Many critics have noted the anti-climactic quality of the final scene of *Coriolanus.* Coriolanus's murder seems to lack the existential intensity and tragic significance often found in other Shakespearean tragedies. But in the context of the play's fascination with the idea of existential otherness, the scene functions as a powerful reminder of the difficulties of living in a world full of other people. After making a pact with his life-long enemy, Aufidius is appalled to find that he has been eclipsed by Coriolanus. He tells his conspirators:

> I took him,
> Made him joint-servant with me, gave him way
> In all his own desires; nay, let him choose
> Out of my files, his projects to accomplish,
> My best and freshest men; served his designments
> In mine own person, holp to reap the fame
> Which he did end all his, and took some pride
> To do myself this wrong, till at the last
> I seemed his follower, not partner, and
> He waged me with his countenance as if
> I had been mercenary. (V.vi.30-9)

Aufidius sees his relationship with Coriolanus as adopting the structure of a master-slave dialectic. He explains that Coriolanus has undermined his sense of authority and power to such an extent that he now feels like 'his follower'. Fear and anxiety about the effect this has on Aufidius's sense of self lead him to plot Coriolanus's immediate death. At the end of the play, Shakespeare reminds us of the friction and conflict that exist in the relationship between self and other, and thus underlines the need for a stronger sense of connection between human beings. The ethical headway made by Coriolanus when he recognised the needs of his family in V.iii is tragically undone at the end of the play. Coriolanus dies reminding his attackers that he 'Fluttered [their] Volscians in Corioles' (V.vi.117) and aggressively demanding that they 'Stain all [their] edges on [him]' (V.xi.113). This play is an ethical tragedy, which, by showing us the

[562] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 647.

challenges inherent in our relationships with others, reminds us of the existential necessity of authentic human bonds.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate the existentially relevant ethics that emerge in *Coriolanus*. Clearly, the existentialist ethics that are apparent in Shakespeare's drama are not stable or straightforward and cannot easily be formulated into moral codes which prescribe 'right' or 'wrong' action. Instead, Shakespeare offers a broader understanding of the ethical nature of human life. The play traces Coriolanus's troubled relationship with others and focuses on his anxiety about bodily exposure that is manifested in his worries about bleeding and blushing before others. At the end of the play, Shakespeare shows how a sense of individual authenticity can, paradoxically, be strengthened by an openness and respect for other people. When Coriolanus admits that he is 'not / of stronger earth than others' (V.iii.28-9), we are struck by this moment of intense self-awareness, amazed that a man who has fervently insisted on his own existential singularity can find a stronger, richer sense of authenticity, not from within, but from his connection with other beings. This process is, of course, traumatic; Coriolanus risks self-loss and subjective dissolution. But Shakespeare's play insists that this loss of self-control is a price worth paying. To think of oneself as the singular source of oneself is strangely stultifying. Instead, we have to reach out to others in order to locate a more liberating sense of our selves. This is the basis of an authentically ethical life.

CHAPTER SIX

'FREEDOM LIVES HENCE' (I.I.180): POLITICAL LIFE IN *KING LEAR*

In the previous two chapters, I have painted a picture of Shakespeare as a proto-existentialist writer deeply concerned with the notion of human freedom and I have endeavoured to show how Shakespeare presents the idea of freedom as perpetually bound up with questions of ethics. His plays insist that human beings must not only commit themselves to the task of self-creation, they must also acknowledge their responsibility for the world they live in. This is no easy undertaking; it is a perilous and sometimes terrifying element of human life. In this chapter, I want to focus primarily on the idea of political freedom in *King Lear* and uncover the ways in which the play suggests that self-realisation is both an ethical and a political command. Shakespeare is fascinated by the inherently political nature of human existence. In her recent study, *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life*, Julia Reinhard Lupton outlines the constitutive relationship between human life and human politics in Shakespeare's work. She argues that when Shylock asks 'If you prick us do we not bleed?' (*The Merchant of Venice*, III.i.54), his 'question is *political*, since it broaches the conditions of personhood, civic belonging, and human rights, but the question 'also bears on *life*, flaring up here as the pierced casing of creaturely existence. And he staples politics and life together with a certain brute simplicity, the stream of monosyllables unmediated by juridical or philosophical terminology.'[563] Political issues and questions in Shakespeare's drama are always powerfully imbued with existential intensity, and in *King Lear*, a play in which a sovereign is forced to realise that his hand 'smells of

[563] Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 1.

mortality' (xx.128), Shakespeare's existential political thinking is most fully and lucidly revealed.

In modern existentialist philosophy, the issue of politics produced a diverse range of perspectives among writers and theorists. Broadly speaking, existentialists were intensely conscious of the fact that no individual exists in a historical, social or political vacuum. By insisting on the situated, concrete and engaged nature of human life, they became increasingly aware of the need to integrate their ontological account of existence with social theory and a socio-historical understanding of existence. The devastation of the Second World War stressed the thoroughly political nature of issues such as freedom, authenticity and self-realisation. Existentialists saw the necessity of promoting not isolated individualism, but an authentic life grounded in an acceptance and recognition of others. Human beings must 'make themselves' in and through collective social action, they tell us. Progressing towards a Marxist version of existentialism and exploring the material aspect of human existence, writers such as Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus sought to understand more accurately the relationship between freedom and determinism. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, countering the argument that Marxism posits a subject completely determined by history, Beauvoir claims that 'Marxism does not *always* deny freedom. The very notion of action would lose all meaning if history were a mechanical unrolling in which man appears only as a passive conductor of outside forces. By acting, as by preaching action, the Marxist revolutionary asserts himself as a veritable agent; he assumes himself to be free.'[564] Beauvoir is not alone in her insistence on a re-humanised form of Marxist thought. Erich Fromm refers to Marxist philosophy as 'a spiritual existentialism in secular language', and points out that 'Marx is primarily concerned with the emancipation of man as an individual, the overcoming of alienation, the restoration of his capacity to relate himself fully to man and to nature.'[565] In stressing the humanistic impulse that lies beneath Marx's thought, existentialists show that a rapprochement of the two philosophies provides a better understanding of the dynamic interaction between the freedom of consciousness and the limits of history. With this in mind, I shall now look at the strengths and limitations of previous political readings of *King Lear*, and proceed to offer an existentialist interpretation of the play's politics.

---

[564] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), pp. 20-1.

[565] Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, trans. T. B. Bottomore (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 3.

Previous Political Readings of *King Lear*

The history of *Lear*'s critical reception is extensive and diverse. Over the last thirty years, various schools of thought (new-historicism, cultural-materialism, feminism and psychoanalytic criticism, to name but a few) have offered their own distinctive interpretations of the play's political concerns. The increasing number of political readings of *Lear* marked an important paradigm shift in Shakespearean criticism, which moved away from humanist views of the tragedy and began to put questions about social and ideological structures at the top of its agenda. Kiernan Ryan notes that with the rise of theory, the 1980s saw the emergence of 'a fresh generation of critics, for whom the meaning of *Lear* was inseparable from questions of language, gender, power and the unconscious.'[566] During this period, new-historicist scholars, whose views proved especially influential, argued that Shakespeare's mightiest tragedy endorsed the dominant ideology of its time and thus encouraged its spectators to become unwitting accomplices in their own subjection.[567]

Stephen Greenblatt's two essays on the play, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists' and 'The Cultivation of Anxiety: *King Lear* and his Heirs', are impressive examples of this line of argument. In the latter essay, Greenblatt argues that 'The very practice of tragedy depends upon a communal conviction that anxiety may be profitably and even pleasurably cultivated. That is, tragedy goes beyond the usual philosophical and religious *consolations* for affliction, and both exemplifies and perfects techniques for the creation or intensification of affliction.'[568] By enjoying the anxiety-producing experience of watching theatre, spectators become complicit in a process that aims to keep them in their place. As an audience, 'we enjoy being brazenly lied to, we welcome for the sake of pleasure what we know to be untrue, but we withhold from the theater the simple assent that we grant to everyday reality', Greenblatt explains in 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists'.[569] He acknowledges that Shakespeare seems to be deeply conscious of this inherent quality of his drama, and suggests that in *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest* Shakespeare deliberately weaves his anxiety about his authorial omnipotence

[566] Kiernan Ryan, '*King Lear*: A Retrospect, 1980-2000', *Shakespeare Survey*, 55 (2002), p. 1.
[567] An important exception here is Annabel Patterson's *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice*, in which she argues that 'Lear learns the contractual relationship between power and responsibility for the powerless, and something about the role of need in establishing economic value' (*Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 110.).
[568] Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 91.
[569] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 176.

into the fabric of the plays. The contention that *Lear* reveals 'the practice of salutary anxiety at the symbolic centre of society', the systematic displacement of fear by royal sovereigns onto their subjects in order to maintain subservience and quash political discontent, is compellingly explored by Greenblatt.[570] However, we need not come to such a bleak conclusion. The arousing of anxiety in others initiated by the demands of Lear's love test has many different effects on the play's characters and its audience. The play engenders a sense of existential trepidation and uncertainty, which is more radical than Greenblatt is willing to admit to. Anxiety is an ambiguous experience. When I stand at the edge of a cliff, 'I am afraid not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over', remarks Sartre.[571] Fear is brought about by the recognition that human life can be influenced and altered by external factors; but anxiety is created when an individual realises that he is an active agent in the world, a participant in existence. Anguish is produced when 'I distrust myself and my own reactions' in a particular situation.[572] Gloucester believes he has been brought to 'a cliff whose high and bending head / Looks saucily in the confinèd deep' (xv.71-2), that he stands 'within a foot / Of th'extreme verge' (xx.25-6). His final thoughts are for the son he has mistreated: 'If Edgar live, O bless him!-' (xx.40). For the audience, his suicide attempt is pitiful, ridiculous, even grotesque. But in many ways, this increases the existential significance of the theatrical moment. Shakespeare stages a scene in which a blind man, afflicted by a deep sense of angst, stands not before the vertiginous heights of Dover Cliff, but standing on smooth, even ground. The effect of this is to mobilise our own sense of freedom, for we are encouraged to recall 'How fearful / And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!' (xx.11-12), how frightening and yet invigorating it is to look over a precipice. As a result, the awakening of anxiety is existentially beneficial. In Sartre's words, it allows me to see 'a self that I am not yet': 'I approach the precipice, and my scrutiny is searching for my self in my very depths. In terms of this moment, I play with my possibilities.'[573] Gloucester allows his imagination (against the better judgement of his senses) to envisage himself standing one step away from a leap to his death, because the experience of anxiety is valuable and to some extent existentially regenerative. Edgar knows this and believes that allowing his father to experience the full force of his anxiety and despair 'Is done to cure it' (xx.34). Of course, Gloucester is not knowingly

[570] *Ibid*., p. 92.
[571] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 53.
[572] *Ibid*., p. 53.
[573] *Ibid*., p. 56.

on a journey of self-discovery. But there are indications that his sufferings have enabled him, like Lear, to become more intuitively self-aware. He says:

> How stiff is my vile sense,
> That I stand up and have ingenious feeling
> Of my huge sorrows! Better I were distraught;
> So should my thoughts be fencèd from my griefs,
> And woes by wrong imaginations lose
> The knowledge of themselves. (xx.271-6)

Gloucester is spared the relief of madness; his grief is intensified by knowledge. His growth of understanding, albeit grasped only intermittently and fleetingly, is an important aspect of the play's insistence on the value of existential unease. This reassessment of the role of anxiety in *Lear* helps shed light on some criticisms levelled at readings such as Greenblatt's. Hugh Grady observes that such views 'seem to present an inevitable process of the triumph of power and ideology . . . with no or very little space left from which it is possible to understand how a resistance to power and received identities could be mounted.'[574] But if *Lear* implies that anxiety stimulates rather than sedates the human impulse to be free, then the play becomes more recognisably concerned with the possibility of political resistance or change. *King Lear*, as Ryan argues, is a tragedy that 'confounds conventional expectations by obliging us to reach beyond the facts of Lear's personal fate to examine the codes that determine the shape his fate takes.'[575]

Another seminal reading of the politics of *King Lear* is Jonathan Dollimore's '*King Lear* and Essentialist Humanism', which distances itself from Christian, existentialist and humanistic readings by insisting that the play is not about passive endurance, tragic inevitability, redemptive suffering or divine justice, but 'about power, property and inheritance.'[576] One of the key strengths of Dollimore's influential reading is his suggestion that there is a subversive political impulse at the heart of the play. By revealing that human nature is not given or innate but largely shaped and influenced by material conditions, and by insisting that individuals often internalise society's dominant ideology, *Lear* allows us to envisage the possibility of political transformation, claims Dollimore. Exposing the way political mechanisms function in

---

[574] Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 262.
[575] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 97.
[576] Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 197.

society enables individuals to see how those mechanisms can be changed, modified, even completely overhauled. This insightful and progressive 'exploration of human consciousness in relation to social being'[577] has brought to light the way an essentialist belief in human nature can often be employed as an ideological tactic to ensure the preservation of the political status quo.

But there are limitations to Dollimore's assessment, the most significant being his rejection of existential humanism, which he sees as a tradition that emphasises 'essential heroism and existential integrity' and is thus 'merely a mutation of Christianity'.[578] He correctly notes, however, that 'In literary criticism the social implications of existentialism, such as they were, were easily ignored, the emphasis being instead on a modernist angst and man's thwarted spiritual potential.'[579] But Dollimore does not seek to rejuvenate the social or political ideas of existentialism to counter this neglect of those ideas in literary criticism. Instead, he endeavours to prove that in *King Lear* pity, compassion and human kindness are ineffectual means of bringing about social change. Dollimore suggest that 'Far from endorsing the idea that man can redeem himself in and through an access to pity,' the play insists that the king exists in a world where 'the majority will remain poor, naked wretches', adding that 'in fiction the wheel of fortune rarely brings them that low.'[580] 'As a basis for human kind's self-redemption', kindness 'is a nonstarter.'[581] Some critics have pointed out the shortcomings of Dollimore's perspective on the role of pity in the play. Tom McAlindon claims that Shakespeare places real emphasis on the necessity of compassion, 'the art of known and feeling sorrows' (xx.214) as Edgar puts it, and 'thus shaped plot and character so as to provide for a reconstitution of the existing social order on a wise, strong and humane basis.'[582] Many existentialists would agree, arguing that an openness towards other people engendered by compassion and pity is in fact the foundation on which a better society can be built. This radical and integral sentiment lies at the heart of *Lear*, a play that is continually reminding us of the value of 'feeling' for and alongside others.[583]

---

[577] *Ibid*., p. 202.
[578] *Ibid*., pp. 193, 195.
[579] *Ibid*., p. 195.
[580] *Ibid*., p. 191.
[581] *Ibid*., p. 192.
[582] Tom McAlindon, 'Cultural Materialism and the Ethics of Reading: Or, the Radicalizing of Jacobean Tragedy', *The Modern Language Review*, 90:4 (1995), p. 837.
[583] In a recent paper entitled 'The Renaissance Sublime' (delivered at The Shakespeare Institute on 22nd March 2012), Katherine Craik notes the importance of 'compassionate accompanying' in Shakespeare's tragedies. She draws attention to the fact that *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers two distinct definitions of the word 'compassion'. In the early modern period, the term denoted 'Suffering together

The purpose of this chapter is not to contest the suggestion of new historicists and cultural materialists that the work of Renaissance writers and dramatists reveals a deep interest in the mechanisms of power and ideology. *King Lear* clearly interrogates the dangerous individualistic ethos of utility and instrumentality. But the play also repeatedly flags up the existential inadequacies and shortcomings of such ways of thinking. John D. Cox concurs with this view, and his explanation of the way Shakespearean drama examines the existential cost of rational political thinking is worth quoting at length:

> Shakespeare was no less insightful than Machiavelli about the infinite resourcefulness of instrumental thinking, and he embodied that resourcefulness in plays about historical process, which for him, as for Machiavelli, meant political process. Where Shakespeare departs most profoundly from Machiavelli is in his affirmation of moral limitation— not in the political process itself, whose exclusive end is the acquiring and maintaining of political power, but in the human situation that encompasses kings and commoners alike, whether the first are willing to admit it or not. Shakespeare's most powerful politicians are the most self-deceived, because self-knowledge comes only with the acknowledgement of human limitations, and politicians, as Machiavelli well knew, need to act as if nothing limits them, least of all moral scruples. Shakespeare knew this too, but his politicians suffer, in ways that Machiavelli's prince never does, because they attempt to deny limitations that their world nonetheless imposes on them.[584]

Donald R. Wehrs argues in a similar vein when he observes that Shakespeare was well aware 'of how his theatre was particularly well-suited to expose the folly and moral cost of separating self-fashioning reason from a corporeal subjectivity binding the self to ethics and sociability.'[585] 'I cannot be / Mine own, nor anything to any, if / I be not thine' (IV.iv.43-5), says Florizel to Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*. Individual identity in Shakespearean drama, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, is often conceived as relational. Shakespeare's characters never interpret their identity in isolation; they negotiate their sense of self through a dialogue with others.

Before we turn to examine in more detail the way Shakespeare links the idea of relational, ethical subjectivity to human politics, it is worth pausing over Sartre's

---

with another, participation in suffering; fellow-feeling, sympathy' (OED) and thus conveyed the idea that compassion is a collaborative and potentially regenerative process.

[584] John D. Cox, *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), p. 160.

[585] Donald R. Wehrs, 'Moral Physiology, Ethical Prototypes, and the Denaturing of Sense in Shakespearean Tragedy', *College Literature*, 33:1 (2006), p. 75.

elaboration of his concept of freedom in *Being and Nothingness*. In a chapter entitled 'Freedom and Facticity: The Situation', Sartre addresses the main charge levelled at proponents of freedom by materialists and determinists:

> The decisive argument which is employed by common sense against freedom consists in reminding us of our powerlessness. Far from being able to modify our situation at our whim, we seem to be unable to change ourselves. . . . Much more than he appears 'to make himself,' man seems 'to be made' by climate and the earth, race and class, language, the history of the collectivity of which he is part, heredity, the individual circumstances of his childhood, acquired habits, the great and small events of our life.[586]

In response to this argument (an argument that clearly resonates with some readings of the politics in *Lear*), Sartre suggests that 'the coefficient of adversity in things can not be an argument against our freedom for it is *by us*—i.e., by the preliminary positing of an end—that this coefficient of adversity arises.'[587] 'The coefficient of adversity' is the term Sartre uses to describe the worldly resistance we encounter when we pursue our projects, the historical, political and moral circumstances that limit our freedom. Sartre continues: 'Thus although brute things . . . can from the start limit our freedom of action, it is our freedom itself which must first constitute the framework, the technique, and the ends in relation to which they will manifest themselves as limits.'[588] In other words, as we pursue our projects in the world, we confront objects, people and environments that curtail the range of our actions. But because we are pursuing a project in the first place, because we are freely following the goals, ambitions and objectives that we have set ourselves, we ascribe meaning to these elements of the world. Sartre explains: 'A particular crag, which manifests a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will on the contrary be a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside. In itself . . . [the crag] is neutral; that is, it awaits to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful.'[589]

It is clear that Sartre is not suggesting that human beings are absolutely free. He rejects this claim outright, and clarifies his understanding of freedom by stating that 'the formula "to be free" does not mean "to obtain what one has wished" but rather "by oneself to determine oneself to wish" (in the broad sense of choosing).'[590] He argues

[586] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 503.
[587] *Ibid*., p. 504
[588] *Ibid*., p. 504.
[589] *Ibid*., p. 504.
[590] *Ibid*., p. 505.

that human beings only come to understand the nature of their freedom when that freedom collides with the limits and givens of their situation. Practical limits, says Sartre, are 'indispensable to the existence of a freedom,'[591] because they give freedom meaning. This understanding allows him to explain what he calls 'the paradox of freedom': 'there is freedom only in *a situation*, and there is a situation only through freedom. Human-reality everywhere encounters resistance and obstacles which it has not created, but these resistances and obstacles have meaning only in and through the free choice which human-reality is.'[592] In an essay that clarifies the idea of existential freedom, Sonia Kruks writes: 'Since we are each a situated freedom, we will each discover how the social milieu in which we live, with its normative and cultural practices, informs (even though it does not determine) our judgements. . . . We will learn, in short, that we do not only decide "in" situation, but we decide as selves that are already strongly suffused by their situation.'[593]

I have dwelt on Sartre's explanation of his concept of freedom because I believe it is especially pertinent to Shakespearean drama. Departing from his previous negative view of the possibility of freedom and independence, Greenblatt has recently offered a more dialectical understanding of the relationship between freedom and limitation in Shakespeare's plays. In *Shakespeare's Freedom*, he writes:

> [Shakespeare's] kings repeatedly discover the constraints within which they must function if they hope to survive. His generals draw lines on maps and issue peremptory commands, only to find that the reality on the ground defies their designs. So too his proud churchmen are mocked for their pretensions, while religious visionaries are exposed as frauds.
>
> Above all, perhaps, it is Shakespeare's lovers who encounter again and again the boundaries that society or nature sets to the most exulted and seemingly unconfined passions. . . . The particular magic of Shakespeare's comedies is that love's preciousness and intensity are not diminished by such exposure to limits but rather enhanced. And when lovers in the tragedies – Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Antony – refuse to acknowledge any limits, their refusal inevitably leads to death and destruction.[594]

When their freedom collides with the full force of history, Greenblatt argues, Shakespeare's characters understand more clearly the nature and existential importance

[591] *Ibid*., p.506.
[592] *Ibid*., p. 511.
[593] Sonia Kruks, 'Moving Beyond Sartre: Constraint and Judgment in Beauvoir's "Moral Essays" and *The Mandarins*', in *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*, ed. Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), p. 168.
[594] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010), p. 3.

of that freedom. This argument provides some insight into the dramatic and philosophical intensity of the opening scene of *King Lear*.

The ethical and political chaos of the abdication scene is perhaps one of the most important dramatic depictions of human freedom conflicting not only with the deeply ingrained political ideologies of society, but also with the freedom of other people, in the whole of Shakespeare's canon. Cordelia's failure to conform to her father's wishes is the critical moment that sets the play's devastating consequences in motion. She says to Lear: 'I love your majesty / According to my bond, nor more nor less' (i.83-4), and then adds:

> Good my lord,
> You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
> I return those duties back as are right fit—
> Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
> Why have my sisters husbands if they say
> They love you all? Haply when I shall wed
> That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
> Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
> Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
> To love my father all. (i.86-95)

For the most part, critics have viewed Cordelia's verbal rebellion from two different perspectives, neither of which adequately conveys the full political intensity of her response to her father's demand for love. Dollimore claims that '[Lear's] relationship to [Cordelia] is saturated with the ideological imperatives of power', and therefore Cordelia is incapable of expressing her love in any terms other than those of power and contractual relations.[595] On the other hand, Peter Holbrook sees this moment as a prime example of Shakespeare's interest in individual, unfettered freedom. He claims that 'Cordelia insists upon speaking in her own voice rather than another's.'[596] Both these interpretations fail to show how Cordelia's refusal to participate in the love test or, more specifically, the way she shapes her response in the dehumanised, insensitive discourse that is endemic in Lear's court, is a radical political act. Rather than speaking in her 'own voice', Cordelia consciously mirrors back the violently degraded nature of human relationships that have become part of the fabric of Lear's world. Through her flagrantly disobedient act, she forces her father to confront the fact that devotion and affection cannot be commanded from on high, that he simply cannot compel another human

[595] Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 198.
[596] Peter Holbrook, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 15.

being to love him, and in doing so, she attacks the system that corrupts and destroys authentic human affection. Beauvoir, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, reflects: 'In order for the universe of revolutionary values to arise, a subjective movement must create them in revolt and hope.'[597] Cordelia is, in short, an existential rebel. When a rebel says 'no', writes Camus, he says 'yes' to life, because he 'affirms that there are limits and also that he suspects – and wishes to preserve – the existence of certain things beyond those limits . . . In every act of rebellion, the man concerned experiences not only a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights but also a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself.'[598]

When Cordelia says, 'I am sure my love's / More richer than my tongue' (i.71-2), we realise that her love for her father goes beyond the limits of verbal communication. So when she speaks of her 'bond' and her 'duties', we are urged to recognise the political intensity of Cordelia's stubbornness. The simple act of *not* saying what she is supposed to say has catastrophic repercussions: it shakes the foundations on which Lear's society is built. Paul Cefalu suggests that 'she seems to be unwittingly mocking the entire system of command morality that overreaches the conduct of all the characters.'[599] In the process, Cordelia gains dignity and a sense of self-worth. Lear tells his daughters' suitors that 'her price is fallen' and that she is an individual of 'little seeming substance' (i.186-7), but Cordelia knows that she is 'richer' for not having 'A still-soliciting eye' (i.222). When France says, 'Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor' (i.240), he indicates that he sees Cordelia as being existentially rich for resolutely adhering to her own ethic of authenticity. France also hints that Cordelia's strength, though it may have brought ruin on herself, has laid bare the existential shortcomings of others. She is 'queen of us' (i.247), says France, and unlike the 'wat'rish Burgundy' (i.248), he chooses to love her for her existential 'virtues' (i.242).

Shakespeare explores the troubled relationship between human freedom and political action in *King Lear*. As we have seen, some previous readings of the politics of the play have failed to account fully for Shakespeare's interest in the power human beings have to resist the dominant ideological influences of their time. McAlindon also draws attention to this point, arguing that 'The King of France and the Duke of Burgundy are presumably products of the same ideology, as Cordelia and her sisters are the children of the same parents. Clearly, this text forces upon our attention *from the*

[597] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 19.
[598] Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 19.
[599] Paul Cefalu, *Revisionist Shakespeare: Transitional Ideologies in Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004), p. 116.

outset the often startling autonomy of the self; its baffling individuality; its resistance to environmental "subjection" and formulaic explanation.'[600] Stanley Cavell suggests that there is no inevitability about this tragedy. To suggest that there is, he argues, runs contrary to our experience of 'these characters as radically and continuously *free*, operating under their own power, at every moment choosing their destruction.'[601] But Cordelia's mobilisation of freedom in the abdication scene reveals Shakespeare's complex vision of individual freedom. To borrow a line from *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Shakespeare thinks like an existentialist, because he 'sees in political operation a total manifestation of man as having-to-be at the same time as being.'[602] In other words, Shakespeare presents Cordelia as an individual who exists within a certain set of historical circumstances, but also as an individual who must actively participate in the process of her own existence.

Linking Ethics and Politics

Throughout his plays, and particularly in *King* Lear, Shakespeare invites consideration of the ethical nature of human politics. Cox explains how inseparable these two issues were in early modern thought:

> Where ethics and politics are concerned, Shakespeare inherited a teleological conception from Aristotle, who argued that the purpose of ethical life is happiness, and that happiness can best be achieved in the kind of polity Aristotle knew in the Greek *poleis.* Ethics, or the study of how human beings achieve their proper end by becoming virtuous, thus serves the purpose of politics. . . . In late Tudor England, ethics had thus become political in a manner Aristotle never imagined. For Shakespeare, the relationship between ethics and politics is implicit in his way of imagining history as the aspirations and actions of powerful elites, because their aspiration is defined both by power and by moral expectation, and the difference between moral expectation and political action is so wide.[603]

Ethics and politics are linked, Shakespeare's plays imply, because they both relate back to the broader issue at stake: human existence, or, to put it more accurately, the way our experience of ourselves and our experience of others are deeply connected. As Sartre

[600] McAlindon, 'Cultural Materialism and the Ethics of Reading: Or, the Radicalizing of Jacobean Tragedy', p. 842.
[601] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 88.
[602] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 23.
[603] Cox, *Seeming Knowledge*, p. 133.

aphoristically puts it: 'History = ethics. History implies ethics (without universal conversion, no meaning to evolution or to revolutions). Ethics implies History (no morality possible without systematic action on the situation).'[604]

In the previous chapter, we saw how Shakespeare's plays imaginatively reconstruct human ethics, not only by offering a meta-ethical enquiry into the foundations of ethical systems, but also by implying that self-realisation and authenticity are ethical commands. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare also scrutinises ethical directives. Shakespeare is as sceptical of passive goodness as he is of calculating rationalism. Albany's 'milky gentleness' (iv.322) is an ineffectual counterforce against endemic terror and oppression. When Gonoril berates her husband for his lack of wisdom and political cunning rather than his leniency and mildness of character, Shakespeare underscores the ethical inadequacies of both political approaches to the world. Characters such as Gonoril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund are 'smiling rogues' who 'like rats, oft bite those cords in twain / Which are too entrenched to unloose' (vii.70-2). Equally, conventional Christian pity elevated to a moral principle is hollow and ethically worthless, indicative of a relationship based on power and self-interest rather than compassion and kindness. But in *Lear* real, authentic pity is always coupled with an emotional openness towards others. In this respect, the play cultivates an alternative affective ethic of empathy, which suggests that the suffering of others can be internalised and lived. By taking an imaginative leap and placing themselves in the position of others, the characters in the play becomes more ethically aware and thus more capable of seeing the political inadequacies of the world in which they exist. In other words, they open themselves up to a world of horrors to allow themselves to *feel* 'how this world goes' (xx.142-3).

James A. Knapp convincingly argues that Shakespeare 'represents[s] the process by which moral conviction is produced phenomenologically, welling up in their characters despite their awareness of established moral principles and in tension with the calm domain of moral reasoning.'[605] Arguing in a similar vein, Cefalu suggests that 'The abdication scene allegorizes the limitations of any ethical system which holds that actions stemming purely from duty, in the absence of affective considerations, can effectively motivate conduct.'[606] When Cordelia refuses to shower her father with

[604] Jean-Paul Sartre, *A Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 471.
[605] James A. Knapp, *Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011), p. 22.
[606] Cefalu, *Revisionist Shakespeare*, p. 120.

eloquent declarations of love, Lear is devastated that his daughter could be 'so untender' (i.98), and their exchange immediately foregrounds the importance of emotional reciprocity in the play. But this ethic of empathy entails more than a simple process of identification or sympathy, more than simply feeling sorry for someone else. *Lear* suggests that one can understand the existential significance of one's own suffering only by becoming directly engaged with the suffering of others. A short passage from *Being and Nothingness* will help to illuminate this complex idea. Sartre claims that

> the affective self is directly present as a lack *suffered* in the very heart of suffering. . . . The suffering of which we *speak* is never exactly that which we feel. What we call 'noble' or 'good' or 'true' suffering and what moves us is the suffering which we read on the faces of others, better yet in portraits, in the face of a statue, in a tragic mask. It is suffering which has *being*.[607]

Sartre is saying here that we experience our own suffering and the suffering of others in different ways. But whereas Sartre sees the suffering of others 'as a degraded approximation of that suffering-in-itself which haunts our own suffering',[608] Shakespeare values this empathetic union of sufferers and shows how the witnessing of another's suffering brings one's own suffering into perspective. The idea is reiterated at a number of points in the play. When Edgar comes into contact with Lear, he says:

> When we our betters see bearing our woes,
> We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
> Who alone suffers, suffers most i'the mind,
> Leaving free things and happy shows behind.
> But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip
> When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
> How light and portable my pain seems now,
> When that which makes me bend, makes the King bow,
> He childed as I fathered. (xiii.95-103)

These lines are often read sceptically, seen as an attempt by Edgar to alleviate the burden of his pain. But what Shakespeare is articulating here is the ethical urgency and importance of bearing witness to the intolerable suffering of others. Edgar comes to realise that his own pain is only ever what Sartre would call 'consciousness of suffering'. It is a 'grief which is haunted by a perpetual absence – the absence of the

[607] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 115.
[608] *Ibid*., p. 115.

motionless, mute suffering which is the self.'[609] For suffering to have form, it must be confronted as something which is embodied by others. As Sartre writes: 'It is for my eyes that [the man of grief] is "crushed" by suffering.'[610] When Edgar sees others violently degraded, their suffering gives shape to his inner anguish and he thus establishes an ethical connection first with Lear and then with his father. Edgar is the voice of empathy: 'A most poor man, made lame by fortune's blows, / Who by the art of known and feeling sorrows / Am pregnant to good pity' (xx.213-5). When he sees a distraught Lear rage against the joint stools in the mock trial of his daughters, he says in an aside: 'My tears begin to take his part so much / They'll mar my counterfeiting' (xiii.55-6). This is an extraordinary statement, evidence of just how invested Shakespeare is in the existential power of his plays. Edgar suggests that his own tears are so authentic that it is as if he is crying Lear's tears for him. Moreover, it is an act of emotional identification that intensifies his own self-experience to the point where he fears it will damage his disguise and reveal his true identity. Clearly, Edgar has moved beyond the realm of pity into the realm of empathy. But his empathetic connection with Lear is doubly revealing, because not only does he expose himself to feel as others do and thus understand more fully the suffering of others, but such an act also strengthens and deepens his own sense of authenticity.

It is useful at this juncture to introduce some of Martha C. Nussbaum's reflections on the nature of compassion in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001). Nussbaum distinguishes between empathy and compassion, arguing that the former involves 'an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, without any particular evaluation of that experience.'[611] In some cases, empathy is an important step on the way to compassion, but on its own it is an insufficient emotional response to suffering, argues Nussbaum. Compassion, on the other hand, requires evaluative engagement with those who suffer:

> Equipped with her general conception of human flourishing, the spectator looks at the world in which people suffer hunger, disability, disease, slavery, through no fault of their own. She believes that goods such as food, health, citizenship, freedom, do matter. And yet she acknowledges, as well, that it is uncertain whether she herself will remain among the safe and privileged ones to whom such goods are stably guaranteed. She acknowledges that the lot of the beggar might be (or become) her own. This

[609] *Ibid*., p. 116.
[610] *Ibid*., p. 116.
[611] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 302.

> leads her to turn her thoughts outward, asking about society's general arrangement for the allocation of goods and resources. Given the uncertainty of life, she will be inclined, other things being equal, to want a society in which the lot of the worst off - of the poor, of people defeated in war, of women, of servants - is as good as it can be. Self-interest itself, via thought about shared vulnerabilities, promotes the selection of principles that raise society's floor.[612]

Before Edgar sees his 'parti-eyed' (xv.7) father, he reasons that 'To be worst, / The low'st and most dejected thing of fortune, / Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear' (xv.2-4). After his suffering and tormented father is led onto the stage by an old man, he says: 'Who is't can say "I am the worst"? / I am worse than e'er I was' (xv.23-4), adding: 'And worse I may be yet. The worse is not / As long as we can say "This is the worst"' (xv.25-6). Through compassion, we register the injustice of another's emotional distress and thus invest life with human worth. However, empathy and compassion as characterised by Nussbaum are not easily prised apart in *Lear*. In fact, Shakespeare fuses the experiences of feeling *with* others, feeling *for* others, and caring for the condition of one's own self.

As *King Lear* makes clear, watching another person suffer is an existentially traumatic experience. There is a powerful emphasis on the value of emotional identification in the play, and this is epitomised by one of its most important passages. When Lear is urged by his companions to enter the hovel, he says:

> Prithee, go in thyself. Seek thy own ease.
> This tempest will not give me leave to ponder
> On things would hurt me more; but I'll go in; [*Exit Fool*]
> Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless night,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
> Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
> And show the heavens more just. (xi.22-33)

In some ways, this reading of Shakespeare's emphasis on empathy and affectivity contradicts Cavell's influential essay, 'The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*', where he argues that the play dramatises the ethical failure of the characters to

[612] *Ibid*., pp. 320-1.

understand and acknowledge their need for love and recognition. Of course, Lear's shameful rejection of others is the trigger that sets the play's terrible events in motion, and Cavell rightly underscores the significance of this. Shakespeare insists that an individual's freedom not only runs up against the socio-historical structures of the world it exists in, it is also challenged and confronted by the freedom of other people. Like Coriolanus, Lear is ashamed that his existence entails appealing to and engaging with others. Shakespeare traces the repercussions of Lear's failure to acknowledge others, dramatising his rapid development from rejection to oppression to violence. The terrible shame of being looked at and the fact that such looks can engender cruelty and aggression is nowhere better illustrated than when Lear says to Oswald, 'Do you bandy looks with me, you rascal?' (iv.79), and then strikes him. But the play also dramatises the devastating political repercussions of the failure to connect with others. Moreover, it shows us the potentially radical and ethically charged politics that could develop out of moments of genuine identification and empathy. Rather than stressing the distance between kings and paupers, Shakespeare repeatedly suggests that, once all the symbols of status and wealth are stripped away, human beings are not all that different from each other. Lear says to Poor Tom: 'thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings!' (xi.96-8). By seeking to divest himself of his royal robes, Lear actively attempts to close the gap between them. It is an act of levelling that points towards Lear's newfound appreciation of vulnerable, fragile common humanity. When Lear initially meets Poor Tom, he solipsistically projects his personal grievances onto him, repeatedly asking him if his daughters have brought him to such destitution. He tries to assimilate him to his suffering, because he is engrossed in his own pain and anguish. As he 'Strives in his little world of man' (viii.9), he cannot see beyond his immediate circumstances. But when he comes into contact with Poor Tom, he repeatedly refuses to take shelter and insists that he wants to stay in the company of his 'Noble philosopher' (xi.157). We begin to see this ethic of empathy emerge from the interactions of the characters on the heath. Ryan argues that Lear 'learns to identify physically and emotionally with the "houseless poverty" of the dispossessed and discounted, embodied before him in the figure of Poor Tom. He stumbles . . . into a way of seeing which enables *us* to apprehend the need to rebuild our social life upon beliefs diametrically opposed to those responsible for this tragedy.'[613]

[613] Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 99.

Sartre is drawn to the existential profundity of *Lear*, and especially attracted to the political vision that emerges after Lear comes into contact with Poor Tom. In his biography of Flaubert, he writes: 'The beauty of the scene comes from the fact that it brings a father, swindled by two of his daughters and having misunderstood the third, face to face with a son, misunderstood and hunted by his father at the instigation of his half-brother.'[614] He goes on to note that it is as if Lear has 'found himself in the presence of Cordelia who had *become other*, having changed sex, and instinctively attached himself to Edgar as a function of this resemblance.'[615] This argument gives a new dimension to Lear's and Poor Tom's newly discovered friendship in suffering. If Poor Tom metaphorically represents Cordelia, then the inference is that Lear also comes face-to-face with the suffering of his cast-out daughter. Sartre claims that Flaubert was unable to grasp the ethical power of the scenes on the heath, underneath which lies a new understanding of human politics. In a passage that benefits from being quoted in full, Sartre explains how the play reveals to us the nature of our basic, physical existence:

> Overcome by misery, Lear intuits the human condition by discovering those more miserable than himself; the strangeness of his statements is not the product of a delirium but of a lucidity too new and too powerful to be easily expressed. Hence the 'passage to the act,' the attempt – immediately aborted by his companions – to tear off the 'lendings,' the rags that still cover him, to abolish the last vestiges of royalty and appear as the bare animal, the starting point from which a new order may be instituted that is proper to man. As if all the effort of centuries had been to hide our needs and veil our bodies, in short, to turn our backs on the truth of the human condition. Instead, true humanism, far from masking our animality, our needs exasperated by penury, should *take these as its starting point* and never deviate from them. Hope, glimpsed too late, vanishes: Lear's authentic greatness will prevent neither his madness nor his death, nor that of Cordelia. Be that as it may, man is possible; curtain.[616]

Flaubert could not come to terms with the pessimism of the play, writes Sartre. He failed to appreciate how the play affords the audience a glimpse of a better world, although he concedes that the utopian vision is unbearably cruel, because 'it is revealed to the wretched at the moment that an ineluctable juggernaut is about to roll over them and crush them to death.'[617] If we recall from Chapter Four Sartre's reconceptualisation

[614] Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*, trans. Carol Cosman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), vol. 4, p. 261.
[615] *Ibid*., p. 261.
[616] *Ibid*., p. 264.
[617] *Ibid*., p. 264.

of humanism as a theory that insists that 'Man is all the time outside of himself',[618] then we can begin to see how *Lear* insists that human existence always retains the possibility of being otherwise. Contrary to Dollimore, who dismisses existential humanism in *Radical Tragedy* as 'merely a mutation of Christianity',[619] I would like to suggest (following Sartre) that the existential humanism in *Lear* augments the political intensity of the play, because it implies that human beings have the capacity to change the world they live in.

An integral part of the existential humanism of *Lear* is the particular emphasis the play places on the human capacity to shed tears. Weeping is a deeply unsettling experience that links up an individual's inward self-experience with their experience of other people in the surrounding world. Tears are associated with subjective disintegration. Early on in the play, when Lear's sense of self is on the cusp of collapse, he says to Gonoril:

> Life and death! I am ashamed
> That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
> That these hot tears, that break from me perforce
> And should make thee – worst blasts and fogs upon thee!
> Untented woundings of a father's curse
> Pierce every sense about thee! Old fond eyes,
> Beweep this cause again I'll pluck you out
> And cast you, with the waters that you make,
> To temper clay. (iv.287-95)

Lear struggles not to cry even as his 'hot tears' roll down his face, which indicates that he has very little control over his emotional response to the world. It is as if his tears somehow surprise his subjectivity and instantly jeopardise what he believes to be the very core of his existence: his sense of himself as an all-powerful monarch. His tears show him that, far from being an invulnerable, self-possessed individual, he is in fact wholly susceptible to the actions of others. Lear finds this basic truth shameful, and in a vivid prefiguration of the shocking attack on Gloucester, he claims that he would rather rip out his eyes than be seen to weep in front of others. This statement conflicts with his desire, expressed only a few lines earlier, to have someone identify with his pain. He wishes Gonoril could know what it feels like to have a child who makes 'cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks' (iv.275).

---

[618] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 55.
[619] Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy*, p. 195.

Later, Lear implores the gods to 'touch [him] with noble anger. / O, let not women's weapons, water-drops, / Stain [his] man's cheeks!' (vii.434-6). As we saw in *Coriolanus*, anger can thwart emotional identification and dehumanise an individual. In Lear's lines, Shakespeare shows us how anger establishes the boundaries of the self, whereas tears dissolve them. But anger can have a value as well. Lear continues his rant against his daughters, and says:

> No, you unnatural hags,
> I will have such revenges on you both
> That all the world shall – I will do such things –
> What they are, yet I know not; but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep.
> No, I'll not weep. [*Storm within*]
> I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
> Or ere I'll weep. – O fool, I shall go mad! (vii.436-44).

Although *King Lear* 'is aware of the cost of irrational rage', as Richard Strier argues in an essay that examines the complex interaction of stoicism and anti-stoicism in the early modern period, 'the moral status of rage in the play undergoes a transformation.'[620] Strier convincingly suggests that Shakespeare was deeply interested in the power of extreme human emotions. He cites Adriana's speech against the virtues of patience and stoic endurance in *The Comedy of Errors* as evidence of the centrality of passion in Shakespearean drama. She says: 'A wretched soul, bruised with adversity, / We bid be quiet when we hear it cry. / But were we burdened with like weight of pain, / As much or more we should ourselves complain' (II.i.34-7). In *Lear*, the dynamic interplay of anger and sorrow shows us the power these emotions have not only to provoke a transformation of the self, but also, consequently, to transform the ethical and political dimensions of human existence. Although Lear's previous identity has crumbled, a sense of self remains. This vulnerable, intuitive selfhood has no fixed form, but is rather grasped from moment to moment. It is both an intensified self-consciousness and an intensified awareness of others: an experience of a self that is at once inwardly felt and outwardly perceived. By evoking imagery of crying and weeping, Shakespeare signifies a change in his conception of the self. Tears testify to the authenticity of grief and thus to the authenticity of the crying individual. In a way, even though Lear undergoes a

[620] Richard Strier, 'Against the Rule of Reason: Praise of Passion from Petrarch to Luther to Shakespeare to Herbert', in *Reading the Early Modern Passions*, ed. Gail Kern Paster, Katherine Rowe and Mary Floyd-Wilson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), p. 36.

traumatic experience of subjective disintegration, his selfhood is enriched in the process, because it is exposed to the compassion of others.

As Leon Harold Craig notes, Shakespeare is keen to emphasise that 'weeping has an effect on other people. Tears evoke pity, draw forth mercy, solicit assistance, and attest to the sincerity of the weeper's misery. And sometimes mere expressions of sympathy from one's fellows are enough to ease the burden of suffering.'[621] This idea is most poignantly conveyed when the Gentleman informs Kent of Cordelia's emotional response to his letter. He recalls how 'an ample tear trilled down / Her delicate cheek. It seemed she was a queen / Over her passion who, most rebel-like, / Sought to be king o'er her' (xvii.13-16). Though she strives to control them, Cordelia's emotions get the better of her. When Kent enquires whether she was 'moved' by the correspondence, the Gentleman admits that although she did not fly into 'a rage' (xvii.17), her vehement indignation eventually overcame her. Like Edgar, Cordelia cries for Lear and opens herself up to his pain. It is perhaps, then, no surprise that tears flow freely from the eyes of both Cordelia and Lear when they are reunited. Lear asks simply, 'Be your tears wet?' (xxi.68), possibly indicating that he touches her face or even tastes her tears. The act of shedding tears draws them closer together, and the scene's emphasis on their mutual affectivity invites us to see how 'tears' can point us towards 'a better way' (xvii.19-20). Maurice Hunt observes that 'Shakespeare makes empathy personal . . . for playgoers and readers in his own and future ages. For he modestly sparks within us the insight that imaginative literature like his own can inspire us to feel a brotherhood of pain that, when recognized, can cause us to . . . feel empathy for others and forgive'.[622] But, in some ways, Shakespeare goes further than this by implying that emotional responsiveness modifies and enhances self-understanding and allows consciousness to understand itself differently. By putting ourselves in another's position, we can come to know ourselves better.

Supporting contextual evidence for an early modern interest in the ethics of identification can be found in John Lesly's 1631 text, *An Epithrene: or Voice of Weeping*, where he states:

> The sorrowfull are comforted, when friends condole their Sorrows, saith the *Philosopher:* Whereof hee yeeldeth *two Reasons; One is,* for that naturally they who groane vnder any burden feele his hand sweete, which laboureth

[621] Leon Harold Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001), p. 164.
[622] Maurice Hunt, 'Balzac vs. Shakespeare: Making Empathy Personal', *CCTE Studies*, 71 (2006), p. 8.

> to discharge them, or which helpe to support them; But friends that endeauour by Weeping to ease them (as it were) of the burden, which presseth them downe, doe sweeten their paine, and make them endure their Affliction, with more Constancy and Resolution: *Secondly,* for that they seeing their friends participate with their Griefe, know thereby that their Affections are sound, and that they love them entirely, which is the sweetest thing that may happen in this life; For by *Nature* wee desire, if wee cannot bee relieved, yet to bee pitied, to see some who condole our Misery, who wish vs well, who want not Will, but power to relieve vs.[623]

In a similar way to *Lear*, Lesly emphasises that human beings can become more fully self-aware through an act of crying. He insists on the regenerative capacity of empathy and the power human beings have to lessen the woes of others by internalising their pain. Interestingly, Lesly does not advocate orthodox Christian pity: weeping, in his mind, involves authentic human recognition. In the chapter entitled 'Applying Some Vses of Weeping' that follows the passage quoted above, he outlines the ways in which weeping enables individuals to recover themselves and locate a more accurate sense of their own authentic lives. *An Epithrene* illuminates the existential pathos that is clearly so fundamental to *King Lear*. By paying close attention to the importance of emotional reciprocity in *Lear*, we can also think afresh about the play's most violent and savage moment: the gouging out of Gloucester's eyes onstage before a theatre of onlookers. If, by virtue of their ability to shed tears, the eyes are representative of the human capacity to empathise and identify with others, then the attack on Gloucester is also an attempt to dehumanise him, to make him incapable of relating to others. In terms of the play's political concerns, it is a brutal assault on a source of ethics that could potentially form the basis of a radical politics aimed at destroying voracious, ethically bankrupt individualism. To put it simply, the self-seeking characters in the play find the idea of emotional identification and authentic human connection threatening, because these existentially revealing experiences have the strength to overthrow a political system based on class, wealth, status and power.

The heart is the emotional core of human life. In his recent study, William W. E. Slights argues that the heart in early modern culture had 'immense significance as a determining force in creating and storing all aspects of human understanding.'[624] In *Lear*, the image of the heart is tied to the idea of emotional connectivity with others.

---

[623] John Lesly, *An Epithrene: or Voice of Weeping: Bewailing The want of Weeping. A Meditation* (London: Printed by A. M. for Humphrey Robinson, 1631), pp. 97-8.

[624] William W. E. Slights, *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 26.

Slights notes that not only does it contribute 'to the structural orchestration of political narrative', but it is also 'crucial to the humanizing of [the] characters.'[625] Throughout the play, the heart is described as swelling, splitting, bursting and cracking, as it is unable to bear the emotional strain of seemingly endless suffering. Like Coriolanus, who tells Aufidius, 'thou hast made my heart / Too great for what contains it' (V.vi.104-5), Edgar describes how his father's 'flawed heart- / . . . 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief, / Burst smilingly' (xxiv.193-6). The actions of other people penetrate deep into the centre of an individual's sense of self. Although this experience is painful, and sometimes self-destructive, Shakespeare insists that the emotions of the heart can journey outwards, even when it suffers greatly. Deeply troubled by his own sorrow and heartache, Lear can still care for another being: He tells his Fool: 'I have one part of my heart / That sorrows yet for thee' (ix.73-4).

In direct contrast to Cavell, I have attempted to show that this play is primarily concerned with the dynamics of existential identification and recognition. Moments when recognition is either deferred or withheld are designed by Shakespeare to increase the dramatic force of the scenes in which characters open up to each other and embrace a new form of authentic being. It is as if, paradoxically, the characters in *King Lear* are drawn away from themselves, forced to reach out to others in order to become more fully self-aware. The play stresses the absolute existential necessity of this human connection and shows us how the kind of vulnerable authenticity that is created through such contact can become the basis of our collective existence. Ewan Fernie concurs, arguing that 'True perception of the other, as this tragedy reveals, is the revolutionary move, the foundation of all ethical and political projects. Only this could begin to make Lear's egalitarian fantasies real. He has made the change, which we are in a position to carry beyond the page and theatre. His unique distinction among tragic heroes is that he dies pointing away from himself, at somebody else.'[626] The existential politics of the play have a metatheatrical dimension: they urge us to see that we have the freedom to refashion the values and moral expectations of our world.

Freedom in the World Beyond the Play

We have seen how a moral and existential seriousness underpins Shakespeare's political thinking. His approach to the politics of human existence, I would like to suggest,

[625] *Ibid*., p. 181.
[626] Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 206-7.

chimes with Camus's post-war political philosophy.[627] In one of his less well-known texts, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners* (originally serialised in the French Resistance newspaper*, Combat*, in November 1946), Camus sets out his view of the political task facing human beings in the wake of the violence, terror and oppression of the Second World War. He writes: 'Hope remains only in the most difficult task of all: to reconsider everything from the ground up, so as to shape a living society inside a dying society. Men must therefore, as individuals, draw up among themselves, within frontiers and across them, a new social contract which will unite them according to more reasonable principles.'[628] This idea resonates strongly with *Lear* and Camus's views on freedom freshly illuminate the play's politics. 'No Shakespeare play speaks more usefully and truly about how to think about defeat', writes Holbrook.[629] Shakespeare reveals to us a world on the brink of total destruction. 'Is this the promised end?' asks Kent, to which Edgar replies, 'Or image of that horror?' (xxiv.259-60), insinuating that history could bring about even crueller scenes of devastation in the future. The question is shocking in its simplicity, but it also invites us to consider the gap that exists between the condition of reality and the potential condition of a future world.

Camus contends: 'It is true that we cannot "escape History," since we are in it up to our necks. But one may propose to fight within History to preserve from History that part of man which is not its proper province.'[630] *Lear* leaves us with the same existential sentiment. While the characters exist in a world where 'All's cheerless, dark, and deadly' (xxiv.285), we are compelled to realise that it need not be that way. Attempts to attribute the catastrophic events to the gods or divine justice, Kent's belief that 'The stars above us govern our conditions' (xvii.34) and Albany's conviction that 'All friends shall taste / The wages of their virtue, and all foes / The cup of their deservings' (xxiv.297-9), are ludicrously inadequate. As we watch the drama unfold, we become less convinced that these individuals are merely products of a given set of historical circumstances, and more aware of the extent to which they choose to shape both themselves and their world. This play, Cavell suggests,

---

[627] As previously noted, existentialist thinkers had diverse political viewpoints. Sartre and Camus disagreed vehemently on the moral justification of violence and killing for revolutionary means. Ronald E. Santoni comprehensively discusses the fierce debate between the two writers and traces what he regards as 'Sartre's seemingly unpredictable and conflicting positions in his trajectory on violence' in *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003). p. 137.

[628] Albert Camus, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder*, trans. Dwight Macdonald (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2007), p. 49.

[629] Peter Holbrook, 'The Left and *King Lear*', *Textual Practice*, 14:2 (2000), p. 344.

[630] *Ibid*., p. 54.

> is a drama not about the given condition in which the soul finds itself (in relation to gods or to earth) but about the soul . . . as the provider of the given, of the conditions under which gods and earth can appear. It is an enactment not of fate but of responsibility, including the responsibility for fate. However this is finally to be put, its reception demands a particular kind of perception.[631]

This play is fascinated by acts of human freedom. The remarkable moment when Cornwall's brave servant says 'Hold your hand, my lord. / . . . better service have I never done you / Than now to bid you hold' (xiv.69-72) testifies to Shakespeare's awareness of such acts as dramatically thrilling. The servant's defence of human dignity and decency is not political in any explicit sense; but it has political implications, because it is a moment when ethics and politics become inseparable. Cornwall's servant, like the other characters who dare to rebel, pays for his assertion of freedom with his life. As a result, we are struck by the sense that somehow, inexplicably, these characters are both agents and victims. The characters seem to find a self-shattering form of authenticity as they assert their freedom. In the end, they are all finally crushed by history. But Shakespeare insists that freedom is not about achievement. Sartre points out that freedom cannot be measured in terms of material success; it cannot be thought of as 'the ability to obtain the ends chosen'.[632] Shakespeare, like Sartre, commends the powerful existential ramifications of assertions of freedom. Acts of freedom are always simultaneously ethical choices. They are declarations about who we are, what we value, whom we love and what we are prepared to risk our lives for. The inherently ethical nature of human freedom makes existence a profoundly serious matter. Of course, our historical and social circumstances have an enormous impact on us as individuals. But this fact does not prevent us from protecting a small kernel of freedom at the heart of being. Camus writes: 'Since these forces are working themselves out and since it is inevitable that they continue to do so, there is no reason why some of us should not take on the job of keeping alive, through the apocalyptic historical vista that stretches before us, a modest thoughtfulness which, without pretending to solve everything, will constantly be prepared to give some human meaning to everyday life.'[633] In Camus's mind, the condemned, the exiled and the injured 'reinvest the world with trust.'[634] For him, the integrity of the concrete individual is the starting point for an alternative mode

[631] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, p. 81.
[632] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 505.
[633] Camus, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*, pp. 54-5.
[634] Christopher C. Robinson, 'Theorizing Politics After Camus', *Human Studies*, 32:1 (2009), p. 3.

of existing alongside others. When Edgar suggests at the end of the play that 'The weight of this sad time we must obey, / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say' (xxiv.319), there is a sense that he is reaching out to the audience, encouraging us to acquire a 'modest thoughtfulness', to borrow Camus's phrase, about how we as individuals relate to the world we exist in.

'Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here' (I.i.182),[635] declares Kent as he is exiled from Lear's court. Like Edgar's final sentiments, this line is imbued with a metatheatrical resonance: the fate of the characters on stage is determined, but freedom exists in *our* world. Refining his point about Shakespeare's treatment of freedom in the play, Cavell continues:

> It is as if in a theater these two worlds [of freedom and determination] are faced off against one another, in their intimacy and their mutual inaccessibility. The audience is free – of the circumstance and passion of the characters, but that freedom cannot reach the arena in which it could become effective. The actors are determined – not because their words and actions are dictated and their future sealed, but because, if the dramatist has really peopled a world, the characters are exercising all the freedom at their command, and specifically failing to. Specifically; not exercising or ceding it once for all. They are, in a word, men and women; and our liabilities in responding to them are nothing other than our liabilities in responding to any person – rejection, brutality, sentimentality, indifference, the relief and the terror in finding courage, the ironies of human wishes.[636]

There is a strange dialectic between the freedom of the audience and the circumscription of the characters on stage. When the action of the play ceases, our freedom is mobilised, argues Cavell: 'Because the actors have stopped, we are freed to act again; but also compelled to. Our hiddenness, our silence, and our placement are now our choices.'[637] Ryan suggests that, although the play interrogates two competing ideologies, 'the old code based on service and the new self-serving realism', it finally encourages us to adopt 'an implicit perspective, whose purchase on our imagination and moral sense is far more powerful.'[638] We can appreciate the full implications of this 'implicit perspective', because it is only we who are able to perceive the concrete synoptic vision of the play; it is an understanding that is denied to the characters. We are placed in a position that enables us to forge an existential politics that accommodates both the

[635] These lines are taken from *The Tragedy of King Lear: A Conflated Text* in *The Norton Shakespeare*. Stanley Well's Oxford edition of the play reads: 'Friendship lives hence, and banishment is here' (i.170).
[636] Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, pp. 88-9.
[637] *Ibid*., p. 114.
[638] Ryan, *Shakespeare*, p. 97.

claims of the personal and the claims of the social realm. The play, as Ryan contends, allows us to see 'the option of being otherwise.'[639] This is the essence of tragedy. Nussbaum notes that 'albeit in a fictive way, tragedies promote concern for someone different from oneself, through the compelling resources of poetry and drama. . . . Tragic fictions promote extension of concern by linking the imagination powerfully to the adventures of the distant life in question.'[640] We are empowered by tragedy, especially Shakespeare's tragedies. As Karl Jaspers insists: 'It is essential that I not only watch and derive "aesthetic" edification from the tragedy, but also participate in it with my innermost self and act out its insight because of its direct importance to me. The whole content is lost if I think myself safe, or if I look upon the tragic as something alien to myself.'[641]

Conclusion

Building on the ideas in my readings of *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus*, this chapter has shown that the political concerns of *King Lear* have an existential intensity. Human politics, Shakespeare's play suggests, are intimately related to the ontological and ethical dimensions of human existence. The self is a 'little world of man' (viii.9), a micropolitical realm not entirely divorced from the strategies and practices of ideology, but still able to find scope for self-modification. Because human beings must engage in ethical negotiations, their relations with others are inevitably vulnerable to tension and conflict. But if individuals can relate to one another in a more empathetic way, then emotional identification and authentic connection are possible: they possess the potential to radically transform oppressive political realities and systems.

[639] *Ibid*., p. 97.
[640] Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 352.
[641] Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore and Karl W. Deutsch (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953), p. 88.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

This thesis has revealed Shakespeare's profound ability to perceive and conceptualise the world in existentialist terms. As explained in Chapter One, it has examined moments of subjective crisis and anguish in Shakespeare's plays not only to reveal the intellectually illuminating reciprocity between Shakespeare's drama and existentialism, but also to develop fresh readings of particular tragic texts. The second chapter of this study uncovered evolving existentialist concerns, ideas and issues in the early modern period. It drew upon a variety of examples from a range of sources to argue that Renaissance thinkers, dramatists, poets and philosophers played a crucial role in the inception of existentialist thought. It argued, moreover, not only that existentialist ideas were beginning to emerge during this time, but also that writers were beginning to formulate a new, distinctive existentialist vocabulary and discourse. Chapter Three explained the methodological approach adopted by this thesis, which entails the treatment of Shakespeare's plays as philosophically responsive texts, rich in existential significance. Shakespeare puts life on stage. Human existence can be at times messy and anguished, at others gloriously full of potential, sometimes even strangely and inexplicably both. In the words of Karl Jaspers, in Shakespeare's plays, 'Human life understands itself in terms of its potentialities and perils, its greatness and nothingness, its human and diabolical strains, its nobleness and meanness, its sheer joy at being alive and its bewildered terror at failure and destruction, its love, dedication, and openness of heart, and then again its hatred, narrowness and blindness.'[642] An existential vitality comes through in the darkest moments of Shakespeare's plays. The special fusion of critical thought and literary form evident in both existentialist literature and

[642] Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore and Karl W. Deutsch (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953), pp. 29-30.

Shakespearean drama sharpens the existential immediacy *and* the philosophical intelligibility of the issues addressed in both kinds of writing. When Shakespeare's characters pose serious and profound questions about being, death, justice, morality, and knowledge, they do so as situated and embodied beings – characters in the process of becoming. Chapters Four, Five and Six explored the special kinds of existential thinking in *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *King Lear*, three plays that are outstanding examples of the depth and breadth of Shakespeare's existential interests. Although I have focused on these plays, I have also, where appropriate, drawn on passages from other plays to bring Shakespeare's existentialism to light more fully. These readings are united by their focus on the theme of existential freedom, something Shakespeare sees as lived, embodied and expressed in human life.

In order to offer a detailed analysis of specific plays, I have obviously had to be selective in my choice of both Shakespeare's texts and existentialist texts. However, my choices have not been arbitrary: rather than mapping existentialism onto the plays, I have been more interested in the germination of different kinds of existentialism within the plays themselves. Once the presence of existentialist thought in particular plays became apparent, I sought to draw on passages from existentialist works – both literary and philosophical texts – that resonate with those plays, so as to engage actively and critically with both bodies of writing. At various points in the study, I have invoked passages from existentialist literature to explain the ideas shared by both more fully, and to show the philosophical rapport that exists between existentialist thinkers and their Renaissance precursor. This dissertation thus endeavoured to examine Shakespearean drama and existentialist philosophy dialectically, revealing in the process points at which Shakespeare advances existentialist thought further than the existentialists themselves.

Of course, there are other works in Shakespeare's canon upon which an existentialist interpretation could shed new light. One of the most important outcomes of this thesis has been an increased awareness of the pervasiveness and centrality of existentialism in Shakespeare's plays and poetry. At every turn, his work seems full of questions about the way we exist as ourselves and as beings in a peopled world. Other tragedies, in particular, especially *Macbeth, Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Timon of Athens, Titus Andronicus* and *Julius Caesar*, would all profit from an existentialist reading. Timon's withdrawal from society and the suicidal intensity of his declaration that 'nothing brings me all things' (*Timon of Athens*, V.ii.73) has an extraordinary existential power. Tormented by his tortured consciousness, Macbeth is a man whose

mind is 'brain-sickly of things' (II.ii.44). His consciousness struggles to posit a fixed self, only to find that within moments that self has morphed into another. It is perhaps no coincidence that Sartre's Roquentin is the sufferer of 'lobster-like thoughts'[643] and Macbeth's mind is famously 'full of scorpions' (III.ii.37). At the nadir of existential despair, Titus laments:

> If there were reason for these miseries,
> Then into limits could I bind my woes.
> When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o'erflow?
> If the winds rage, doth not the sea wax mad,
> Threat'ning the welkin with his big-swoll'n face?
> And wilt thou have a reason for this coil?
> I am the sea. Hark how her sighs doth blow.
> She is the weeping welkin, I the earth.
> Then must my sea be movèd with her sighs,
> Then must my earth with her continual tears
> Become a deluge overflowed and drowned,
> Forwhy my bowels cannot hide her woes,
> But like a drunkard must I vomit them.
>
> (*Titus Andronicus*, III.i.218-30)

In light of some of the ideas explored in this thesis, Titus's outpouring of sorrow and anguish is extremely suggestive. The symbolism of Titus's sea-like self is further evidence of the radical, complex and philosophically advanced nature of Shakespeare's existential thinking. Titus describes the painful, inward experience of drowning in himself. Yet it is at this point, when his self is reduced to an abject state of dissolution, that he is able to feel how his raped and mutilated daughter's 'sighs doth blow' (III.i.224). The passage ends with an image of existential nausea and anguished embodiment as Titus spews up the pain of Lavinia's afflictions and his own. His son, Lucius, remarks: 'Ah, that this sight should make so deep a wound / And yet detested life not shrink thereat− / That ever death should let life bear his name / Where life hath no more interest but to breathe!' (III.i.245-8). Human life – struggling to breathe and stamped with the mark of death – is a painful test of endurance for Lucius. However, there is a persistent implication in the text that hard, worldly experience does not entirely destroy the self, but rather gives individuals reason to live.

These examples from *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, and *Titus Andronicus* testify to the remarkable range of existential concerns that animate Shakespearean tragedy. But, as my quotations from diverse comedies, histories, problem plays and Romances

[643] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 20.

throughout this thesis attest, the tragedies are by no means the only genre that provides further opportunities for bringing Shakespeare and existentialism into dialogue with one another. Throughout this thesis, I have cited the recent work of a number of existentially orientated critics in an attempt to demonstrate the merits of such readings of Shakespeare. Although few invoke existentialism explicitly, many critics, including Mousley, Fernie, Davis, Ryan, Holbrook and Cavell, have in their own ways begun to examine the existential depth and richness of Shakespearean drama. What is unique about this study is that it places Shakespeare and existentialism openly and directly side-by-side. Moreover, unlike studies that have brought existentialism to bear anachronistically on the plays,[644] this thesis has read both bodies of work in conjunction with one another while maintaining an awareness of historical difference. The result of this approach has been a fresh appreciation of the way early modern thinkers and Shakespeare in particular contributed to the development of existentialist thought. It has been beyond the scope of this thesis to historicise existentialism fully,[645] but I hope I have shown that the early modern period was an important part of existentialism's philosophical heritage, and that early modern thinkers made substantial philosophical advances, which would provide the foundations for what would be recognised more formally as the existentialist movement in philosophy.

As well as paying due attention to the historical distance between Shakespeare and existentialism, this thesis has made a bolder implicit claim about the relationship between the existential concerns of Shakespeare's plays and his enduring popularity as a dramatist. It has argued that Shakespeare's enduring, universal appeal has a lot to do with his particular skill in dramatising existential crises. Julia Reinhard Lupton suggests that her study 'attests to the universality of Shakespeare's plays, not as a thesaurus of eternal messages but in their capacity to establish real connections with the successive worlds shared and sustained by actors and audiences over time.'[646] In so much as I have

[644] I refer here to some of the studies examined in the opening chapter, including Asloob Ahmad Ansari, *The Existential Dramaturgy of William Shakespeare: Character Created Through Crisis* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010); Jagannath Chakrevorty, *King Lear: Shakespeare's Existentialist Hero* (Calcutta: Avantgarde Press, 1990); and Michael G. Bielmeier, *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard and Existential Tragedy* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000). All these studies pay little if any attention to the historical difference between early modern drama and twentieth century philosophy and often treat Shakespeare as though he were fully aware of existentialist theory.

[645] Contrary to those who argue that existentialism quickly arose in post-war France and then quickly diminished once other lines of philosophical enquiry had been established, I believe that the philosophy has a long and densely complicated history. It has been shaped by many different kinds of literary and philosophical thinkers.

[646] Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 18.

shown that there is a real philosophical reciprocity between Shakespeare and existentialism, with the former having a tremendous influence on the latter, this thesis corroborates the conclusion of Lupton's study. The journals, diaries and letters of Sartre and Beauvoir show that they immersed themselves in Shakespeare's work, often reading plays for several hours a day, while writing and formulating their own existentialist theories. It is therefore not altogether implausible to suggest that key ideas, incidents and passages from Shakespeare's work informed – either consciously or unconsciously – their philosophies. This thesis has also highlighted the existentially engaged nature of these philosophers' appropriation of Shakespeare. Existentialists from Kierkegaard to Camus have been drawn to the powerful, revelatory energy of Shakespeare's drama; they have found that the affective impact of the plays reveals the subjective and personal nature of our aesthetic encounter with Shakespeare. The passion Shakespeare's plays arouse in us as human beings, claim existentialists, is politically valuable. They make a strong case for making our existential engagement in literature central to the practice of criticism.

Part of the aim of this thesis has been to dispel the popular myth that existentialism espouses an absurdist and nihilistic view of the world and human existence. On the contrary, existentialists insist that individuals must not abandon themselves to despair because the world is inherently meaningless and futile, for that is what makes a meaningful human life possible. Instead, this fact makes human life possible. As Christopher C. Robinson succinctly puts it: 'Absurdity is expressed as a starting point and not a terminus.'[647] In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir writes: 'Men do not like to feel themselves in danger. Yet, it is because there are real dangers, real failures and real earthly damnation that words like victory, wisdom, or joy have meaning. Nothing is decided in advance, and it is because man has something to lose and because he can lose that he can also win.'[648] A further aim of this thesis has been to offer a new view of existential subjectivity. It has revealed the existential self not as splendidly isolated and autonomous, but as fully immersed and implicated in history. Moreover, it has reappraised and underscored existentialism's emphasis on the ethical relationship between self and other. Reviving these often overlooked aspects of existentialism has been an important objective of this study, because doing so has provided a stronger and fuller sense of existentialism's view of the human subject. Despite Western philosophy's widespread tendency over the last forty years to

[647] Christopher C. Robinson, 'Theorizing Politics After Camus', *Human Studies*, 32:1 (2009), p. 8.
[648] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), p. 34.

disparage any philosophical enquiry that centres on the idea of 'the subject', existentialism has had and continues to have an important part to play in the philosophical rehabilitation of the subject. Take, for instance, the existentialist assertion that it is impossible to tackle real politic problems without dealing first with the ontological and ethical issues that underpin those problems. This simple yet potent argument continues to exert force on current political philosophy. In *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, Slavoj Žižek claims that 'a spectre is haunting Western Academia . . . the spectre of the Cartesian subject.'[649] He reasons that the idea of an authentic political project that aims to ameliorate existing political conditions demands a robust understanding of the human subject. Žižek tells us that his intention 'is not to return to the *cogito* in the guise in which this notion has dominated thought (the self-transparent thinking subject), but to bring to light its forgotten obverse, the excessive unacknowledged kernel of the *cogito*, which is far from the pacifying image of the transparent self.'[650] Žižek's study has existentialist roots and shows some of the ways in which existentialism paved the way for other thinkers and philosophical projects. Existentialism is not a dead philosophy of the past; it continues to inform both literature and criticism as well as theory and political thought.

This thesis has investigated some of the ontological, ethical and political concerns in Shakespeare's drama from an explicitly existentialist perspective. The primary purpose of this investigation has been to provide a fresh account of the process of subjectivity in Shakespearean tragedy. In *Hamlet*, we saw that Shakespeare is profoundly interested in fundamental questions about the nature of being. Through Hamlet's probing reflections, Shakespeare interrogates the internal contradictions, ambiguities, and tensions of human consciousness. In *Coriolanus*, we saw the emergence of an existentialist ethics grounded in the value of mutual recognition and a deep understanding of the individual's obligations to others. By showing his audience a form of authenticity linked not to individual self-assertion but to a respect for and recognition of others, Shakespeare builds on the notion of the self as a fluid, unfixed and vulnerable entity. Self-revelation and the revelation of others are the sides of the same coin in Shakespearean drama. This linking of ethics and subjectivity makes possible an existentially powerful understanding of human politics. The politics of Shakespeare's plays demands much more from the audience than placing them in the context of early modern political theory. They allow us to see the possibility of

[649] Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 1.
[650] *Ibid*., p. 2.

transfiguring our own political sphere. As David Ruiter suggests: 'Individual identity is more complex than the "is" and "was" of existence. It entails the hope of what "could be" and even the wish to live up to what we "should be."'[651] This chimes with the way existentialism encourages a more considered and active engagement with the world. Nathan Oaklander writes: 'What existentialists say about the structure of existence is existentially relevant only if we choose to see it in relation to our own life, incorporate it into our life, and become involved in an intensely personal act of self-transformation as a consequence of it.'[652] In the spirit of existentialism, Shakespeare's plays provide us with the hope of transforming our selves and our world for the better.

Word Count: 845897

[651] David Ruiter, 'Harry's (In)human Face', in *Spiritual Shakespeares*, ed. Ewan Fernie (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 51.
[652] Nathan Oaklander, *Existentialist Philosophy: An Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 9.

Bibliography

Primary Renaissance Sources

Abbadie, Jacques, *The Art of Knowing Oneself: or, An Enquiry into the Sources of Morality* (Oxford: Leonard Lichfield, 1695).

Abercromby, David, *A Moral Discourse of the Power of Interest* (London: Printed by Tho. Hodgkin, 1690).

Bacon, Francis, *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

Calamy, Edmund, *The Monster of Sinful Self-Seeking; Anatomized., Together with A Description of the Heavenly and Blessed Selfe-Seeking* (London: Printed by F.G, 1654).

Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (London: S.C.M. Press 1960).

Crowley, Robert, *The Selected Works of Robert Crowley*, ed. J. M. Cowper (London: 1872).

Dyke, Daniell, *The Mystery Of Selfe-Deceiving. Or A Discovrse and Discouery of the Deceitfullnesse of Mans Heart* (London: Printed by Edward Griffin, 1614).

Donne, John, *The Complete Poems of John Donne: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire, Religion Poems, Wedding Celebrations, Verse Epistles to Patronesses, Commemorations and Anniversaries*, ed. Robin Robbins (Harlow: Longman, 2010).

----------, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975).

Erasmus, Desiderius, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).

Goodwin, George, *Automachia, or The Self-Conflict of a Christian*, trans. Josuah Sylvester (London: Printed by Melch Bradwood for Edward Blovnt, 1607).

Harrison, William, 'A Historicall description of the Iland of Britaine, with a briefe rehersall of the nature and qualities of the people of England, and such commodities as are to be found in the same', in *The First and Second Volumes of Chronicles*, ed. Raphael Holinshed and William Harrison (London: Printed by Henry Denham, 1587).

Jedin, Hubert (ed.), *Contarini und Camaldoli* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 1953).

Jonson, Ben, *Discoveries 1641; Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden 1619* (London: Barnes & Noble, 1966).

Lesly, John, *An Epithrene: or Voice of Weeping: Bewailing The want of Weeping. A Meditation* (London: Printed by A. M. for Humphrey Robinson, 1631).

Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1999).

Montaigne, Michel de, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003).

Mirandola, Giovanni Pico della, *On the Dignity of Man, On Being and the One and Heptaplus*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis et al. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).

Raleigh, Walter, *Sceptick, or Speculations. And Observations of the Magnificency and Opulency of Cities. His Seat of Government. And Letters to the Kings Majestie,*

and others of Qualitie. Also his Demeanor before his Execution (London: Printed by W. Bentley, 1651).
Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).
----------, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Arden Shakespeare, third series (London: Thomson Learning, 2006).
----------, *The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, ed. R. B. Parker, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
----------, *The History of King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
----------, *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008).
Sidney, Philip, *A Defence of Poetry*, ed. J. A. Van Dorsten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).
Spenser, Edmund, *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).
Spira, Francesco, *Spira Respirans: Or, The Way to the Kingdom of Heaven by the Gates of Hell; In an Extraordinary Example* (London: T. Stowe, 1695).
Stow, John, *A Survey of London: Written in the Year 1598*, ed. Henry Morley (Stroud: Sutton, 1994).
Webster, John, *The Works of John Webster*, ed. David Gunby, David Carnegie and MacDonald P. Jackson, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Existentialist Texts

Beauvoir, Simone de, *The Blood of Others*, trans. Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse (London: Penguin, 1964).
----------, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976).
----------, *Letters to Sartre*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare (London: Radius, 1991).
----------, *The Prime of Life*, trans. Peter Green (London: Penguin, 1965).
----------, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1944).
----------, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1997).
---------- (ed.), *Witness to my Life: The letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir 1926-1939*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).
Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Eastford: Martino Publishing, 2010).
Camus, Albert, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).
----------, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin, 2005).
----------, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners: An Ethic Superior to Murder*, trans. Dwight Macdonald (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2007).
----------, *The Outsider*, trans. Joseph Laredo (London: Penguin, 2000).
----------, *The Rebel*, trans. Anthony Bower (London: Penguin, 2000).
----------, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
----------, *Selected Essays and Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Philip Thody (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, *Notes from the Underground and The Double*, trans. Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin, 2009).

Gide, André, *The Journals of André Gide*, 4 vols (London: Secker and Warberg, 1947-51).
Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008).
----------, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Taylor and Francis, 1978).
Jaspers, Karl, *Philosophy*, trans. E. B. Ashton, vol. 2 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).
----------, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard F. Grabau (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971).
----------, *Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore and Karl W. Deutsch (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953).
Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
----------, *The Essential Kierkegaard*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
----------, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 2005).
----------, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).
----------, *The Point of View*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).
----------, *The Present Age; and, Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York and London: Harper and Row, 1962).
----------, *Repetition*, ed. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
----------, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1989).
Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
----------, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
----------, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1992).
----------, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, trans. Graham Parkes (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
----------, 'Beyond Bourgeois Theatre', *The Tulane Drama Review*, 5:3 (1961), 3-11.
----------, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1980).
----------, *The Family Idiot: Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*, trans. Carol Cosman, 4 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
----------, *Kean; or, Disorder and Genius*, trans. Kitty Black (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1954).
----------, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2000).
----------, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Lionel Abel (New York: Vintage, 1989).
----------, *A Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992).
----------, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Random House, 1968).

----------, *Truth and Existence*, trans. Adrian van den Hoven, ed. Ronald Aronson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).
----------, *Witness to my Life: The Letters of Jean-Paul Sartre to Simone de Beauvoir 1926-1939*, trans. Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee, ed. Simone de Beauvoir (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).
----------, *What is Literature?* trans. Bernard Frechtman (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).
Schelling, F. W. J., *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)*, trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978).

Secondary Sources

Abbagnano, Nicola, *Critical Existentialism*, trans. Nino Langiulli (New York: Anchor Books, 1969).
Adelman, Janet, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
Adorno, Theodor W., *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
----------, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Rovert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
----------, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1992).
Anderson, Amanda, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
Andretta, Richard A., 'Is Iago an Atheistic Existentialist?', *Arab Journal for the Humanities*, 58 (1997), 360-81.
Ansari, Asloob Ahmad, *The Existential Dramaturgy of William Shakespeare: Character Created Through Crisis* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010).
Armstrong, Philip, *Shakespeare's Visual Regime: Tragedy, Psychoanalysis and the Gaze* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000).
Baker, James V., 'An Existential Examination of *King Lear*', *College English*, 23:7 (1962), 546-550.
Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act*, trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).
Barbour, Reid, *Literature and Religious Culture in Seventeenth Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
Barker, Francis, *The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).
----------, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London: Methuen, 1989).
Barnes, Hazel E., 'Walter Kaufmann's New Piety', *Chicago Review*, 13:3 (1959), 87-101.
Barrett, William, *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (Westport: Greenwood, 1958).
Bate, Jonathan, 'Shakespeare's Foolosophy', in *Shakespeare Performed: Essays in Honor of R. A Foakes,* ed. Grace Ioppolo (London: Associated University Presses, 2000), pp. 17-32.
Bauer, George Howard, *Sartre and the Artist* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

Bauer, Nancy, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).
Belsey, Catherine, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (Methuen: London, 1985).
Bennett, William E., 'Shakespeare's Iago: The Kierkegaardian Aesthete', *Upstart Crow*, 5 (1984), 156-9.
Berman, Marshall, *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society* (London and New York: Verso, 1970).
Bernd, Magnus, *Nietzsche's Case: Philosophy as/and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
Berry, Ralph, '"To say one": An Essay on *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 28 (1975), 107-15.
Bevington, David, *Shakespeare's Ideas: More Things in Heaven and Earth* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).
Bielmeier, Michael G., *Shakespeare, Kierkegaard and Existential Tragedy* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).
Birenhaum, Harvey, 'Consciousness and Responsibility in *Macbeth*', *Mosaic,* 15:2 (1982), 17-32.
Bloom, Allan, *Shakespeare on Love and Friendship* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).
Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
----------, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).
----------, *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (London: Papermac, 1995).
Boyer, Eric R., '*Hamlet* and Absurd Freedom: *The Myth of Sisyphus* as Commentary on Shakespeare's Creation', *Ball State University Forum,* 16:3 (1975), 54-66.
Bradley, A. C., 'Character and the Imaginative Appeal of Tragedy in *Coriolanus'*, in *Coriolanus: A Casebook*, ed. B. A. Brockman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 53-72.
----------, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1992).
Bristol, Michael D. (ed.), *Shakespeare and Moral Agency* (London: Continuum, 2010).
Bruster, Douglas, *To Be or Not to Be* (London: Continuum, 2007).
Burckhardt, Jacob, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Penguin, 1990).
Burke, Kenneth, *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, ed. Scott L. Newstok (West Lafayette: Palor Press, 2007).
----------, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).
Caferro, William, *Contesting the Renaissance* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
Calderwood, James L., *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
Cassirer, Ernst, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).
Cavell, Stanley, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
Cefalu, Paul, *Revisionist Shakespeare: Transitional Ideologies in Texts and Contexts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2004).
Chakrevorty, Jagannath, *King Lear: Shakespeare's Existentialist Hero* (Calcutta: Avantgarde Press, 1990).

Charnes, Linda, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).
Cheung, King-Kok, 'Shakespeare and Kierkegaard: Dread in *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35:4 (1984), 430-9.
Clay, Charlotte N., *The Role of Anxiety in English Tragedy: 1580-1642* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1974).
Coleman, Patrick, Jayne Lewis, and Jill Kowalik (eds), *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
Collmer, Robert G., 'An Existentialist Approach to *Macbeth*', *Person*, 44 (1960), 484-91.
Cooper, David E., *Existentialism: A Reconstruction*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).
Cooper, John (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
Cox, John D., *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007).
Craig, Leon Harold, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001).
Crystal, David, and Ben Crystal, *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* (London: Penguin, 2002).
Cheung, King-Kok, 'Shakespeare and Kierkegaard: "Dread" in *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 35:4 (1984), pp. 430-9.
Daigle, Christine (ed.), *Existentialist Thinkers and Ethics* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).
Davies, Stevie, *Renaissance Views of Man* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978).
Davis, Philip, *Shakespeare Thinking* (London: Continuum, 2007).
----------, *Sudden Shakespeare: The Shaping of Shakespeare's Creative Thought* (London: Athlone, 1996).
Derrida, Jacques, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).
----------, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority' in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Grey Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 3-67.
----------, *The Gift of Death*, trans. D. Wills (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).
----------, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
Detmer, David, *Freedom as a Value* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986).
Deutscher, Penelope, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
Dollimore, Jonathan, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
----------, *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
----------, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
Dreyfus, Hubert L., and Mark A. Wrathall (eds), *A Companion to Heidegger* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
Eagleton, Terry, *Shakespeare and Society: Critical Studies in Shakespearean Drama* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970).
----------, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).
----------, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
Earnshaw, Steven, *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006).

Edmundson, Mark, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida: A Defence of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
Escolme, Bridget, *Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
Fahmi, Mustapha, *The Purpose of Playing: Self-Interpretation and Ethics in Shakespeare* (Québec: Two Continents, 2008).
Felski, Rita (ed.), *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
Fernie, Ewan, **'**Dollimore's Challenge', *Shakespeare Studies*, 35 (2007), 133-57.
----------, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).
---------- (ed.), *Spiritual Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).
----------, 'Terrible Action: Recent Criticism and Questions of Agency', *Shakespeare*, 2:1 (2006), 95-115.
Ferry, Anne, *The Inward Language: Sonnets of Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare and Donne* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983).
Fineman, Joel, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality: Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990).
----------, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1987).
Frank, Mike, 'Shakespeare's Existential Comedy', in *Caliban*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1992), pp. 142-65.
Fromm, Erich, *Marx's Concept of Man*, trans. T. B. Bottomore (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).
Frye, Northrop, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).
Fuery, Patrick, *The Theory of Absence: Subjectivity, Signification and Desire* (Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1995).
Gadd, Ian, and Alexandra Gillespie (eds), *John Stow and the Making of the English Past* (London: British Library, 2004).
Garber, Marjorie, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon, 2004).
----------, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 2008).
Gillespie, M. A., *Hegel, Heidegger and the Ground of History* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984).
Girard, René, *A Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).
Goddard, Harold C., *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1951).
Goldthorpe, Rhiannon, *Sartre: Literature and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
Gomez, Christine, 'Hamlet: An Early Existential Outsider?', *Hamlet Studies*, 5 (1983), 27-39.
Goodlad, J. S. R., *A Sociology of Popular Drama* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1971).
Grady, Hugh, *The Modernist Shakespeare: Critical Texts in a Material World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
----------, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
Greenblatt, Stephen, 'Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion', in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 504-35.

----------, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).
----------, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
----------, 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory'*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London and New York: Routledge, 1985), pp. 163-87.
----------, *Shakespeare's Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2010).
Grene, Marjorie, *Introduction to Existentialism* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).
Grossman, Marshall (ed.), *Reading Renaissance Ethics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007).
Guggenheim, Michel, and Richard Strawn, 'Gide and Montaigne', *Yale French Studies*, 7 (1951), 107-114.
Guignon, Charles (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
Habermas, Jürgen, 'How to Answer the Ethical Question', in Bettina Bergo, Joseph Cohen and Raphael Zagury-Orly (eds), *Judeities: Questions for Jacques Derrida* (London: Eurospan, 2007), pp. 142-54.
Hanson, Elizabeth, *Discovering the Subject in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
Hartle, Ann, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
Hawkes, Terence, *Shakespeare and the Reason: A Study of the Tragedies and the Problem Plays* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).
Hawley, William M., '*A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Relating Ethics to Mutuality', *The European Legacy*, 15:2 (2010), 159-69.
Hazlitt, William, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (Boston: Wells and Lily, 1818).
----------, *Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth Delivered at the Surrey Institution* (London: Stodart and Steuart, 1820).
Heller, Agnes, *Renaissance Man*, trans. Richard E. Allen (London, Henley and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
----------, *The Time is out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002).
Hennedy, John F., 'Macduff's Dilemma: Anticipation of Existentialist Ethics in *Macbeth*', *Upstart Crow*, 18 (1998), 110-17.
Heter, T. Storm, 'Authenticity and Others: Sartre's Ethics of Recognition', *Sartre Studies International*, 12:2 (2006), 17-42.
Hill, R. F., '*Coriolanus*: Violentest Contrariety', *Essays and Studies*, 17 (1964), 12-23.
Holbrook, Peter, 'The Left and King Lear', *Textual Practice*, 14:2 (2000), 343-62.
----------, *Shakespeare's Individualism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
Holm, Isak Winkel, 'Monstrous Aesthetics: Literature and Philosophy in Søren Kierkegaard', *Nineteenth Century Prose,* 32:1 (2005), 52-74.
Horowitz, David, *Shakespeare and Existentialism* (London: Tavistock, 1965).
Howells, Christina, 'Conclusion: Sartre and the Deconstruction of the Subject', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*, ed. Christina Howells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 318-52.
Hunt, Maurice, 'Balzac vs. Shakespeare: Making Empathy Personal', *CCTE Studies*, 71 (2006), 1-8.
----------, '"Violent'st" Complementarity: The Double Warriors of *Coriolanus'*, *Studies in English Literature*, 31:2 (1991), 309-25.

Jeanson, Francis, *Sartre and the Problem of Morality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).
Johnson, Paul K., 'Battle Within: Shakespeare's Brain and the Nature of Human Consciousness', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 4:4 (1997), 365-73.
Joughin, John J. (ed.), *Philosophical Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).
Kaufmann, Walter, (trans. and ed.), *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1956).
----------, *Existentialism, Religion and Death* (New York: New American Library, 1976).
----------, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism: An Original Study* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).
Keller, J. Gregory, 'The Moral Thinking of Macbeth', *Philosophy and Literature*, 29:1 (2005), 41-56.
Knapp, James A., *Image Ethics in Shakespeare and Spenser* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2011).
Knight, Everett W., *Literature Considered as Philosophy: The French Example* (London: Routledge and Paul, 1957).
Knottman, Paul A., (ed.), *Philosophers on Shakespeare* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).
Kott, Jan, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1974).
Kruks, Sonia, 'Moving Beyond Sartre: Constraint and Judgment in Beauvoir's "Moral Essays" and *The Mandarins*', in *Beauvoir and Sartre: The Riddle of Influence*, ed. Christine Daigle and Jacob Golomb (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 160-79.
Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd edn (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).
LaCapra, Dominick, *A Preface to Sartre* (London: Methuen, 1979).
Lang, Berel, *The Anatomy of Philosophical Style: Literary Philosophy and the Philosophy of Literature* (Oxford Blackwell, 1990).
Langley, Eric, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
Le Doeuff, Michèle, 'Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism', in *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Elaine Marks (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), pp. 144-153.
Lee, John, *Shakespeare's Hamlet and the Controversies of Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
Levinas, Emmanuel, *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).
Lévy, Bernard-Henri, *The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).
Levy, Eric P., *Hamlet and the Rethinking of Man* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008).
Lottman, Herbert R., *Albert Camus: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1979).
Low, Anthony, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003).
Luce, Louise, 'Alex Dumas's *Kean*: An Adaptation by Jean-Paul Sartre', *Modern Drama*, 28:3 (1985), 355-61.
Lupton, Julia Reinhard, *Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

Macquarrie, John, *Existentialism: An Introduction, Guide and Assessment* (London: Hutchinson, 1972).
Martin, John Jefferies, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
Marks, Elaine (ed.), *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987).
Martin, John, 'Investing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe', *The American Historical Review*, 102:5 (1997), 1309-42.
Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York; Random House, 1973).
Mascuch, Michael, *Origins of the Individualist Self* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997).
Maus, Katharine Eisaman, *Inwardness and Theater in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995).
McAlindon, Tom, 'Cultural Materialism and the Ethics of Reading: Or, the Radicalizing of Jacobean Tragedy', *The Modern Language Review*, 90:4 (1995), 830-46.
McBride, William L. (ed.), *The Development and Meaning of Twentieth-Century Existentialism* (New York and London: Garland, 1997).
---------- (ed.), *Existentialist Literature and Aesthetics* (New York and London: Garland, 1997).
----------, *Sartre's Political Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
McGinn, Colin, *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meanings Behind the Plays* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006).
Montrose, Louis Adrian, 'The Poetics and Politics of Culture', in *New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 15-36.
Mousley, Andy, *Re-Humanising Shakespeare: Literary Humanism, Wisdom and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
Mulhall, Stephen, *Heidegger and Being in Time* (London: Routledge, 1996).
Murdoch, Iris, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1997).
Natoli, Joseph, 'Dimensions of Consciousness in *Hamlet*', *Mosaic*, 19:1 (1986), 91-8.
Nehamas, Alexander, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1985).
Novello, Samantha, *Albert Camus as Political Thinker: Nihilisms and the Politics of Contempt* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
Nuttall, A. D., *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).
---------- 'Shakespeare's Imitation of the World', in *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's Coriolanus,* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1988), pp. 91-8.
Nussbaum, Martha C., *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
Oaklander, Nathan, *Existentialist Philosophy: An Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1992).
Oates, Joyce Carol, 'Essence and Existence in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*', in *Troilus and Cressida: A Casebook*, ed. Priscilla Martin (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976), pp. 167-85.
Palfrey, Simon, 'Macbeth and Kierkegaard', *Shakespeare Survey*, 57 (2004), 96-111.
Paolucci, Anne, 'Shakespeare and the Genius of the Absurd', *Comparative Drama*, 7 (1973), 231-46.
Paster, Gail Kern, Katherine Rowe and Mary Floyd-Wilson (eds), *Reading the Early Modern Passions* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Patterson, Annabel, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
Patterson, Lee, *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison, Wisconsin and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).
Pattison George, 'Art in an Age of Reflection', in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. Alistair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 76-100.
Pemble, John, *Shakespeare Goes to Paris: How the Bard Conquered France* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2005).
Pickus, David, 'Paperback Authenticity: Walter Kaufmann and Existentialism', *Philosophy and Literature*, 34:1 (2010), 17-31.
Poole, William, and Richard Scholar (eds), *Thinking With Shakespeare: Comparative and Interdisciplinary Essays for A. D. Nuttall* (London: Legenda, 2007).
Robinson, Christopher C., 'Theorizing Politics After Camus', *Human Studies*, 32:1 (2009), 1-18.
Roe, John, 'Rhetoric, Style and Poetic Form', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare's Poetry*, ed. Patrick Cheney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 33-53.
Rokem, Freddie, *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
Rosslyn, Felicity, 'Tragedy and Emancipation', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 30:4 (2001), 307-18.
Rudrum, David (ed.), *Literature and Philosophy: A Guide to Contemporary Debates* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
Ruoff, James E., 'Kierkegaard and Shakespeare', *Comparative Literature,* 20:4 (1968), 343-54.
Ryan, Kiernan, '*King Lear*: A Retrospect, 1980-2000', *Shakespeare Survey*, 55 (2002), 1-11.
----------, *Shakespeare*, 3rd edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).
----------, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
----------, 'Shakespeare's Thoughtless Wisdom', Unpublished Paper, May 2010.
Santoni, Ronald E., *Bad Faith, Good Faith and Authenticity in Sartre's Early Philosophy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).
----------, *Sartre on Violence: Curiously Ambivalent* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).
Scheenwind, J. B., 'Montaigne on Moral Philosophy and the Good Life', *The Cambridge Companion to Montaigne*, ed. U. Langer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
Schürmann, R., 'On Constituting Oneself as an Anarchistic Subject', *Praxis International,* 6:3 (1986), 294-310.
Selleck, Nancy, *The Interpersonal Idiom in Shakespeare, Donne and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
Sherman, David, *Sartre and Adorno: The Dialectics of Subjectivity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).
Sherwood, Terry G., *The Self in Early Modern Literature: For the Common Good* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007).
Shuger, Debora Kuller, *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance: Religion, Politics and the Dominant Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
Slights, William W. E., *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Smith, Bruce R., *Phenomenal Shakespeare* (Chicester: Wiley Blackwell, 2010).
Steiner, George, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).
Stevens, Paul, 'Pretending to be Real: Stephen Greenblatt and the Legacy of Popular Existentialism', *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 33: 3 (2002), 491-519.
Stewart, Jon (ed.), *Kierkegaard and the Renaissance and Modern Traditions: Literature, Drama and Music* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).
Stewart, Stanley, '*Lear* in Kierkegaard', in *King Lear: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Kahan (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 278-96.
----------, 'Philosophy's Shakespeare: Breaking the Silence', *Ben Jonson Journal: Literary Contexts in the Age of Elizabeth, James and Charles*, 10 (2003), 139-59.
----------, *Shakespeare and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2010).
----------, 'Was Shakespeare Thinking Philosophy?', *Ben Jonson Journal: Literary Contexts in the Age of Elizabeth, James and Charles*, 15:1 (2008), 123-37.
Stralen, Hans van, *Choices and Conflicts: Essays on Literature and Existentialism* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005).
Symonds, J. A., *Renaissance in Italy: The Revival of Learning* (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1897).
Szabari, Antonia, '"Parler seulement de moy": The Disposition of the Subject in Montaigne's Essay "De l'art de conferer"', *MLN,* 116:5 (2001), 1001-24.
Szondi, Peter, *An Essay on the Tragic*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
Taylor, Charles, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1991).
----------, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
Thiel, Udo, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
Tidd, Ursula, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
Todd, Olivier, *Albert Camus: A Life*, trans. Benjamin Ivry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).
Trilling, Lionel, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972).
Turgenev, Ivan, *Sketches from a Hunter's Album*, trans. Richard Freeborn (London: Penguin, 1990).
Uhlig, Claus, 'Shakespeare and Philosophicalness', *Neohelicon*, 30:2 (2003), 147-62.
Wagner, John A. (ed.), *Voices of Shakespeare's England: Contemporary Accounts of Elizabethan Daily Life* (Oxford: Greenwood, 2010).
Wahl, Jean, *Philosophies of Existence: An Introduction to the Basic Thought of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre*, trans. F. M. Lory (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959).
Weckermann, Hans-Jürgen, '*Coriolanus*: The Failure of the Autonomous Individual', in *Shakespeare*: *Text, Language, Criticism*, ed. Bernhard Fabian and Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador (New York: Olms-Weidmann, 1987), pp. 334-50.
Wehrs, Donald R., 'Moral Physiology, Ethical Prototypes, and the Denaturing of Sense in Shakespearean Tragedy', *College Literature*, 33:1 (2006), 67-92.
Weimann, Robert, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
Weitz, Morris, *Shakespeare, Philosophy, and Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).
Wild, John, *The Challenge of Existentialism* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970).

Williams, Raymond, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana Press, 1983).
Wilson, Richard, *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).
Witmore, Michael, *Shakespearean Metaphysics* (London: Continuum, 2008).
Wrathall, M., and J. Malpas (eds), *Heidegger, Authenticity and Modernity: Essays in Honour of Herbert L. Dreyfus* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2000).
Zalloua, Zahi, 'Roquentin and the Metaphysics of Presence: Philosophy, Literature, Textual Play', *The Comparatist*, 25 (2001), 133-50.
Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000).