Chapter 9

Conclusion

This monograph makes a sustained argument against the anti-humanism to which, under the sway of cultural historicism, Shakespeare studies has been in thrall since the 1980s. It puts forward three principal objections. The first of these is that the anti-humanist concept of the individual is both under-theorised and seemingly oblivious to the facts of modern genetics and neurobiology. The view of individuals as having few innate qualities or characteristics and being almost wholly determined by cultural and ideological forces robs them of agency and strips history of human significance. When individuals are enveloped by social forces which determine their thoughts and actions, we are left not with a history of human beings, but with a history of structures working on and competing with other structures, from which the individual has disappeared.

To the anti-humanist, it does not matter who became the king of England in 1603, or who wrote Measure for Measure in 1603, or who carried out any action in that year; what matters is that these actions were ‘produced’ in a certain place and time under a set of governing structural forces. For all that it matters to a new historicist such as the Jonathan Goldberg of James I and the Politics of Literature, which I analysed in Chapter 2, they might as well have been performed by the same person; what difference does it make when individuals are formed wholly by culture and ideology, and motivated by the same ideas and circumstances? Goldberg’s apparent inability to distinguish between James I and Shakespeare exposes the residues of formalism that new historicism has never been able to abandon fully. In new historicist hands, history becomes a synchronic snapshot of a given culture, each part of which is a synecdoche that secretes the nature of the whole. So despite its avowed intention to view history heterogeneously, in practice new historicism arbitrarily connects the disparate fields of a historical moment by assuming that they are governed by the same monolithic cultural
logic. This is the assumption that allows Stephen Greenblatt to ‘transcode’ social rituals from one sphere of action to another (for example, from the church to the theatre). The failure to account for individuals leads new historicism to create a theoretical and critical black hole of cultural essentialism that swallows individuals and discursive fields and annihilates difference.

My second principal objection to the anti-humanist approach is that it falls prey to a mode of deterministic thinking, whereby the explanatory power of a meta-narrative is given primacy over other explanations. As a result, anti-humanists are prone to become dogmatic and inflexible. In Chapter 3, I argued that although cultural materialism offers a more sophisticated, theoretically developed and properly materialist model of culture and ideology than new historicism, it appears unable to engage with its critics without accusing them of being the ideologues of essentialist humanism and/or universalism, and thus reprehensible apologists for the patriarchal, class-divided status quo. This renders cultural materialism blind both to valid criticisms of its theory, and to recent developments in science that strongly suggest that individuals are not as passive and susceptible to the lures of ideologies, cultures and subcultures as cultural materialists assume.

The third and most important objection concerns the way that anti-humanists read Shakespeare’s plays. Because of their anti-humanism, cultural historicists are disposed to read Shakespeare’s plays diagnostically, as mere products of their place and time which reflect only the ideas of that place and time. This effectively limits Shakespeare’s authorial agency to a set of established positions attributable to other sources in the period. I have argued that this is an inadequate critical method with which to approach a writer as complex and nuanced as Shakespeare, not only because it is so patently reductive, but also because it blinds us to his trenchant insights into the workings of history and ideology in the history plays – into the very issues with which, ironically, cultural historicism itself is concerned. Even more ironically, as I sought to show in Chapter 7, Shakespeare’s own dramatic meditations on history allow a scope for the role of the individual and individual agency in history, which anti-humanist modes of thought find inconceivable. In addition, as Chapter 8 undertook to demonstrate, these plays also display an acute awareness of the importance of ideology for those in power as a means of maintaining control of their subjects and, of particular interest to cultural materialists, an equally shrewd understanding of how ideology can fail in that endeavour.

Since Shakespeare, as I contend in Chapter 6, is a humanist and a political realist, his treatment of history is not constrained by the inflex-
ible determinism that mars cultural historicist commentaries on his history plays, in which he ascribes some decisions and actions to human nature and others to the social milieu. As I argue in Chapter 7, a criticism that proceeds on the assumption that Shakespeare was an exceptionally creative, intelligent and thoughtful individual, who was influenced and informed, but not completely ‘produced’, by the world and time in which he wrote, is better equipped to do justice to the complexity of his drama. This is not to resurrect the idea of the Universal Bard, but simply to treat the plays of an extraordinarily gifted individual with the same respect cultural historicist critics have afforded the work of Michel Foucault. If Foucault, writing in the twentieth century, could have original, provocative insights into the order of things in his time, why could not Shakespeare writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? This monograph makes an argument for the agency of individuals in history and for Shakespeare’s agency as an individual. In doing so, it produces new readings of the history plays that may facilitate readings of other plays, readings that are historically grounded, theoretically informed, attuned to textual nuances, and committed to the notion that individuals can and will think independently. In writing this book, I hope to have made a significant contribution to the movement to free Shakespeare studies from the shackles of anti-humanism.