Book Review: *Shakespeare's Early History Plays: Politics at Play on the Elizabethan Stage*

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It is always pleasing to read a lively and persuasive argument which invites us to reconsider established and sometimes stale theories about Shakespearean drama, even if that argument ultimately fails to change our minds. Such is the effect of Donald G. Watson's thoughtful and engaging study of the Yorkist cycle of Shakespearean histories. Watson's thesis—that Shakespeare fundamentally is an ironist in his historical composition—is not new; in the 1920s, W.B. Yeats asserted the same point in particular reference to *Henry the Fifth*. Watson, however, is representative of but a few contemporary critics in his suggestion that an ironic point of view and political ambivalence inform the whole Yorkist tetralogy.

Watson's contention, underscored by his suggestion that Shakespeare redefines conventional theories of history in the Tudor era by a deft manipulation of perspective in the Yorkist histories, is inventive and sometimes compelling. However, Watson does not convince us that Shakespeare ever acts as more than an occasional ironist; no ultimately irresistible evidence is offered by which we might reach the conclusion that Shakespeare is substantially dedicated to the erasure of Elizabethan political and religious orthodoxies. Even less are we persuaded that it is Shakespeare's purpose to invest his historical drama with no small measure of ambiguity and an existential point of view hardly characteristic of late sixteenth-century drama or other Shakespearean plays. Watson's analysis advances some interesting theories, to be sure, but we are rather more informed about the author who advances these theories in this book than we are about Will Shakespeare's inten-

ditions in his early histories. Read thus, Watson's book offers us some perhaps unexpected insights; after all, as Oscar Wilde once said, criticism is just another mode of autobiography.

Daniel L. Wright