French, like all the critics discussed in this section, takes it for granted that the argument about whether King Lear is a ‘great’ play, a classic, a pinnacle of the literary canon, is a crucial one, but should we necessarily accept this premise?

Displacing the value argument

The emphasis in this section will be rather different from that in the previous one, where I was discussing explicit attacks on King Lear by people who thought it had been overestimated by others and wished to lower its standing. Few if any contemporary critics would go so far as this, but it seems to me nevertheless that there are some underlying trends in the most recent Shakespearean criticism generally and in Lear studies in particular which carry important implications for the argument about value. It is not so much that contemporary critics are disputing the traditionally high evaluation of King Lear as that new critical procedures are displacing the whole argument about value and making it seem less central than it used to.

At all levels it seems natural to want to discuss the value of works of fiction. We ask our friends if the film or television programme they saw last night was ‘any good’, and we scan press reviews for value judgements to help us decide how to spend our time and money when we have the choice. But at the same time it is often the case that, once a discussion gets going, we tend to displace or postpone matters of evaluation: we describe the work in question as much as we judge it, and many of our comments could begin ‘It was interesting because...’ rather than ‘It was good or valuable because...’.

Much of the professional work done by literary specialists operates in the same way. It has always been possible to investigate a text in terms of its sources, its background, its language and so on without allowing the issue of absolute value to dominate one’s discussion. Sometimes this kind of
work has been labelled 'scholarship' as opposed to 'criticism', which has been assumed to be more directly concerned with evaluation. But is it even the case that traditional literary criticism has really been concerned with evaluation? It is possible to argue that in Shakespeare criticism, as in literary criticism more generally, the stress has been on interpretation rather than on evaluation. There have been plenty of new readings and rereadings, but the impression is of a plurality of approaches rather than of a plurality of judgements about the merits or otherwise of individual plays.

In the mid-1960s Alfred Harbage complained about 'The Myth of Perfection' in Shakespeare studies (Harbage, 1966, pp. 23–38) whereby, compared with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century editors and adapters who were prepared to correct and revise Shakespeare when they found fault with him, twentieth-century critics prefer to 'serve the myth of perfection', not by excessive enthusiasm or rapturous superlatives, but by simple assuming that, 'because the plays are excellent, they are excellent in every way — in a word that they are perfect' (p. 31). As he says, it is hard to imagine modern critics 'failing to discover any excellence they hope to find', and even harder to imagine them roundly terming Measure for Measure a 'hateful' play, as Coleridge did (p. 32). Rather, they appoint themselves as apologists, offering ingenious explanations for anything that an 'uneducated' person might assume was incoherent, obscure, tasteless or otherwise reprehensible in the canon. The result of this is that Shakespeare criticism begins to look like an undiscriminating stream of panegyric and that students in schools and colleges are both bored and intimidated by the assumption that they are not allowed to do anything with Shakespeare except repeat received notions about why he is so wonderful.

Certainly there was an air of competitiveness and debate surrounding Shakespeare criticism in the mid twentieth century. Richard Levin's lively investigation of trends in the field from 1950 to 1978 has a section called 'My Theme Can Lick Your Theme' (Levin, 1979), but he claims that this argumentativeness is more apparent than real: there has in fact been a widespread tolerance on the part of critics with everything that other critics write and little real debate or