I have titled this work *Shakespeare the Renaissance Humanist* because I think whatever it has to say about him arises ultimately out of the forces of Renaissance Christian humanism as I describe it later in this chapter. I might have also titled the book *Shakespeare and Moral Philosophy* because it talks more about moral philosophy as such than about the humanism in question by its name, and “moral philosophy” in fact appears in the subtitle. However, for the main title, this would have been putting the cart before the horse. Moral philosophy, as I will argue, was the practical everyday expression of humanism at work in every field of endeavor. In its own way, it fused the elements that came to constitute humanism and its numerous shifting phases and changes out of medievalism into what we call modernism, and by doing so it made it a way of life capable of discussion in its own day. Moral philosophy was the practical expression of humanism in the streets of Renaissance Europe and it is in light of this “street humanism” that the present work considers those of Shakespeare’s plays to which it refers to explain what they say. One works one’s way through humanism more or less part by part according to the identifiable major trends of which it was made and of which it came to constitute, and the path I have chosen in the following pages in relation to Shakespeare is that of moral philosophy as the creative force of an abstract metaphysics in daily life.

The best way of examining the presence of this humanism in Shakespeare’s writing seemed to me to show different aspects of its moral philosophy at work individually in a variety of his plays. I
eschewed the path of first trying to describe moral philosophy as a whole and then exploring it piece by piece in the drama. Any work that pretends to encapsulate the entirety of Renaissance moral philosophy would appear to me as impossible to write as one that tried to encompass the totality of its humanism. In addition, such an undertaking would have left little room for Shakespeare. The mechanical critical procedures required to link moral philosophy to Shakespeare in such a volume would have also contradicted the vitality of the life that it represented to its times.

The first chapter of this book explores therefore, or perhaps I should more hopefully say attempts to explain, why the moment seemed opportune today in light of the present criticism of Shakespeare to write a book on him in terms of the street humanism of moral philosophy. I do not consider this first chapter an “introduction,” as in my mind it constitutes an integral part of what the five following chapters themselves contain. It is not meant to clarify ahead of time what the later chapters describe because, like them, it is itself intended to pass a comment on Shakespeare, showing how moral philosophy was an active agent in his work. In addition, it will become quickly apparent from the various Renaissance texts referred to in the following pages that moral philosophy is considered here in two senses. First, it appears in the sense of a genre of classical philosophy with which we are all more or less familiar. For example, the English moralist William Baldwin’s *A Treatise of Morall Philosophie*, a best seller published in 1547 that went through 25 editions by 1651, “augmented” by Thomas Palfreyman, is overtly a text of moral philosophy. Second, moral philosophy also appears here in the wider sense of those writings in which its topics were also discussed. I therefore consider works such as Philippe de Mornay’s *The Trewnesse of Christian Religion*, which straddles philosophy and theology, as an expression in everyday life of what moral philosophy had to say about how humanism was to be lived. *Trewnesse* was translated by Sir Philip Sidney and Arthur Golding in 1587 and republished in three more editions by 1617.