

SHAKESPEARE: TOUCHSTONE OF CRITICISM

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TO the student of Shakespeare, an unusual opportunity for self-examination has recently been provided by Mr. Augustus Ralli's *History of Shakespearean Criticism*. In two brimming volumes of admirably lucid summaries by period and country, Mr. Ralli has laid before us nearly the whole range of the world's published thought about Shakespeare. Over three hundred critics have their say. Every approach, every kind and colour of criticism has its representatives. Here is a chance, rarely so succinctly presented, of testing by one's own reading of the plays the various aims and methods of the critics. Obviously the result can have no more than a personal validity, and as such I venture to give it.

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The dominant thought left is precisely expressed by Mr. T. S. Eliot in one of his essays when he says that the task of criticism to-day is no longer to expand its boundaries but to clarify its centre. This centre, I would hold, which calls for clearer recognition is the fact that the critic is confronted by, must never forget that he is confronted by, a work of art; that his function, however variedly he may perform it, is to elucidate the significance of a work of art. In the case of Shakespeare this means that all criticism is off the centre, and may be fallacious or futile, which fails to keep in mind that every aspect of his art is conditioned by his being a poet.

That, of course, is old doctrine. In recent times it has found perhaps its best statement in Professor A. C. Bradley's inaugural Oxford Lecture on *Poetry for Poetry's Sake*. "The consideration of ulterior ends," he says, "whether by the poet in the act of composing or by the reader in the act of experiencing, tends to lower poetic value. It does so because it tends to change the nature of poetry by taking it out of its own atmosphere. For its nature is to be not a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world (as we commonly understand that phrase), but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous; and to possess it fully you must enter that world, and conform to its laws." In his *Principles of Criticism* Mr. I. A. Richards pounces on this statement by Professor Bradley. It smacks, he thinks, of the unsavoury heresy of art for art's sake.

It is cutting poetry away from life. But really it is doing nothing of the sort. It is merely contending that what the poet feels about life he utters as a poet, and that this has to be received on its own level as poetry. There is no denial here that the poet in his experience has responded to life with his whole being, spiritual, moral, intellectual; nor does it deny that we too respond with this wholeness to the poem. But for poet and reader the experience, with all its implications, has been transmuted, and has its new nature and value in the change. "So Shakespeare's knowledge or his moral insight, Milton's greatness of soul, Shelley's hate of hate and love of love, and that desire to help men or make them happier: all these have their poetic worth only when, passing through the unity of the poet's being, they re-appear as qualities of imagination, and then they are indeed mighty powers". To know the poem or play, that is, you must keep within it. The poet's wisdom and his moral insight lose their mighty power when abstracted and couched in prosaic terms of knowledge or morality. You may, indeed, with profit extract and codify Milton's thought or Shakespeare's philosophy, if you can find it, but that which you coldly gather will not be the equivalent of what the poet gives. The poet's expression has its power and is brought memorably home to us by the imagination, not the logic, of the thought. As Professor Bradley says, "Hamlet was well able to unpack his heart with words, but he will not unpack it with our paraphrases."

The neglect of this elementary truth, that the values of poetry can be realized only if it is accepted on its own terms, marks and limits much Shakespearean criticism. It shows itself in various ways, and is especially evident in criticism from the end of the eighteenth century to our own day. It is not a failing so common in the earlier periods. With all their narrow conceptions of the drama, the best of the seventeenth and eighteenth century writers were at least literary critics. They treated literature as literature with its own peculiar satisfaction, not as something else—like philosophy or history or moral doctrine. For the most part, it is true, they were content with generalizations. They had not yet advanced to a play's minute dissection or subtle interpretation. But, with all their limitations, their main concern was with Shakespeare's art or his lack of it. Not that they were unaware that his ultimate distinction lay in his rich imaginative response to life. Dryden's summing up has still to be bettered: "The man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient, poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul". But, that said, Dryden turns to straight literary judgements. "When he describes anything, you more than

see it, you feel it too. . . I cannot say that he is everywhere alike. He is many times flat, insipid, his comic wit degenerates into clichés, his serious swelling into bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him; no man can say he ever had a fit subject for his wit and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of poets". I am not suggesting that the earlier criticism was all of this quality. That would be absurd. And it would be mere pedantry to assert that in the elucidation of the play's significance, which I take to be the critic's task, the writers of the earlier period, from Ben Jonson to Dr. Johnson, can as a whole rank with those who followed. I am contending merely that these earlier critics did not so frequently fall into the error not uncommon with the romantics, of translating the poetry of the plays into non-poetical terms.

It is not to my purpose to enlarge on the nature and distinction of the new romantic criticism. My concern for the moment is merely with a vitiating tendency which too often marked it. The more studiously Shakespeare was read, the more was there read into him. His drama came to be regarded too often, not as imaginative literature, but as a compendium of all knowledge. With many of the interpreters its soul was imagined "to reside in a sort of philosophical, moral, political and historical teaching upon which Shakespeare was supposed to have woven his plays". These critics were particularly prone to the narrow ethical fallacy. No character was free from the danger of being seized as the exemplar of some moral doctrine. "Desdemona by her marriage transgresses against the inviolable right of the family, and therefore against the protecting bond of morality:" so says Ulrici. "Romeo and Juliet make the right of their love the law of the world and forget the sanctity of the moral order, so their love is a rebellion against moral necessity." "The Nurse" (in *Romeo and Juliet*), says Hallam, "points the obvious moral of the bad influence of such domestics". One can imagine the Nurse's reply: "Scurvy Knave! an he speak anything against me, I'll take him down, an he were lustier than he is, and twenty such Jacks". Falstaff naturally has had much to put up with. More than ever in his play-life he had need of an answer to his sigh, "I wish to God I knew where a commodity of good names were to be bought". Morgann, in the most penetrating essay ever written on a Shakespearean character, defended Sir John manfully from the charge of cowardice; but, of course, the mistake was and is that such an indictment should solemnly be pressed. It may be a fine compliment to the dramatist's creative power that we thus worry ourselves about the old man's conduct,

but any moral indignation takes us beyond Shakespeare's intentions and clean outside the play. It is not that Shakespeare put moral considerations aside. He could not do that and create a world of men: but it was a world of men he created, and not of moral precepts or abstractions; and, certainly, to draw from his drama or to impose on it a rigid system of Shakespearean ethics, as many of the nineteenth century writers did, is merely to misread him and to injure his art.

I have instanced this mal-practice of the moral interpreters in the case of single characters. It is even more serious when it entails the misreading of a play; and this, it seems to me, has happened most grievously to *Hamlet*. Since the time of Coleridge it has generally been treated as if it were Shakespeare's exposition of a problem of conduct. Why did Hamlet delay, we ask; and we offer our varied answers. That has been almost the central interest. But, surely, the delay, while it gives the plot, is of little moment as regards the tragedy. Shakespeare is not driving home a lesson in the ghastly dangers of procrastination or, as Coleridge has it, "the truth that action is the chief end of existence." Action on Hamlet's part would not have affected the tragedy. That lies in his state of mind, in the disillusionment, the world-weariness which the peculiar circumstances have inflicted on him, and his mother's frailty more than his father's death, as one can further see from the new emphasis laid on this by Shakespeare in the revised second quarto. There can be little doubt, from the evidence we have, that Shakespeare's main change on the old play was just to shift its significance from a story of revenge delayed by external obstacles to the revelation of the suffering inner consciousness of the man. It is in relation to Hamlet's state that everything else in the play takes its meaning; and, certainly, to express our response to what we witness, any mere moral generalization is flat and impertinent.

That the quest for moral doctrine in Shakespeare is legitimate, no one will deny. We are all justified in getting from his world what we can, even if it be only hints on gardening. But that the moral interpreters have not been helpful, because they have mistaken what Shakespeare as a poet has to give, must as readily be allowed. I am not sure that those who would translate his poetry into the terms of philosophy have been much more illuminating. They, too, tend to petrify what is warm and alive, to generalize from what has its virtue in being particular. It is undoubtedly vain to formulate from the plays and attribute to Shakespeare any systematized view of life or of man's relation to the universe. It is just the

distinction of his nature—which, after all, can be known only as revealed in his art—that he was opposed to any such hard dogmatism of thought or to a precisely defined philosophy. Who can say Shakespeare believes with Falstaff that honour is a word, rather than with Hotspur who would pluck it from the pale-faced moon? We may have chosen definitely between the belief of Romeo that we are fortune's fools and the creed of Iago, "Tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus". Shakespeare too may have done so, but you have nothing to guide you in the world of his tragedy to say confidently on which side he lies. And that surely is just his greatness. Compared with him, the dogmatists seem shallow and unreal. After the burning experience of his tragedies, the generalizations of his philosophical critics are too often like cold cinders. "He always promises hope for the future", says one. "In *Lear* the majesty of the moral law is the unseen arbiter", and so on. But these are merely the personal refuges of the critics. Shakespeare himself offers no such facile answers. He merely awes us with the dazzling spectacle—the pity of it, and the retrieving splendour of human loyalties. The rest is silence. Any view of life, one might argue, could find some backing in Shakespeare's world, except, we would like to think, the merely hopeless, that life is without meaning; and even as we say this, we hear Macbeth voicing, as some would have it, humanity's despair:

Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

That, if you wish, you may call humanity's despair; but it reveals Shakespeare only because for the moment he *is* Macbeth. He is living with the man, not using him to expound a philosophy.

Indeed we could go further and say that with Shakespeare the centre is always the man. For him the story was the means of presenting a range of human experience, not of expressing an abstract idea. The sense of life which the play conveys, and which we try to attribute to the poet, issues from the vividly characterized experience; it is not an abstraction by itself, for the expression of which the story and person are merely necessary instruments. The man, so to speak, *is* the idea. It is the living Brutus and Coriolanus who firstly interest him, not the conflict of political principles; Hamlet, not an ethical problem or a life and death theme. As Professor Abercrombie admirably has it: "The art of poetry can do nothing more impressive than the creation of human character:

it is never so alive, it never makes such seizure on our minds, as when the result of all its verbal and imaginative technique is our entrance into the life of a character. . . . No idea could concentrate its significance so deeply and intensely in us as this concrete symbolism, this moment in the life of a man”.

It is then with Shakespeare the humanist poet—to use that term in its strictest sense—that we should firstly concern ourselves, rather than with the philosopher or the metaphysician. If we are deaf to the human note, and unriddle the play in abstract terms, we shall never reach the heart of his greatness. This, nevertheless, is the error of many of the interpreters. They fly away from the immediate passionate world of the play, some even to a dream-land of parable or myth. They search for a secret meaning, exchanging for the gossamer of metaphysical fancies the poetry of Shakespeare’s imaginative re-creation of life. Professor Stoll, in his essay on *The Tempest*, has the fitting comment: “Drama and character and poetry do not content them. Shakespeare himself, I fear, does not content them, and with the noble simplicity wherewith ‘the author writ’, they will not read. They have the latter-day taste for an inner meaning, biographical or symbolical; and both in the last work and in any of moment they expect to find a message. Not only do I think such an interpretation unwarranted by the text and the spirit of the poet; I think it actually troubles and disturbs the artistic effect”.

This is not, of course, to deny the profundity of meaning which lies in Shakespeare’s greatest plays. It is not asking us to see them merely as time and place stories. It is rather asserting that the poet’s transcription of life itself, his focussing the life-sense which the story suggests, into such vividly personal figures as Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth and Lear, carry us to heights and depths unreached by those who translate the plays into allegory and parable. The imagination is more stirred to realize the wonder and mystery of things by seeing Hamlet as a man in a soul-racking situation, than by reducing him to an abstract force. Those who seek the abstraction tend to substitute for the work of art a thesis of their own. They are concerned not so much with the play as with themselves. It is the mind, the ideas of the interpreter which are being revealed. It may, of course, be argued that the play is after all merely the mental experience of an individual, that what he chooses to find in his reading is for him there. In a manner that is true, but what he exhibits must be found, not brought. His mind’s eye, so to speak, must be looking out, not inwards to himself. The external stimulus is another’s experience, and must be recognized as such.

Most of those who thus impose their own contradictory ideas on the plays readily admit what we are inclined to believe, that Shakespeare may have been quite unaware of such further meanings. He builded, presumably, better than he knew. Art, we are reminded, wells up from the sub-conscious. The conscious intention does not count; we can ignore it, when what interests us is the metaphysic behind the poetry. There are, however, those who would impatiently deny such argument. For the metaphysician or the allegorist, they would say, that may be so, but not for the critical interpreter of the poetic drama. "A mystical treatise", says Mr. Eliot "is at best a poor substitute for the original experience of its author". "The critic," says Professor Stoll "does not explore his own consciousness, but determines the author's meaning and intention". Whether or not we believe that the author's meaning and intention give us the play's full value, there is little doubt that we should take cognisance of them if we can; and to the question as to how we can come at least near to them, two lines of answer are offered. The one is simply to read the play sensitively, and unbiassed by preconceived theory. The other is to know all that can be known about what went to the play's making by relating it to the circumstances in which it was written. This latter is the answer of the historical critics, and with these and the validity of their contention I would now stay a little.

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The defence of the historical approach is nowhere more persuasively given than in the late Professor Greenlaw's monograph on *The Province of Literary History*. For him the historian has a double function. The first, while not bearing on the immediate question as to the possibility of elucidating the meaning of Shakespeare's plays, has a relation to my main contention that the plays must be realized as poetry. This first function is to chronicle "the gradual unfolding of the human spirit as manifested in the record of that spirit. . . in art and literature". To the literary historian, says Professor Greenlaw, "poems, dramas, the literature of the imagination may be regarded as documentary material to be taken into account in any appraisal of the civilization to which they belong". Such a task most of us would admit to be of high worth, one of the chief learnings, as Professor Greenlaw calls it; but this admission would have one reservation to which reference has already been made—the difficulty, namely, of justly documenting the contribution of the poet except by quoting the poem. An account of Milton's theology extracted from *Paradise Lost* is not Milton's distinctive manifestation of the greatness of the human

spirit. Shakespeare's thought may be related to the thought of his time—indeed it generally is—but what he contributes to the manifestation of the human spirit is his imaginative vision, his poetry, which cannot be defined adequately in any other terms. Yet, while from the point of view of criticism we mark this important limitation, it would be ungracious to belittle this aspect of the work of the historians. For the last fifty years at least, this extra-art interest has been almost the chief concern of professional students of literature. At their best they have illuminatingly explored life itself, rather than its expression in art. At their lower levels they have merely discussed the state of society or politics or religion, using literature, poetry alike with prose, as a source of information.

The second function of the historian of literature, and the one which really concerns us now, just reverses the first process. It is to seek light on the poetry by investigating the conditions of its composition. Its method involves "the study of the time in which the author lived, and his experience as far as we may know it in the life of his period". It involves the study of the books which he read, the contacts which he formed with the past, those more subtle currents of thought and feeling of which he may have been only partially aware; and in the case of the dramatist it involves a study of his theatrical environment and the conventions which he may have accepted.

Now, we must take these claims calmly. There is no need, as some do, to scream that the historian is all wrong, that you cannot explain a work of art by piecing together its supposed constituent parts, even if you are able to find them. A historian like Professor Greenlaw is not asserting that you can. He is quite aware of the inexplicable part played by Shakespeare's creating mind, and he would allow that, for the critic, a sensitive imagination and a knowledge of life are far more profitable than what the investigators can give. He is merely claiming, what few of us would deny, that the historian's information may often prove helpful as a preliminary to the task of pure criticism, the comprehension and evaluation of the plays. Nor should we grumble because a great deal, seriously and patiently sought out, has been helpful only to the researcher's degree. It is the mode of the moment to sniff at the academic products of this historical scholarship, but even the academic scholar, like Pompey, is "a poor fellow that would live". Besides, you never know when a fact uncarthd may have a real bearing on the critical problem; and assuredly an ounce of pertinent fact outweighs a bale of woolly speculation.

Of these preparatory investigations, as they help in eliciting the author's intention and the play's significance, I would refer

further only to two. There is the study of literary sources, as they are called, the books from which Shakespeare took his themes or the plays which he revised. It would be merely foolish to deny that by comparison, by following the process of selection and alteration, we can get some inkling of the distinction of Shakespeare's art. We may at least be saved from misapprehending it. We can see more clearly into *Hamlet* by knowing what is to be known of the older versions, and by realizing that the play is a stratification. There is value in being aware that Shakespeare is by no means singular in his treatment of the story in *Troilus and Cressida*. To see him at work, giving vitality to a scene, put the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* against the opening of the old play, or study with Mr. Middleton Murry the transmutation of the passage in North into the description of Cleopatra in her barge. That, you may say, is merely to get a glimpse of his art methods. I would answer that you cannot afford to neglect these, if you seek the play's meaning.

Again, we have to acknowledge a value for the critic in such studies as those of Professor Schücking on Elizabethan dramatic practices. He like others was impelled to his examination by an impatience with the extravagance of the older subjective interpretation. For the nineteenth century idealists, the perfection of the plays was something to be taken for granted. Significance was found everywhere. Each play, almost each character, was regarded to the minutest detail as a purposed harmony. Coleridge could say that "Shakespeare . . . never introduces a word or a thought in vain or out of place; if we do not understand him, it is our fault, or the fault of copyists and typographers". To the frequent uncritical abandon of the older school the scientific historical approach has been in many ways a healthy corrective. It has rightly pointed to the contemporary elements in Shakespeare's drama, the older technique which he often accepted. It has thrown light on Shakespeare the playwright, often the hurried careless playwright, filling out with genius other men's work, but at times leaving the old crude matter butting disconcertingly through.

Yet, helpful as much of this scientific work has been, it has in its extreme forms led to a mode of regarding the plays which is wholly unjustifiable. It has led to a kind of criticism which, more than any of the others mentioned, wrongs Shakespeare by forgetting that he was a poet. With Professor Schücking, but more with some of his followers, it has resulted in what I may call the fallacy of the logical test. The plays are dissected as if they were scientific data or the literal records of fact. On this level, discrepancies of

plot and character are eagerly pounced upon. We have, for example, to admit that, according to Shakespeare's own story, there was no possible occasion for Desdemona's unfaithfulness with Cassio which so perturbs the Moor. To such lamentable slips there is logically no answer except that, if we noticed them, they did not disturb us or seem to spoil the play. And there are the supposed character inconsistencies, the illogical psychology. Cleopatra, says Professor Schücking, is in the early acts a frivolous courtesan who could not possibly become the tragic queen of the last scenes. Enobarbus, you remember, had also remarked on her infinite variety. Bottom is incongruous, for he jests wittily with Titania's elves, "whereas his ass-head shows that he is meant to be a fool", Desdemona could not have been the innocent Shakespeare wishes her to appear, for she tells a lie on her death-bed. I have not invented these charges. They have actually been laid in well-known books. I cite them, in the first place, as illustrations of the most wrong-headed way of testing the impression of unity which Shakespeare's greater characters leave on us. For one thing, these critics demand the psychology of the pre-conceived formula, not of life, the narrow decorum which made Rymer object that the soldierly Othello could not legitimately be shown as a victim of jealousy. But there is an error beyond that. They show a misunderstanding of the manner in which a dramatic poet creates the illusion of life. There is no dramatist, I believe, with a subtler knowledge of mental processes than Shakespeare, but he does not present his persons after the fashion of the modern analytic novelist. Analysis may explain, but it cannot make live. That demands an act of the imagination; and it is Shakespeare's imagination which evokes in his greatest characters the impression of vital unity, which is transmitted to us if we see imaginatively.

This error of the logical approach begets another. It brings trailing after it the mistake of regarding the poetic drama as if it were attempting the same effect as the realistic play-type of yesterday, of those who sought to follow Ibsen. Whereas Shakespeare is doing something far more difficult and profound. He is not representing life, but revealing it. And this revelation of the human experience, the intensest moments in the inner life of a man, which in the great plays is the centre and shapes the circumference, can be given only because Shakespeare is a poet. "Tragedy in prose", says Hume, "though not impossible, is maimed, since poetry like music creates an atmosphere: it is not easy in the phrase of daily speech to support the rhythm or deal with so moving or great a thing as life. By music and poetry we raise the veil, which gives a

kind of heavenly understanding, we are drawn nearer to truth." There is no refuting the rightness of this comment. Indeed it fits the effect not only of the great tragedies but of most of the plays. We must hear the poetry, surrender ourselves to its moods, if we are to get the full revelation, the "heavenly understanding", as Hume calls it. In short, Shakespeare's greatness as a dramatist comes from his greatness as a poet.

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In this slight survey I have been mainly negative. I have tried to show that certain critical approaches lose in value because they tend to forget the central fact that Shakespeare was a poet, or to confuse the nature of poetry. Fortunately it would not be difficult to be positive, to cite examples of critical practice which is not in this way limited. Glancing merely at the more modern period against which I have chiefly tilted, one would obviously point to Morgann's essay, where he climbs round and beyond Falstaff to a subtle enquiry into Shakespeare's achievements in vitalizing his people. Then there is Coleridge, at his best neither the moralist nor the theoretic philisopher, but the interpreter whose aim, as Mr. Ralli says, is to recapture the experience rather than to find the idea. If the critic's function be to elucidate the art, to make us more vividly aware of its quality, it would be hard to know where that can be better illustrated than in Coleridge's seemingly casual notes on the opening scenes of *Hamlet* or on *Lear*. There a poet is interpreting a poet, yet with such simplicity that all who run may read. To him can be applied what Mr. Eliot says of the poet as critic. He may seem, suggests Mr. Eliot, to a member of the Browning Study Circle cold and limited. But "it is merely that the practitioners have clarified and reduced to a state of fact all the feelings that the member can enjoy in the most nebulous form". A century after Coleridge there is Professor Bradley. In his work on the tragedies he comes perhaps nearest to being the perfect interpreter, and this despite a tendency to be at moments over-subtle and to examine the characters beyond the play. He approaches the tragedies with no bias, no thesis of his own to be imposed. With unmatched sensitiveness he unfolds the poetic shaping of character, lets the play reveal its own tragic import, and leaves us with the feeling that what he has analyzed was poet's creation. Throughout, the imaginative attitude is maintained; his impressions never grow cold.

Although in the quarter century since *Shakespearean Tragedy* nothing of a like quality has appeared, there are manifest signs that contemporary criticism is healthily veering to the centre, to

a recognition that we must know Shakespeare as a poet. This is perhaps seen most clearly and interestingly in the work of a group who may be called, for lack of a fitter name, technical critics. Their common aim is to answer as far as they can the finally unanswerable question: how does Shakespeare as poet achieve his effects? Can we, even in a degree, share in the creative act of his expression? As typical of this kind of interest there are the Essays and Prefaces of Mr. Granville Barker, in which he follows Shakespeare's progress in rendering his medium more and more capable of what he takes to be the dramatist's highest achievement, the poetic revelation of the inner mind of man. There are the chapters by Professor Stoll in his *Poets and Playwrights* where he speaks of the methods of character presentment. There are, too, those, like Miss Holmes and Miss Spurgeon, who would seek to examine the style, and on this level to throw light on the peculiar working of Shakespeare's creative mind. Perhaps, however, the finest recent achievement of this technical criticism is found here and there in the Essays of Mr. Middleton Murry, the passage, for example, in his *Problem of Style* where he analyses the subtle orchestration of Cleopatra's last speech, and reveals convincingly how Shakespeare has based his effect on "the double contrast of Cleopatra the queen changing into Cleopatra the woman, while Charmian lifts her into the queen again".

Such technical commentary exemplifies an approach to the plays which could in sensitive hands profitably be followed further. Moreover, like all the best written on Shakespeare's drama, it fulfils the conditions which, I have maintained, are those necessary for central criticism; it helps to elucidate the significance of the play, and it does not forget that Shakespeare was first and foremost a poet.