Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION

THE family is so basic a human institution that in almost any play or group of plays it has an important role. Shakespeare's history plays are primarily concerned with the public life of his nation, the terrible hundred years of civil strife and wars against the French that haunted the imagination of Elizabethan England and that earlier time of crisis in the reign of King John. His plays express the deepest and most widespread feelings of his countrymen. To them political matters were not of merely theoretical concern; they dreaded the return of a chaos that they knew would involve them and their families in untold suffering. In our age we have trouble responding to or even understanding the *eros* that Elizabethans felt toward their autocratic queen. The principles of order and succession are abstractions, but in the Elizabethans they evoked the most intensely personal feeling.

No man could avoid showing the family in history plays since kings and princes are necessarily fathers and sons, husbands and brothers. But Shakespeare's special contribution is to make the language and episodes of family life relevant to the political themes of

the plays. In a kind of drama shaped by Tudor political ideas, Shakespeare makes the family a microcosm of the state and an echo of its values. Marriage and the relationship of father and son, brother and brother, the noble and his house—these are the stuff of a personal drama. He relies on them to give immediacy to his panoramic views of the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms. Ready to his hand is a tradition of seeing in the family a symbol of the state, part of the Elizabethan habit of finding correspondences among all levels of existence. Hence there are traces of the family used similarly in other history plays of the period as well as in the chronicles, moral tracts, and even official pronouncements like the Homilies. But Shakespeare goes beyond his fellows by turning this use of the family into a formal principle, an important part of the whole structure of the plays.

His most conventional use of the family is in the images of family life that permeate the language of the plays. For all the growth of his poetic technique during the 1590s, in *Henry V* he is still inclined to make his references to family relationships abstract and rhetorical. The power of such utterances can be great. Henry V evokes the brutality of war with remarkable clarity when he warns the citizens of Harfleur of the violence facing them, the rape of their daughters and the murder of their infants and aged fathers. But neither the abstract content nor the formal syntax of such passages has changed greatly since Bedford's grotesque description in *1 Henry VI* of the chaos to follow Henry V's death:

When at their mothers' moist eyes babes shall suck,
Our isle be made a nourish of salt tears,
And none but women left to wail the dead.
(I.i.49-51)

All the plays are full of generalized references to the doctrine of moral inheritance, to loyalty and order in the family, and to the impact of political order and disorder on the family. At their best these can be striking, and their frequency gives them cumulative effect over the whole span of history plays. Most important, they provide an undercurrent that complements more extensive uses of the family.

Closely related to this poetic technique is the emblematic episode or mirror-scene.[1] In it one of the stock images, such as a father and son's estrangement through political strife, is given fuller dramatic expression in a brief action more or less detachable from the plot of the play. These scenes are simplest and most obvious in the early plays. Henry VI looks on at the battle of Towton in *3 Henry VI* while a father discovers that he has killed his son and a son that he has killed his father. Here a weak monarch watches helplessly as the horrors of civil disorder pass from public to private life. Though the first tetralogy is full of such effects, Shakespeare may have grown tired of their comparative simplicity. In *Richard II* he dissipates the emblematic significance of York's denunciation of his treacherous son by tinging the scenes with savage comedy.

In the later plays such episodes are more a part of their dramatic context and less marked by a heightened, artificial style. Much less formal than the emble-

matic scenes of the Henry VI plays are those in *1 Henry IV* in which the domestic happiness of the conspirators, especially Hotspur and his wife, provides ironic contrast with the national upheaval they are bringing about. The effect is all the richer for being less conspicuous, more appropriate to the overall tone and dramatic structure.

But these uses of the family are essentially figurative; they are not part of the central dramatic action as it expresses the characters and fates of the main agents in the historical narrative. Acting or refusing to act, men produce historical events, and the character that governs their political behavior reveals itself as well in their domestic lives. One frequent pattern of these plays is that the man and the statesman overlap, that virtues in the one are virtues in the other. Henry VI fails as king and husband; Henry V is victorious at Agincourt and in wooing Katherine.

If that kind of parallel defines the pattern of the Henry VI plays, the dramatic technique is more complicated from *Richard II* on. The principle of ethical similarity still holds, but Shakespeare turns part of his attention to other relationships between public and private life. As he comes to focus on men striving and failing or succeeding in their effort to be good kings, he explores the special pressure that being a king puts on the man. As a result the two realms—public and domestic—are no longer separate. In growing up and coming to terms with his father, Hal learns to be a king, and his personal development is made especially difficult by his position as heir apparent and by his father's questionable title.

Richard III culminates Shakespeare's first experiments with the history play. The three Henry VI plays are in a sense stepping-stones toward its achievement, though that should not obscure their independent merit. The chronicles gave Shakespeare a large amount of varied material, and the orthodox view of history gave him a theme and a dramatic pattern. In the scarcity of firm knowledge about the theater of the 1580s and 1590s, we can only guess how much he learned from other men; but it is apparent that two strands in dramatic tradition offered some of the techniques that he needed: the largely native morality play and the imported Senecan tragedy. Just as Sackville and Norton drew on them for *Gorboduc*, so Shakespeare with his immensely larger genius used them in dramatizing the England of the civil wars.

There is some plausibility in reducing the plays to one formula or the other.[2] But if one argues, for example, that the heroine of *1 Henry VI* is Respublica torn between the virtues led by Talbot and the vices led by Joan, he has let a convenient metaphor get out of control. Although both *Respublica* and *1 Henry VI* deal with England's welfare, they are not very similar in technique. In the same way one oversimplifies Richard III's character in seeing him as Thyestes or Nero, an ordinary villain-king overcome by nemesis. Shakespeare creates a new, synthetic form even while he draws on elements of the older traditions. In *Richard III* the form reaches maturity.

Although the first tetralogy concentrates on public affairs, these two traditions provide a place for the family as a commentary on the political themes. The theme

of inheritance is a natural part of Shakespeare's chosen subject, since the succession of the monarchy was the main element of fifteenth-century history in which the Elizabethans saw lessons for their own time. Also central to the history were the great noble houses with their demands for loyalty often conflicting with duty to the king. But even the elements of family life that seem most detached from great public events have an inner connection with them according to the doctrine of correspondences. Elizabethan audiences would notice that Henry VI's wife usurps the mastery in their marriage just as the Duke of York usurps the throne.

Still there are many other correspondences that can and do provide similar parallels; another reason accounts for the special prominence of the family. Politics was a matter of great concern to every man when Spain and the Roman Catholic church threatened England's life and the succession to the throne was in doubt, but even so politics was a mysterious and distant subject to much of Shakespeare's audience in the popular theater. Issues of state came alive for them when he showed their impact on the family. If ten thousand spectators wept to see Talbot die, it must have been in part because they could imagine how a father and son dying together must feel.[3] When Richard III scoffed at his mother's blessing, they were amused and shocked, but they were not puzzled.

Therefore the primary function of the family in these plays is analogical. It shows the value of political order and the consequences of its perversion. There is a line of characters from Joan of Arc through Jack Cade to Richard III, anarchic figures who attack both the state

and the family. These three repudiate their parents in one way or another, and both Joan and Richard earn a parental curse. In the same plays an exhibition of love and trust in the family contrasts ironically with the political disorder and typifies the nationwide harmony to be achieved under Henry Tudor. The filial piety of the younger Talbot, Warwick, and Richmond; Alexander Iden's contentment with his idyllic inheritance; the Duchess of York's noble grief at her family's destruction—all these evoke the same values as Richmond's unifying marriage.

Mirror-scenes are useful in bringing to bear the full symbolic weight of the family. In the Henry VI plays they are more or less peripheral, reinforcing themes established elsewhere; but in *Richard III* the episodes involving the wailing women are essential to show the gradually increasing power working against Richard. At first the women seem as ineffectual as Henry VI on the battlefield of Towton, but the mysterious figure Queen Margaret brings the power to curse. Also, as the Duchess of York comes to dominate Anne and Elizabeth, her strength of character helps them to find a moral stance in opposition to Richard. These three women reassert the values of love and family loyalty. They express the moral order of which Richmond is the physical power. These scenes are less simply emblematic than those in the Henry VI plays, more a part of the dramatic whole.

Thus Shakespeare finds an important place for the family in this group of political plays. But since its function is mainly thematic, the tendency is toward abstraction and generalization. The nuances of a per-

sonal relationship are largely irrelevant to the broad moral issues that he is dramatizing. Hence he cultivates a style of lofty impressiveness at the cost of immediacy. By the time of *Richard III*, after a period of experimentation, he has chastened the ritual parts of his poetry to a neo-Senecanism that suits these purposes exactly, a style somewhat like those in Samuel Daniel's *Cleopatra* and Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*, though richer and more exuberant than either.

Something is lost to the family by associating it with this severe style, a directness that makes Joan's father come to life in a few lines of *1 Henry VI*. More and more as the tetralogy goes on, this free, realistic idiom is reserved for the villains like Joan, Jack Cade, and Richard III. Their earthy cynicism cuts across the decorum of language in a way that suggests their anarchy even while it gives them a remarkable vitality in evil. Our aesthetic enjoyment of them should not hide the fact that their anarchy is self-destructive. Although they are worthy antagonists of the nemesis that governs these plays, they are finally destroyed. And as nemesis comes more and more to be equated with Providence, they take their place as a part of the overall pattern.

Richard III is a brilliant achievement in its own terms, but it is an idea-centered play. Despite the great vitality of its protagonist, the building-blocks of the play are concepts rather than characters. The play, indeed the whole tetralogy, succeeds because these concepts are woven into a rich and meaningful pattern, one in which even the striking figure of Richard Crookback has his place. Hereafter Shakespeare's dramatic

art will take a new turn, but no other Elizabethan play excels *Richard III* in its own mode. There is room for a deeper exploration of the family, but Shakespeare must devise a new form for the history play to admit such exploration and adapt it to a political theme. If a character developed as fully as Richard and having his vitality of language were placed in the family, not isolated from it, a whole new range of potentiality would open up.

King John and *Richard II* include some of Shakespeare's experimentation with the history play. In outline *King John* repeats some of the major themes of *Richard III*. It portrays an efficient usurper who loses control of events when his brutality toward the rightful heir to the throne mobilizes opinion against him. But the rigid moral antitheses of *Richard III* have no place in this play. In spite of a first impression of Machiavellian ability, John is no demon but a weak and vacillating man. Also the motives of idealism and commodity are mixed indiscriminately between his friends and enemies. Somewhere in the past is an ideal England, associated with Richard Coeur-de-Lion's glorious rule, but this present land has lost its legitimacy. Power, ability, and title to the throne are hopelessly fragmented, and it takes years of suffering before Englishmen can work out the salvation of their land through a combination of loyalty and practical sense.

Faulconbridge's words give a choric analysis of this political dilemma, and his position is a symbolic analogue of England's plight. Tainted by bastardy, he is thrust into a moral land of shadows in which every ethical choice is ambiguous. To claim his legal inheri-

tance is to rely on a quirk of the law while denying his real self. To claim his moral inheritance from Richard I is to admit his bastardy, hurt his mother's reputation, and abandon himself to the perils of dependence on courtly favor. Still he chooses easily enough, and Shakespeare makes clear the rightness of his choice and his position in the play as moral commentator. He is the main embodiment of the shrewdness and patriotic fidelity that preserve England for its legitimate king, John's son.

Richard II is another study of a weakly evil king, and it starts the chain of guilt that ends only with Richmond's victory in *Richard III*. Still the pattern of guilt and disorder is overshadowed by interest in Richard's character as he reacts to adversity. Of special importance for the next three histories is the concern with how Richard's official role affects his understanding of himself. Here Shakespeare takes up with new interest the relationship between the public and private man. It is not true, as romantic critics like Yeats argued, that Richard's vices are only political and that he is a creature too spiritual for the dirty work of governing men. His cruelty as a king manifests itself in part by an attack on his own family, and he shows no signs of genuine personal attachment to anyone, even after he is humbled by grief. But the isolation that he himself has chosen is painful to him, especially since it forces him to confront the truth of his fall without any support. His tragedy is that his failure to live up to his royal office destroys him as a man.

Although the family has a part in both plays, in neither is its significance unequivocal. The pathos of

Constance and Arthur or of Gaunt's regret for his son's banishment is in the vein of the first tetralogy, but they are isolated events in their plays, not part of a coherent pattern that mobilizes spiritual force against enemies of the family and political order. In these two plays there is something nostalgic and unreal about the values of the family, and so a character like York is slightly absurd in his rigid probity. When he defends Bolingbroke's inheritance before Richard and especially when he offers his son's life out of loyalty to Bolingbroke, now the new king, York's virtue is anachronistic. Its practical use is doubtful since it has no consequences in the action. In both plays the references to the family and episodes of family life often have a new poetic richness and power, but they are not integral to the dramatic structure. The antithesis of order and chaos, love and ambition, no longer gives shape to the action and symbolic meaning to the family.

In the Henry IV plays Shakespeare finds a pattern that allows him to relate the family to the state without reverting to the simpler parallels of the first tetralogy. All the themes from Tudor orthodoxy are still there. Shakespeare constantly implies the need for order and for the extension of personal virtues like love and loyalty to the public realm. But in turning to a new theme, the education of a prince, he adapts a popular dramatic form built on the parable of the Prodigal Son. Christ's parable uses family life as a symbol of man's relationship to God, and so it is easily adapted to the multiple levels of Shakespeare's concern. Hal is a son who breaks away from his father but finally returns to take his place in the family. At the same time he is a prince

who gains insight into his land by escaping the court and seeing the taverns and back roads. This escape involves the peril of weakening his position as heir to the throne, but on his return Hal takes up his heritage and even brings new strength to it. In his reconciliation with his father the king, he reaffirms his commitment to the principle of order. After his coronation he promises the man who has dared to judge even him with justice, "You shall be as a father to my youth" (*2 Henry IV*, V.ii.118).

Of all the characters in the two Henry IV plays, only Hal chooses the values of the family with complete integrity and comprehension of the issues involved. Some of the others offer verbal tribute, using the formal language of the first tetralogy, but their actions belie their commitment. Thus the Percies demonstrate their unworthiness for rule by their disloyalty to one another. Only Hotspur is unwavering in his fidelity to the common cause, and he keeps his integrity by a thorough blindness to his partners' motives. His simple chivalric code, both admirable and slightly comic, is all that holds the Percy rebellion together. When his father betrays him and lets him take the field at Shrewsbury against hopeless odds, his death ends the Percies' effective power. Hal, reconciled with Henry IV, kills Hotspur in a single combat that acts out their duel for moral supremacy.

Opposite Hotspur, Falstaff has the clown's prerogative of parodying everything in the serious plot, including the family themes. He is the old generation masquerading as youth, and he pretends to be a father to Hal who must pass on to him the code of moral inheri-

tance. The inheritance he offers is the code of Puritan highwaymen. To the extent that Falstaff is joking, Hal can play his game; but there is a serious claim to influence and favor in the knight's manner that Hal must finally reject. Liberal education though his friendship is, Falstaff is also a tempter toward anarchy. Hal's ironic detachment allows him to enjoy Falstaff without succumbing to his influence. The fat knight is a father to Hal's youthful spirits, but not to his moral commitments.

Central to Hal's growth toward fitness for the monarchy are the two confrontations with his father—especially the second, when the old king is dying. Here Shakespeare dramatizes Hal's attainment of personal maturity and with it his acceptance of his public role. As Henry talks with his son, his clarity of vision is dimmed by age, sickness, and the pressure of maintaining himself on a doubtful throne; but his selfless concern with England's future shows him at his best. For all his guilt, Henry has both shrewdness and virtue for his son to inherit. Hal acts with propriety and affection to calm his father's doubts, but the intensity of his feeling suggests that the estrangement has been real enough. He has sought to escape the court in part because he knows the strain of being in authority. Hence he takes the crown from his father's bed with full consciousness of its burdens. Ironically, Henry completely misunderstands Hal's act, but his misunderstanding leads to the confrontation that clears the air between them. Henry can die in confidence that his son will carry on the Lancastrian heritage. He even hopes that

Hal has escaped the guilt of Richard's deposition and death.

The two Henry IV plays have a unity more like the *Faerie Queene* than the *Aeneid*. They form coherent patterns through a network of themes that weave in and out of a complex narrative, one that lacks even a protagonist as dominant as either of the two Richards. Hal's education occupies a central position between the political and comic plots, but it does not monopolize the interest of the plays. And even that theme allows for an extraordinary richness and complexity of development. Shown as it is in the Prodigal Son pattern, it includes psychological, political, and even religious meanings. It is as though Shakespeare turned to the other potentiality of correspondences so as to find multiple levels of meaning in one set of events.

The central concern of the Henry IV plays is still political, but the political issues are seen in a broader and more human way than in the first tetralogy. The abstractions of Tudor orthodoxy are less important than the problem of how a man can live up to his divinely appointed role. Shakespeare has given these doctrines a new depth by showing the human meaning of the great abstractions: order, majesty, patriotism, inherited nobility.

In *Henry V* Shakespeare undertakes to set forth an orderly state under an ideal king and to show that state conquering a mighty rival by the sheer impact of its virtue. Henry V is able to draw England together into a harmony and vigor that the French cannot rival. Such a theme being central, the family is not a primary concern, at least in the full development of the Henry IV

plays. However, Shakespeare uses it as a public symbol, a touchstone by which to test the comparative merit of the English and the French, including their governors. Henry embodies the private virtues as well as the public, and the disorderly squabbles of the French king and the Dauphin illustrate the decay of the French commonweal.

Still *Henry V* is more than a political pageant. Henry himself is not just another Talbot because Shakespeare no longer allows his hero to have a merely public existence. However, it is through comradeship in arms rather than family life that we see most deeply into Henry's personal feelings. Much of his behavior is formal and public; only on the night before Agincourt does he reveal himself with the fullness of Shakespeare's mature craft. Powerful though that scene is and for all the exhilaration of the battle scenes, *Henry V* is a less interesting play than its two historical predecessors. Perhaps one reason is its return to a simpler and more formal way of using the family.

One conclusion should be apparent if this analysis is valid: the family as part of man's personal life is not opposed to what is needed for success in public affairs. It is true that a king must lose the sense of personal contact with others which private men can feel and that Shakespeare finds a deep pathos in this loss. However, the family can serve as an analogy to the state precisely because their ethics are parallel. It is the school of political nobility and skill, and it suffers when the governors of the commonwealth lack virtue. Because it and the state are parts of a larger organism, their healths are interdependent. This doctrine allows

Shakespeare to develop a dramatic technique that modulates between the public and private worlds. His plays can have both scope and unity because he sees a larger unity in the nature to which he holds up the mirror. But the metaphysic of correspondences does not offer a dramatic technique fully developed for his use. His growth as a craftsman during the 1590s is in part an expansion of scope to take in more and more of man's life without losing unity and control. One side of that growth comes through the history plays as he learns to illuminate both the family and the political world by their relation to each other.

[1] For the term and concept see Hereward Price, "Mirror-Scenes in Shakespeare," *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies*, ed. James G. McManaway et al. (Washington, D.C., 1948), pp. 101-13.

[2] On occasion E. M. W. Tillyard and Irving Ribner do nearly that. Comparing *Richard III* with the Henry VI plays, Ribner comments, "England continues as a kind of morality hero torn between good and evil forces" (*The English History Play in the Age of Shakespeare* [Princeton, N.J., 1957], p. 118). To call England or Respublica the heroine of the history plays describes their theme accurately enough, but it also makes certain misleading implications about their dramatic structure.

[3] See Thomas Nashe's apparent allusion to the popularity of this scene in *Pierce Pennilesse*, quoted in *The First Part of King Henry VI*, ed. John Dover Wilson, New Cambridge Edition (Cambridge, Eng., 1952), p. xiv.