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Author(s): Graham Holderness

Source: *Critical Survey*, 2014, Vol. 26, No. 3, Special Issue: Radical Shakespeare: In Memory of Terry Hawkes (2014), pp. 47-60

Published by: Berghahn Books

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24712560>

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# 'Thirty Year Ago': The Complex Legacy of *Political Shakespeare*

Graham Holderness

## Abstract

This article was delivered in the plenary session of the Shakespeare Association of America's annual meeting in St Louis, April 2014, alongside papers from Ania Loomba and Jonathan Dollimore, also for the first time published in this volume. The purpose of the panel was to commemorate and celebrate two important critical texts whose anniversaries fell at that time: Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy*, published in 1984, and *Political Shakespeare* (1985), edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, which went into its second edition in 1994. This article discusses the impact and influence of *Political Shakespeare*, to which I was a contributor.

## Political Shakespeare

Both *Radical Tragedy*<sup>1</sup> and *Political Shakespeare*<sup>2</sup> are landmark texts in a history entailing the establishment and development of an innovative critical method, explicitly named as 'cultural materialism'. The story of cultural materialism, usually in tandem or in contrast with new historicism, has often been narrated. A specifically British product arising from the Marxist cultural criticism of Raymond Williams, who contributed an 'Afterword' to *Political Shakespeare*, cultural materialism registered the impact of European critical theory, especially the work of Althusser, Gramsci, and Foucault, and challenged preceding critical orthodoxies, such as new criticism, 'old' historicism, the various formalisms of G. Wilson Knight, L.C.

Critical Survey  
doi: 10.3167/cs.2014.260308

Volume 26, Number 3, 2014: 47–60  
ISSN 0011–1570 (Print), ISSN 1752–2293 (Online)

Knights, and F.R. Leavis. In *Political Shakespeare* cultural materialism linked hands with American new historicism, incorporating work by Stephen Greenblatt and Leonard Tennenhouse; indeed one could argue that there is very little to distinguish the other essays in the first half of *Political Shakespeare* from the work of those same new historicists.

The book was explicitly presented as a manifesto for a new way of understanding Shakespeare, and for a new intensity of radical, socialist, political engagement.

Cultural materialism does not pretend to political neutrality ... On the contrary, it registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class. (2)

Cultural materialism then evolved into either (according to its supporters) a powerful critical methodology that successfully replaced existing models of literary interpretation; or (for its detractors) a tyrannical anti-humanist dogma that came to dominate English departments on both sides of the Atlantic. Either way, cultural materialism seems to have made an undeniable difference to the theory and practice of Shakespeare studies.

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Let me first of all correct some of the distortions that have shaped this history. Here are 'Five Great Myths about *Political Shakespeare*'. First, that *Political Shakespeare* was primarily a work of theory. It was not. Apart from Raymond Williams's 'Afterword', there is no extensive theoretical discourse in the book at all. Citations of the major theoretical influences are actually quite sparse. There is far more referencing of Shakespeare and Renaissance scholarship and criticism than there is of continental theory. This is because in *Political Shakespeare*, theory is already absorbed and implicit. It is not an object of inquiry, but rather facilitative of a new method, which is essentially a theoretically informed critical practice. The book is not encouraging its readers to replace literature with theory, but rather to re-read literature with theory in mind. Cultural materialism, remarks Jonathan Dollimore, was (and is) 'a philosophically informed critical practice'.

Secondly, the book is frequently characterised as a work of anti-humanism. Earlier on this was the main thrust of the polemical critiques of Richard Levin and Graham Bradshaw, and is particularly

emphatic in Neemah Parvini's *Shakespeare and Contemporary Theory*.<sup>3</sup> *Political Shakespeare* is said to have asserted that there is no such thing as human nature; that men and women are entirely a product of their societies. Hence older forms of criticism that assume an immanent human nature were obsolete, and only a Marxist materialism could truly capture the social nature of humanity. Again, this is wrong. The Marxism of *Political Shakespeare* is a Marxist humanism. It affirms only that human beings are socially conditioned, especially by ideology, so that any critical practice must give a corresponding weight to history, society and ideology if it is to understand literature's representations of human behaviour.

Following from this, it is argued that the Marxism of *Political Shakespeare* was entirely deterministic, and denied the possibility of human agency. Everything is containment rather than subversion. And yet the book's position on this is quite clear. The 'Introduction' cites Marx's words: 'men and women make their own history, but in conditions not of their choosing'. To be effective, moral or political action must acknowledge the need to change society. Indeed, the very concept of 'intervention' that pervades the book would be unthinkable without a belief in the potentiality of human action, however constrained by circumstance, to produce social change. But nowhere in the book will you find the view that human beings are purely a deterministic product of their environment.

Fourthly, it is suggested that once established, cultural materialism operated like a Marxist political party, with all its members sworn to uphold and enforce a common dogma. Cultural materialists shared, in Graham Bradshaw's words, a kind of 'group think' mentality, imposing uniformity and crushing dissent. This is possibly the silliest accusation of all. The volume assumes a certain commonality of purpose, but nothing like a unified political programme. The approaches and methods of the various contributors are actually very diverse. 'We never envisaged cultural materialism dogmatically', states Jonathan Dollimore, 'and still don't'.

And lastly there is the view that *Political Shakespeare* was, as a work on Shakespeare, in some profound way self-destructive, since it aimed at replacing Shakespeare with the political, or at least hoped to diminish his relevance and value in favour of some larger totality, history, or theory, or sexual politics, or class struggle. Certainly some of the contributors sometimes seem to be arguing that Shakespeare invariably functions as a conduit of the dominant ideology, a

‘patriarchal bard’, and that the causes of democracy, diversity and libertarianism could be better pursued without him. But overall the volume works to render Shakespeare as a necessary object of critical practice: more, not less, important; more, not less, relevant; his value enhanced, not diminished, by the new methods and approaches.

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But I don’t want to spend the few words I have time for recapitulating and critiquing these historical commentaries. Instead I want to say something about the legacy of the work, its contribution to subsequent Shakespeare criticism, the difference it has made; something about where the *Political Shakespeare* project stands today – to what extent have its aspirations been fulfilled; and to what extent is there still what the book’s other co-editor, Alan Sinfield, described as ‘unfinished business’; and something about what participating in *Political Shakespeare* meant to me at the time, which is one thing you can’t read about in books.

In offering some necessarily general observations, I will inevitably tend to make *Political Shakespeare* sound like the fons et origo of all modern Shakespeare criticism. So let me emphasise at the outset that the book fully acknowledged earlier work of the same kind, and set itself within a tradition. It was also explicitly showcasing work in progress being done by the contributors, and referencing work by other major figures in the field who weren’t in it, including Terry Hawkes (*Alternative Shakespeares*<sup>4</sup> was published in the same year). *Political Shakespeare* was an influential element in a broad and diverse movement that irrevocably altered the academic landscape of Shakespeare studies.

As I indicated earlier, it’s easy to find statements claiming that both new historicism and cultural materialism have become completely mainstream and now dominate English departments, certainly in U.S. and U.K. universities, for good or ill, depending on your point of view. This claim may be exaggerated, but not by much. The book was launched as an innovative, radical initiative, self-consciously marginal, challenging orthodoxies, establishments, structures, and institutions of power and authority. The contributors were not exactly in the first flush of youth (the average age, excluding the two senior members Margot Heinemann and Raymond Williams – both respected Fellows at Cambridge – was about forty), but in academic terms this was young. What happened later to those zealous and idealistic young writers?

Where are they now? One is Chair of English at Duke University. One became a deputy vice chancellor, and then Director of the Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham. One was, and still is, Stephen Greenblatt, an institution in his own right. Others are senior professors, or professors emeritus. And of course the people associated with the broader movement have been equally successful. In fact the University of East London has just appointed one who I think is probably the first cultural materialist vice chancellor, John Joughin.

This subsequent professional mobility of what began as an oppositional minority certainly endorses the view that what was radical in the 1980s has become mainstream today. These people advanced up the professional ladder, taking their criticism and scholarship with them and established it by means of their own newfound authority. It's a huge success story. Unless you believe that such success is irredeemably corrupting and destructive, of both individuals and ideas ...

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Ewan Fernie suggested to me that it would be a good idea to imagine what an updated version of *Political Shakespeare* would now have to contain. If in fact its radical legacy has become a dominant orthodoxy, then the result would be perhaps disappointingly déjà vu. A book of essays, using 'historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis', containing studies in Renaissance power and authority; colonial and postcolonial Shakespeares; feminist readings; case studies in sexual politics and queer theory; studies of Shakespeare in contemporary education, theatre, film, and television; an essay on Brecht's Shakespeare; with an Afterword by (maybe) Stephen Greenblatt – *Political Shakespeare* 2016? Would that be all? And would it, however good, carry any kind of radical charge comparable to its original 'intervention'?

Now again, this is exaggerated. Some of the fields opened up and developed by *Political Shakespeare* have seen enormous advances in scholarship, criticism, and theory. *Political Shakespeare* 2016 would have to enlarge its perspectives on power and authority to take account of the huge amount of historical work done on these topics, especially in terms of 'history from below'. Postcolonial paradigms would have to be extended to incorporate theories of globalisation, and take on board what we now call Global Shakespeare. Feminist and queer readings would have to include a broader range of scholarship,

including materialist-feminist work on the body, the domestic sphere, household objects, and so on. Performance studies of theatre, film and television have crossed departmental boundaries between English, drama, media studies, and are immeasurably richer and better informed as a consequence. All this is a natural extension of what was in *Political Shakespeare* to begin with (even more so in the two new essays added in the second edition of 1994) and would fit easily into an updated edition.

But there are certain things that are important today in Shakespeare studies that were not visible in *Political Shakespeare*. An obvious example is the World Wide Web, which was not established until the 1990s. There is hardly anything in *Political Shakespeare* on bibliography and textual studies, and it would be difficult to have foreseen at that point the subsequent explosion of theory and practice in textual editing, occasioned in part by a rethinking of textual 'materialism'. What has been called the 'spiritual turn' in Shakespeare studies, the discovery of new uses for religious and theological concepts and language, was very definitely not part of the materialist agenda, though it has of late become very significant. Critical-creative approaches to Shakespeare, a relatively recent development, are not strongly foreshadowed, though Alan Sinfield did commend some creative-writing practices in schools. New kinds of interdisciplinary rapprochement, well beyond the hallowed trivium of literature, history, and philosophy, continue to take shape, putting Shakespeare into new relationships with, for example, science.

What do we gather from this? That the book was influential across a broad but limited spectrum of methods, topics, pedagogies, and forms of engagement. That some things that happened later, like the Internet, changed the landscape, and rendered some of its insights unavoidably limited. People grew older, changed their minds, altered their methods and practices. *Political Shakespeare* became historical in an objective as well as a methodological sense. We could call it, using a fashionable buzzword, a milestone, but there's often little difference between a milestone and a gravestone. The book, and the movement of which it was a part, transformed Shakespeare studies in its time. But that time is past, and we have no occasion to renew old quarrels, or follow an antique drum.

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There is a point in *Political Shakespeare* where cultural materialism parts company with new historicism. The book's first section, 'Recovering History', features essays of historical interpretation and analysis: Greenblatt's justly celebrated 'Invisible Bullets', linking colonial Virginia with *Henry IV*; Paul Brown on sixteenth-century colonialism in *The Tempest*; Leonard Tennenhouse on Renaissance strategies of state and theatres of power. The second part, 'Reproductions, Interventions', focuses not on the past, but the present; on Shakespeare in contemporary culture; on media and institutions that disseminate Shakespeare to his modern audiences. Here we find essays on how Shakespeare was taught and assessed in the British education system; on the medium of television, and the cultural politics of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC); on the Shakespeare produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. To me, this focus on contemporary Shakespeare, on cultural practice and media and institutions, provided a new, exciting and innovative field. No one else was doing this, certainly not the new historicists. Raymond Williams also responded with a characteristically discreet enthusiasm to these studies:

It is not for the writer of an afterword to select and direct attention to particular essays. I am glad that the studies of contemporary productions of Shakespeare, in education and performance, are so detailed and challenging.

Dollimore and Sinfield made it clear in their 'Foreword' that the past and the present, the retrospective and the contemporary, were of equal importance to their project.

The relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, for culture is made continuously and Shakespeare's text is reconstructed, re-appraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific contexts ... That is why the book discusses also the institutions through which Shakespeare is reproduced and through which interventions may be made in the present.

Now of course all the work in *Political Shakespeare* is oriented towards an awareness of the present, which is always implicit in the historical studies, and very near the surface in Kate McKluskie's essay on feminism, or Jonathan's on transgression in *Measure for Measure*. And one of the problems about the present, at least then, is

that it was specific, concrete, and localised. To what extent were very detailed studies of the *British Broadcasting Corporation*, the *Royal Shakespeare Company* and the *British* education system interesting or even intelligible to people outside the U.K.? This is probably the main reason why the second half of *Political Shakespeare* has been largely ignored when its story has been told. People talk about ‘presentism’ as a breakaway movement from cultural materialism, as if *Political Shakespeare* wasn’t ‘presentist’ enough already.

Notwithstanding, it was my sense that the ‘Reproductions/Interventions’ of the second part were the real breakthrough. They certainly inspired me to put together *The Shakespeare Myth*, published in 1985.<sup>5</sup> Essentially a supplement to *Political Shakespeare*, and commissioned of course by Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore for their Cultural Politics series, *The Shakespeare Myth* made it possible to link Shakespeare with absolutely anything and everything: with new areas such as popular culture, tourism and heritage, film and television, adaptation and appropriation; and gave new paradigms and methodologies for exploring established fields, such as Shakespeare in different types of theatrical institutions, in sexual politics, in education, and so on. I also incorporated, into the book’s dialectical structure, edited interviews with major practitioners of the Shakespeare industry – Sam Wanamaker, Jonathan Miller, Terry Hands, Michael Bogdanov – a move that was also unprecedented. Some of *The Shakespeare Myth* even found its way back into *Political Shakespeare*, when Alan Sinfield added an essay to the second edition, extensively drawing on work in the later volume.

When Peter Holland used the SAA (Society of American Archivists) plenary session in 2012 to talk about the impact of Shakespeare on a wider world beyond the academy – Dr Who and Harry Potter, graphic novels, state interference in U.S. education policy – he was deploying methodologies opened up by *Political Shakespeare* and *The Shakespeare Myth*. Of course outstanding work has been done since then in these fields of Shakespeare and the media, popular culture, and education. But show me anything like this from before 1985, before 1988.

Now it’s also interesting that the occasion of that deliberately broad survey was Peter Holland’s defence of the humanities against the application of quantitative performance indicators to academic research; a defence aimed at demonstrating that Shakespeare already does have a far-reaching impact on, and a quantifiable value within,

the wider culture and society. It's useful to think of *Political Shakespeare* as also in itself simultaneously as a kind of educational or pedagogic initiative, and a manifesto for the importance of culture in society: a way of demonstrating how Shakespeare can be important and relevant across a much wider range of cultural practices.

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To get at this, we need to explore the 'political' in *Political Shakespeare*. What were its politics? In some ways they were surprisingly inexplicit and generalised, as in the slogan I quoted at the beginning about a commitment to the transformation of an exploitative social order. This is appropriate for an 'eclectic' anthology, but might leave us asking well, how? Some contributors define a specific political position, and even adumbrate a political programme, a radical agenda for socialist change. When it gets down to detail, this is again very much a British programme. The book explicitly, at a number of points, aligns itself with the left, and opposes the British Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1979–90). It speaks for values such as social inclusion, diversity, multiculturalism, internationalism, the advancement of women. It defends the welfare state, and state funding of the arts. It seeks to revalue and reposition 'subcultures' – ethnic and sexual minorities, dissident youth groups – in relation to the dominant culture. Throughout there is a clear antipathy to free market capitalism, and a corresponding preference for democratic movements, organised labour, and the welfare state.

Now some of the contributors are very up front about this. Those who aren't, either because they were doing new historicism, or because they didn't especially want to, nonetheless tend to assume and endorse, in their approaches to Shakespeare, the existence of such a body of socialist values. And at the time you certainly would not have chosen to have your work included in so explicitly Marxist a project unless you were happy to sign up to some such political programme.

But there was a variety of Marxist philosophies and socialist ideologies around in Britain at the time, and this shaped the way Marxism grew in universities. In particular there was a divide between an older Marxism-Leninism, embedded in the Labour movement, and a form of Trotskyism popular among university staff and students. Both are implicit in *Political Shakespeare*. Raymond Williams and Margot Heinemann represent that older Marxism, which was

uncomfortably shrugging off its Stalinist and pro-Soviet stances, but remained committed to a vision of socialist change effected by the organised working classes. Others saw the university, and university students, as potentially at the forefront of political struggle. Jonathan Dollimore reminds us of this when he recalls the ‘evenements’ of Paris in 1968, when students and workers rioted in the streets, and quotes the slogan of the ‘situationists’ – ‘demand the impossible’. In this latter model, political criticism of Shakespeare – whether that be the exposure of Shakespeare as a patriarchal bard, or the revelation of him as a crypto-materialist with radical potential – was to be inculcated in students in order to develop their revolutionary consciousness.

The older Marxism still found use for the ‘base/superstructure’ model, which was pretty much abandoned by the new ‘cultural’ Marxism and did not see universities or culture or literature as natural crucibles of revolution. Such people would be active in political organisations, as was Margot Heinemann; and in adult, trade union and workers’ education, as was Raymond Williams. Such people were committed to breaking down the barriers between the university and the society, barriers separating genders and races, ethnic and cultural majorities and minorities, as well as classes. The slogan for this cause was Marx’s ‘the condition for the free development of each is the free development of all’.

Out of this tradition you get a view of *Political Shakespeare* as an educational rather than a primarily political project. The world was not to be changed overnight by re-readings of Shakespeare. Such change could only be brought about by a long, slow, patient, and, above all, *collective* process of raising awareness and understanding among all classes. This tradition was more interested in dismantling barriers than in manning barricades. Dollimore’s Introduction to *Political Shakespeare* calls for such a ‘dismantling of barriers (barriers of exclusion as well as of containment)’. Barriers between disciplines and departments in the universities; between staff and students; between the university and society; between different spheres of the education system – universities, schools, community organisations.

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Let me return now to one of my opening questions: to what extent did *Political Shakespeare* achieve its aims? To what extent has it left us with ‘unfinished business’?

If the over-arching aim of the book was to transform an exploitative society then we can set it down as a resounding failure. If its political aim was to 'demand the impossible' then we can safely say that the impossible remains no more possible than it was in 1985. Faced with a utopian objective, all that remains for us is disenchantment; demoralisation; nostalgia for the days when political struggle was real. As one of the 'Four Yorkshiremen' puts it in the famous Monty Python sketch from which I derive my title, 'I were 'appier then when I 'ad nothing'.

But how can this be reconciled with the self-evident academic and professional success of the book and its contributors; and with the acknowledged supremacy of the modes of study it pioneered? This is not a matter of ideals corrupted by success, or subversion adroitly contained by a hegemonic ideology. It is manifest that many of the values espoused by *Political Shakespeare*, cut loose from its Marxist ideology, have become completely naturalised in Western democracies, to the point where no mainstream political party would seriously challenge them. This does not mean that the partisan political philosophy underpinning those beliefs has been generally adopted: far from it. In this sense, the values promoted by the book, and by the larger movement of which it was a part, have been so firmly established as fundamental social principles that one might even say its aspirations have been not only implanted but exceeded, certainly in Britain, and certainly in the view of large sections of its population. The excessive legal protection of minorities, the unchallengeable pieties of multiculturalism and the daily absurdities of the European Convention on Human Rights have all taken these principles to a point where it is often the majority that feels threatened and embattled.

I think it would be foolish to claim that *Political Shakespeare* has not lived to see many of its aspirations advanced, if not realised. Others would argue that the wished-for transformation of an exploitative society remains to be fulfilled. Jonathan Dollimore believes, as do many others in academia, that universities have lost their way, and that academic ideals have been hopelessly compromised by concession and corruption. I don't, and I think it would be remiss of us not to recognise the real achievements of the generation of *Political Shakespeare*, the generation of which I was glad to be a part.

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If we think of *Political Shakespeare* as primarily an *educational* rather than a directly *political* initiative, then we can measure its impact by different success criteria. We don't need to assess the extent to which the whole society has been transformed as a consequence of the book (and the movement of which it was a part), proving some casual connection. If we can show that the book (and the movement of which it was a part) succeeded in its aim of dismantling barriers – barriers between disciplines and departments, between sectors of the educational system, between constituencies inside and beyond the academy, even between the past and the present – then we can claim that its radical and progressive influence found its way into a very large number of minds. (Manchester University Press estimates 10,000 copies sold, though I suspect it is more.) It enhanced and enlarged the possibilities for interdisciplinary work, for a wider range of critical methodologies, for work linking all levels of education in literacy, and for work concerned with the ways in which history lives in the present. I would call that a result.

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Talking of breaking down barriers, I want to end with an anecdote. And I don't mean the sort of anecdote that links *Twelfth Night* with cross-dressing in a remote French village, but just a story from the early days of *Political Shakespeare*. The time: 1987. The place: Weimar, in the German Democratic Republic. The occasion: the conference of the East German Shakespeare Association, the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft. The British Council had helped a number of Western academics to respond to an invitation, issued at the behest of the great Robert Weimann, to attend the conference. Kiernan Ryan was there. And John Drakakis, and David Margolies (two contributors to *The Shakespeare Myth*). And Walter Cohen. And Stephen Greenblatt and I (two contributors to *Political Shakespeare*). This was a society in which people were afraid to speak. If someone cracked a joke about the East German president, people got up and left the room. Free conversations took place in hotel bedrooms, not public places. East Berlin was a city of silence.

I remember David Margolies thanking our hosts for inviting us, commending their courage in doing so, and describing the moment as 'the *glasnost* of the Deutsche Shakespeare-Gesellschaft'. *Glasnost* was of course the slogan for reform, synonymous with the opening of

the Soviet Union to international relations promoted by Mikael Gorbachev in that very year of 1987. It means literally 'thawing', melting, dissolution. Three years later the Berlin Wall, which we had all had to cross to reach Weimar, fell.

What did an academic conference about Shakespeare have to do with that world-changing event? Perhaps very little more than coincidence and contiguity. We didn't bring down the Berlin Wall by talking about Shakespeare. It was broken from both sides, by a spirit of reform in Russia, and by the political struggle of the German people. But we were there to offer a friendly hand, and to speak a word of encouragement to those who were working for that *glasnost* – that breaking of the ice of the Cold War, that dissolution of divisions, that 'dismantling of barriers'.

Margot Heinemann ended her essay on Brecht in *Political Shakespeare* with a quote from one of Brecht's poems:

I could not do much, but without me  
Those in power would have sat safer, so I hoped.

In memory of those departed comrades, Raymond Williams and Margot Heinemann, let me extend and update Brecht's thought:

I could not do much, but I spoke in hope,  
And what little I could do, I'm proud to have done.

## Notes

1. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1984).
2. Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, ed. *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
3. Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare and Contemporary Theory: New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012).
4. John Drakakis, ed. *Alternative Shakespeares* (London: Methuen, 1984).
5. Graham Holderness, ed. *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985).

Writer and critic **Graham Holderness** has published over forty books, mostly on Shakespeare. He is acknowledged as a formative contributor to a number of branches of Shakespeare criticism and theory. He is also a novelist, poet and dramatist. His novel *The Prince of Denmark* was published in 2001; his poetry collection *Craeft* received a Poetry Book Society award in 2002; and his play *Wholly Writ* was in 2011 performed at Shakespeare's Globe, and by Royal Shakespeare Company actors in Stratford-upon-Avon. Recent publications include *Nine Lives of William Shakespeare* (Bloomsbury/Arden Shakespeare, 2011), *Tales from Shakespeare: Creative Collisions* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) and *Re-writing Jesus: Christ in 20th Century Fiction and Film* (Bloomsbury, 2014). He is Professor of English at the University of Hertfordshire.