SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

SHAKESPEARE THE ELIZABETHAN

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EVER since Ben Jonson, in his memorial verses for the first Folio, wrote, 'He was not of an age, but for all time', there have been admirers who have rejoiced to separate Shakespeare from his period, to deny that his work should be interpreted in historical and biographical terms, and to assert that his plays should be considered as isolated phenomena having no connexion with the man or his environment but as artefacts as anonymous as the Bushman paintings, or the Hittite sculptures in the Ankara Museum.

In the nineteenth century this tendency was strengthened by the Romantics' ignorance of the sixteenth and their adulation of Shakespeare for his inventiveness and poetry, and also by the Germanic belief that a Genius was a divinely inspired embodiment of Nature producing imaginative creations completely separated from the practical or rational order of existence. The legend of Shakespeare's lack of learning supported the idea that his mind was naïve and beyond analysis, and although Coleridge insisted that 'Shakespeare's judgement was equal to his Genius', the notion that the man completely effaced himself in the artist died hard. Hence Matthew Arnold's sonnet beginning:

> Others abide our question; thou art free.
> We ask and ask. Thou smilest, and art still,
> Out-topping knowledge. . . .

And Robert Browning rejected Wordsworth's assertion that the Sonnets were autobiographical:

> '*With this same key*
> *Shakespeare unlocked his heart*' once more!
> Did Shakespeare? If so, the less Shakespeare he!

The later nineteenth century with its passion for biographical criticism, and the twentieth with its psychological approach and more detailed historical and theatrical scholarship, certainly reversed this trend and produced many striking proofs of

Shakespeare's interest in events and personages of his time and of his participation in contemporary ideas and stage-fashions.

More recently in a wave of revulsion against biographical and psychological interpretations some critics have misapplied Mr. T. S. Eliot's dictum, 'poetry is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality', and have sought to separate Shakespeare's work from its environment and even from its theatrical purpose, seeing the play as essentially a *poem* in which imagery and style are more important than action or characters; everything is subordinated to 'total situation', the play becomes 'an expanded metaphor', and the words on the page are meant to be explicated in the study rather than enacted on the stage.

The existence and profitable application of diverse interpretations are not to be deplored. They often prove a great artist's excellence. Carlyle wrote of Shakespeare's 'unconscious intellect', 'there is more virtue in it than he himself is aware of. . . . The latest generations of men will find new meanings in Shakespeare, new elucidations of their own human being; . . . concurrences with later ideas, affinities with the higher powers and senses of man'.[1] Certainly Shakespeare means something different to every age, because he is one of those who, in Sainte Beuve's words, 'have permanently increased the sum of the mind's delights and possessions'.

Shakespeare did this, not by trying to do so, not by writing for posterity or striving for immortality (except perhaps in one or two Sonnets), not by ignoring the times in which he lived or the stage by which he lived, but by embodying many current beliefs, prejudices, and attitudes, by making the most of the conditions of his profession as a playwright, and by infusing into the literary tradition which he inherited the special qualities which lift him above the ruck of Elizabethan poets and dramatists. 'Genius is always above its age', wrote Blake. Indeed; yet the nature of the great poet is often the more intelligible the more we know of the age, since he is usually a person in whom what Pater called 'the stir, the genius, the sentiment of the period' found itself.

It is fitting therefore on this fourth centenary of Shakespeare's birth to inquire into some features of his work which made him the poet of his age as well as of all time.

The surviving comments of his contemporaries throw some light on the way he was regarded during his life. After Robert

[1] T. Carlyle, '*The Hero as Poet*'.

Greene in 1592 had attacked him as an actor turned plagiarizing playwright ('an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers') whose *Henry VI* had stolen the true dramatist's thunder, Henry Chettle's apology has some significance, for it refers not only to Shakespeare's 'uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty' but also to 'his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art'.

'Facetious grace' and similar phrases were long bestowed on Shakespeare, often more because of his narrative poems than of his plays. Thus Richard Barnefield in 1598 wrote of his 'hony-flowing Vaine' in *Venus* and *Lucrece*, and John Weever in 1599 called him 'honie-tong'd Shakespeare' in respect of these, but also praised *Romeo* and *Richard*, and

> more whose names I know not,
> Their sugred tongues, and power attractive beauty
> Say they are Saints althogh that Saints they shew not,
> For thousands vowes to them subjective dutie.

Francis Meres (in *Palladis Tamia*) ranked 'mellifluous and hony-tongued Shakespeare' with Sidney, Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Marlowe, and Chapman among those by whom 'the English tongue is mightily enriched, and gorgiouslie invested in rare ornaments and resplendent abiliments'. He was the best for 'Comedy and Tragedy' among the English. After this Ben Jonson (in the first Folio) praised Shakespeare for surpassing Lyly,

> Or sporting Kyd, or Marlowes mighty line

and, despite his lack of classical learning, for uniting Nature with Art. In his *Timber* essays he declared that his friend

> was (indeed) honest, and of an open, and free nature: had an excellent *Phantsie*; brave notions, and gentle expressions: wherein hee flow'd with that facility, that sometime it was necessary he should be stop'd. . . . His wit was in his owne power; would the rule of it had beene so too.

Jonson probably referred to Shakespeare's effervescent fancy in company, as well as in his writing.

Others paid tribute to his dramatic skill: Antony Scoloker in 1604 noted the success of both the comedy and tragedy in *Hamlet*; John Webster (1612) referred to 'the right happy and copious industry of M. *Shake-speare*, M. *Decker*, and M. *Heywood*'; and Thomas Heywood long afterwards (1635) declared that his 'inchanting Quill/Commanded Mirth or Passion'.[1]

[1] These and many other contemporary allusions are given in E. K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare*, 1930, ii. 186–237.

The criticism of Shakespeare during his life and for many years afterwards did not strike deep, and indeed not until Dryden was any real attempt made to examine his powers. He was often classed with other playwrights, obviously because he was regarded as a typical writer, whose subjects and treatment were not seen as at all unusual. He did with special grace what others were doing at the time, and was remarkable chiefly for ease, elegance, industry, and versatility.

This last quality, versatility, was called forth by professional circumstances as well as by his nature. As an actor-playwright in companies closely associated with the Court, he wrote or adapted plays not only for the popular open-air theatre but also on occasion for performance at the Inns of Court (*Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, probably *Troilus*), at Whitehall (perhaps *Twelfth Night*), and in noble houses (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*); finally he probably wrote for a select indoor theatre, the Blackfriars. This variety of audience caused Shakespeare to become a dramatist not only for the common people but also for critical and sophisticated audiences of lawyers and men-about-town. These gentlemen were inclined to hold him lightly as a purveyor of light entertainment, and that he ruefully accepted their judgement some Sonnets may indicate, where he speaks of his 'outcast state' (29) and regrets his lack of 'public honour and proud titles' (25). Yet this does not mean that he scorned his dramatic work or did not put the best of himself into it. Over eighteen years he averaged nearly two plays a year (usually a comedy and a history or a tragedy). Some of these may have been pot-boilers (though we should beware of dismissing the plays we least like in this way). But the skilful organization and fullness of most of them, the richness of cross-references and the careful balance of emotional tensions, the mastery of stage-techniques and the poetic dexterity or intensity, show that he approached each play as a new problem and created for it a special atmosphere. It is hard to believe Jonson's assertion that he 'never blotted out line'. Heminge and Condell also declared that 'wee have scarce received from him a blot in his papers', but one suspects that there must have been 'foul papers' behind the fair copies, and that he probably played up slightly to his reputation as one who wrote with consummate ease.

Having begun as a *Johannes factotum* of the theatre he remained an adaptor and improver rather than a conscious innovator. He rarely troubled to create a plot, but took them from the

common stock of Elizabethan popular reading—from the chroniclers Hall, Holinshed, and Foxe, from Chaucer and lesser poets, from Ovid, modern romances, and short stories, and from other plays. He learned the tricks of his trade from Plautus, Lyly, and Greene in comedy, from Seneca, Kyd, and Marlowe in tragedy (though Marlowe may also have learned from him), and he was never above taking a hint from a rival dramatist. Some of his plays indeed may have been deliberate replies or counter-blasts to pieces recently produced or revived by other companies—*Troilus* for instance, and *Henry VIII*. He would gladly seize on an old play such as *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* or *King Leir*, and remould it completely. He was quick to adapt himself to changing stage fashions, to new popular cults such as that of the Melancholy man, who was heralded by Arthur in *King John* (iv. 1. 14–16)

> I remember when I was in France
> Young gentlemen would be as sad as night
> Only for wantonness;

sketched in the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*; portrayed satirically in the sentimental Jaques of *As You Like It*; and raised to tragic stature in *Hamlet*. The Malcontent, the satiric railer, the court fop are other contemporary types used.

Shakespeare was not a topical dramatist in the sense of accurately reproducing English daily life and making references to current personalities and fashions the mainstay of his comedy. He lacked the journalist's insatiable eye for trivia, and he never became, like Jonson or Middleton, a social cartoonist. He set most of his comedies and tragedies abroad or in the past. Yet one has only to turn the pages of *Shakespeare's England*[1] to realize how rich his plays are in passing allusions to dress and furniture, heraldry and music, meals, the life of town and country, horsemanship and games. At their most romantic they are firmly based in a life like that of Elizabethan England.

More generally the plays often show what might be called a 'distanced topicality', as if the dramatist, without explicitly saying so, expected the audience to draw parallels. Thus *Henry VI, Part I*, with its war in France and sieges, would be topical between 1589 and 1592 when English gentlemen and troops were assisting Henry of Navarre. *The Merchant of Venice* may

[1] Ed. S. Lee and C. T. Onions, 2 vols., 1916; see also *Shakespeare Survey 15*, 1962.

have been written soon after the execution of the Portuguese Jew Lopez for an alleged attempt on the life of Queen Elizabeth. *Macbeth* was obviously meant to appeal to the new king's pride of ancestry and his interest in witchcraft. Lastly, *Coriolanus* (an out-of-the-way subject) may have been written in 1608 as a warning against class-hatred when there had recently been risings in the Midlands caused by land-inclosures and a corn-shortage.

Shakespeare's development as a playwright was thus the result of interplay between social and theatrical influences and the natural development of a well-balanced yet passionate imagination. Hence the several overlapping phases often noted in his career, which, keeping E. K. Chambers's dates, I would characterize as: (1) political propaganda and structural experiment (–1592); (2) lyrical fancy and witty rhetoric (1592–6); (3) humorous ethical comedy (1596–1600); (4) tragedy and tragicomedy of good and evil (1600–8); (5) tragicomedy of reconciliation (1608–11). In the remainder of this lecture I shall touch on a few topics indicative of this development.

Shakespeare was a willing conformist in politics and religion, an orthodox supporter of the Tudor régime and the established Church, believing in the divine right of kings and the hierarchic principle. Indeed a great deal of his worldly success may have been due to the ordinariness of his views, his acceptance of the Establishment, and his ability to embody in his plays commonsense ideas which most people in his audience could accept without question. For Shakespeare, as for Spenser and Donne, all human activities were affected by the vitalistic theory of correspondences which linked all creation in a divine order in which 'natural' and 'supernatural' were not opposites but a continuous gradation of being.

Too much has been written in the past thirty years about Shakespeare's expression of these beliefs in his English Histories for me to discuss them here, but they are a major conditioning factor in his imaginative view of mankind. Indeed the ideas of order, of obedience to magistrates, of the evils of dissension were so inherent in Elizabethan thought that he did not expound the full doctrine until Ulysses' great speech in *Troilus and Cressida* (i. 3.), written at a time when the old order was changing rapidly and true values must be restated.

In the early Histories the assumptions are ever-present as the dramatist reveals the difficulties of a realm with a child-king who grows up an unpolitic saint fit only to dream of a shepherd's

quiet life while the Battle of Turton rages near by; shows the descent into chaos of a country where 'the vulture of sedition feeds on the bosom' of great noblemen, and private passions augment public rivalries till there emerges the monstrous Machiavellian tyrant Richard III.

Shakespeare's English Histories were written out of chronological order and we can either rearrange them so as to present, as in Hall's Chronicle, a great sweep of history from Richard II to Richard III, or see them as indicating in their order of composition a development in Shakespeare's attitude to the general subject. The first tetralogy is all passionate display, Machiavellian intrigue, violent action and stylized rhetoric, and Richard III is almost the first character to talk like a man rather than a heraldic figure.

In the second tetralogy the interest broadens to include both the spiritual problems of being a king and a wider and more intimately painted social canvas. The weak monarch, barely sketched in *Henry VI*, exposes himself as a self-pitying fanciful introvert in *Richard II*; his supplanter proves to be no tyrant but a correct, self-tormenting anxious father in *Henry IV*; and the whole culminates in the depiction of Henry V as the hero-king.

In moving about the century of civil wars Shakespeare underwent many influences, the chroniclers themselves with their detail, the *Mirror for Magistrates*, the plays of Seneca with their turgid supernatural and display of passions, Machiavelli and Marlowe's power-complex, the political ballads. In consequence, wrote *The Times* reviewer of a recent Stratford production of *Richard II*, 'The eight plays of Shakespeare's cycle of English histories amount to our nearest approach to a national epic' (*The Times*, 16 April 1964).

It would be interesting to turn aside and inquire why the Elizabethans with all their heroic ardour and the endurances of their exploring captains, the upsurge of national feeling in the queen's reign, did not produce an epic poem equal to the *Lusiads* of Camões. I must only suggest, in the light of Shakespeare's plays, Spenser's allegory, and the patriotic poems of Daniel and Drayton, that for all their patriotism and enterprise the Elizabethan writers were too self-critical for epic, too affected by the Reformation and the moral restrictions of their literary theory, too matter of fact, too afraid of their country's future, to sustain the heroic note for long. When every historical poem must be a 'Mirror for Magistrates' the influence of that dreary collection of ghostly complaints was fatal to heroic action. Moreover,

good writers like Daniel and Drayton had too great a respect for the Chronicles to do much more than versify them. At moments George Peele could rise with some sense of strain to an approximate elevation, as in his 'Farewell to Sir John Norris and Sir Francis Drake' (1589):

> To arms, to arms, to honourable arms!
> Hoise sails, weigh anchors up, plough up the seas
> With flying keels; plough up the land with swords.
> In God's name venture on, and let me say
> To you, my mates, as Caesar said to his,
> Striving with Neptune's hills; 'You bear,' quoth he,
> 'Caesar and Caesar's fortune in your ships' . . .
>
> O ten times treble happy men, that fight
> Under the cross of Christ and England's queen,
> And follow such as Drake and Norris are!

But there is too much fustian in it; and the pages of Hakluyt testify that the English practical genius was already turning more to the geographical and economic sides of exploration than to an imaginative rendering. Even Shakespeare's Histories for the most part remained too deliberately exemplary for epic as he moved from a panoramic interplay of individual moral conflicts (in *Henry VI*) to an expansive blend of comedy and politics (in *Henry IV*) and so to the high magniloquence of *Henry V*. Here at least he achieved moments of dramatic epic, though he felt obliged to apologize in his Choruses for the inadequacies of the theatre. When later he used some of his reading about the explorations he made the voyages to Virginia and the Bermudas merely the starting-point for his gracious morality in *The Tempest*.

The early Histories tested Shakespeare's constructive power and in manipulating the not very coherent narrative of the Chronicles he learned several lessons—to consult several authorities, to organize the material by contrast and parallel, rearranging where necessary, and to obtain unity of effect by suffusing the whole with a poetic tone derived from brooding long and seriously over the sources. This organizing ability as much as his peculiar poetic talent distinguishes the young Shakespeare from his fellow dramatists, Marlowe and Kyd, Peele and Greene. History provided so much material that he was encouraged to be prodigal in his use of it. Incidents which would suffice his contemporaries for a whole play he gets through in an act, for a major feature of his work is incessant activity, a teeming fertility of incident, character, and language.

Hence in his first comedies Shakespeare's problem was

invention—not how to spin out one slender thread of narrative, but to interweave enough material to make the piece long enough for 'the two hours traffic of our stage'. He solved it by duplication, contrast, and the infusion of additional matter. Thus in *The Comedy of Errors* the doubling of the twins gives occasion for scenes of comic misunderstanding not in Plautus, and the *Amphitryon* is drawn on to eke out the *Menaechmi*. In *The Taming of the Shrew* the wooing of Bianca (adapted from Gascoigne's *Supposes*) is contrasted with the taming of Katharine by Petruchio; and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the contrast between sober age, headstrong youth, fairies, and guildsmen is carried to fantastic lengths. Nor is this enough to satisfy Shakespeare's desire for variety and close-packed incident. All three pieces are examples of the inset-play—a dramatic equivalent no doubt of the story-within-a-story which he had read in Sidney, Montemayor, and Greek romances.

The predicament of Aegeon in *The Comedy of Errors*; the translation of Sly the tinker to a castle not unlike Kenilworth or Warwick where he watches the comedy of the shrew; the nuptials of Theseus and Hippolyta announced and celebrated during the action (with the mechanicals' burlesque of Pyramus and Thisbe) not only lengthen the piece but also give it an additional dimension by placing the plot and characters in a wider social setting.

Shakespeare's sense of a large natural order of society was not confined to his Histories and Tragedies. In the Comedies too it gave a unique fullness and vitality to his portrayal of life in palaces and mansions, where he rejoiced to include as many social levels as possible, princes and pedants, courtiers and their kitchenfolk, counsellors and hangers-on, so that each play presents a microcosm of the world, and the household itself is often seen against the background of the state. Shakespeare's dukes afford an instructive study, the stern just arbiters who gradually take on a more intimate interfering role, till the lurking duke of dark corners in *Measure for Measure* both starts the action and conducts it to its ambiguous ending, and Prospero in *The Tempest* is the complete manipulator of other men's lives. Such are the privileges of the great; but these two also illustrate the wisdom of Sidney's Philanax who advises the philosopher-king Basilius not to withdraw from court-life: 'Let your subjects have you in their eyes: let them see the benefites of your justice dayly more and more.'[1] The monarch must never surrender his responsibility, and the Duke is a little monarch.

[1] *Arcadia*, ed. Feuillerat, i. 25, lib. 1, ch. 4.

Shakespeare loves to show the noble household as an active organism with gaiety and good sense operating at all levels. How delightfully he sketches the nobleman among his entourage in *The Shrew!* His greeting to the Players, which so nearly anticipates Hamlet's, suggests that this was how Shakespeare (recalling bitter experiences on tour) wished it might always be done:

Lord. Now fellows, you are welcome.
Players. We thank your honour.
Lord. Do you intend to stay with me tonight?
Players. So please your lordship to accept our duty.
Lord. With all my heart. This fellow I remember,
Since once he played a farmer's eldest son;
'Twas where you woo'd the gentlewoman so well.
I have forgot your name; but, sure, that part
Was aptly fitted and naturally perform'd.

and later:

Go sirrah; take them to the buttery,
And give them friendly welcome every one;
Let them want nothing that my house affords.
(*Ind.*, sc. 2)

Then there are the revels in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado*, the ball in *Romeo and Juliet*, where hospitality banishes enmity—the different degrees of formality portrayed, the sprightly conversation of lords and ladies, the pertness of pages, the crudities of the menials. Where, one wonders, did Shakespeare learn to handle so smoothly the conversation of these nobles, to represent the glittering surface of Court life, the courtly manners, and an ideal of conduct which came more and more to enrich his plays with delicate moral purport?

From observation to some extent no doubt, especially after acquaintance with Southampton and other noblemen gave him occasional admittance to their circles; for Elizabethan society had achieved a certain elegance and formality of social intercourse, as surviving letters and State Papers show. Undoubtedly he owed much to his reading, for the life he depicts could often come straight from the pages of Boccaccio, Bandello, Cinthio, or from Castiglione, whose *Courtier* (trans. Sir Thomas Hoby, 1561) provided an eloquent exposition (in dialogues where the ladies' wit rivals the gentlemen's) of the training, equipment, manners, and high ideals of the true courtier. An attempted revival of chivalry at the queen's court had been encouraged by Sidney and Spenser, and Shakespeare's debt to the *Arcadia* and

The Faerie Queene was considerable. They both preached the life of noble action and gave a highly idealized picture of courtly life and love which he dramatized, though without their allegorical leanings.

Shakespeare from the first was not only a popular but a courtly dramatist, 'submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind', and seeking in the action of each play some informing ethical principle, however slight, which would recur like a theme in music and relate the parts to the whole. Between plays written in the same period the repetition of the same themes gives a clue to Shakespeare's imaginative habits, and proves that he was interested in what interested many other men at the time. Thus although *The Comedy of Errors* was conceived mainly as a farce, the *Menaechmi* of Plautus suggested the question of marital relations, and the hint of shrewishness in Antipholus of Ephesus's wife is developed into an important topic, for it excuses the husband's absence from home, gives substance to the personality of the newly invented sister Luciana who reproves her sister for ill treating him, and provides a theme for a short sermon by the Abbess who proves to be Antipholus's long-lost mother.

In *The Taming of the Shrew* the fabliau question 'How to manage a wife' not only shapes the main plot, but is used to correlate the Bianca-plot too, so that the play is about two different ways of wooing and winning wives, and culminates in the wager by which Petruchio proves that his brutal methods are more effective than those of Italianate love-intrigue; for whereas the romantic bride refuses to come at her bridegroom's bidding, the tamed Katharine comes and delivers a sermon on the rightful subjection of women: 'Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign! . . .' Both of these plays accept the bourgeois standards of sex-relationships (as expressed in the jest-books rather than in the popular works on family government), and the appearance of Sly is doubtless not only to expand the play but also to make a refined audience accept the more readily this coarse-grained homespun yarn suitable as a lesson for a tinker.

Two Gentlemen of Verona is on the 'Titus and Gisippus' theme of loyalty and disloyalty in friendship and love. Here Shakespeare has turned from bourgeois simplicity to the courtly ways of thinking which were henceforth most to occupy him, and the ideal of friendship he portrays here and elsewhere—as a virtuous relationship at least as desirable as love between the sexes—he

shared with romancers like Sidney, Lyly, and Greene, as well as with Sir T. Elyot (bk. II, xi–xii) and Montaigne (who called true friendship 'a general and universal heat, and equally tempered . . . all pleasure and smoothness, that hath no pricking or stinging in it' (bk. I, ch. 27)).

When Shakespeare wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he had come to accept the notion of romantic love as a magic which affected all grades of beings—courtiers, mechanicals, fairies—alike. So the spells of Oberon and Puck, the loves of Bottom and Titania, and the young people, the dream which they all share, become the source of a new fanciful poetry, and the enchantment is not disproved by Theseus's reasonable attempt at dismissal:

> The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.

For Shakespeare comedy implied an admission and exploitation of the notion that love was a lightning yet lasting enchantment, a fine madness making life like a dream and inspiring the poetic mind to invention and rhetoric.

The amorous inevitability gently laughed at here is defended and analysed with a wealth of psychological terms in *Love's Labour's Lost* where the folly of all ranks from monarch to pedant is not to fall in love, but to think to avoid it. And the contrast between practical experience and the learning got by painful poring over books would have special point when the play was performed before the students at the Inns of Court, and at a time when the virtues of retirement and of study were being warmly debated at Court. In *Romeo and Juliet* the ineluctable passion catches up the adolescent girl and youth into actions 'too rash, too unadvised, too sudden', yet not morally reprehensible, though in opposition to their families and under inauspicious stars which turn accident into fate.

For the comedies written after 1595 Shakespeare chose stories laden with current ethical questions which are more and more directly illustrated or discussed by the characters. So *The Merchant of Venice* is partly concerned with usury, a topic frequently ventilated at the time. But the play is not just about this; for the churlish avarice of Shylock is contrasted with the generosity in friendship of Antonio and the generous gaiety of the other Venetians. Similarly the Jew's vengeful rigour and passionate unreason are set over against Bassanio's rational prudence which brings him to the right Casket, and the reasonable appeals of Portia for mercy and equity. In *Much Ado* the

theme concerns what Spenser called the Blatant Beast, i.e. false report, slander, rumour, which was described so savagely in the last completed Books of the *Faerie Queene* (published in 1596) and at the end of Book VI, despite Sir Calidore's triumph, was still untamed:

> So now he raungeth through the world againe,
> And rageth sore in each degree and state:
> Ne any is, that may him now restraine,
> He growen is so great and strong of late,
> Barking and biting all that him doe bate,
> Albe they worthy blame, or clear of crime:
> Ne spareth he most learned wits to rate,
> Ne spareth he the gentle poets rime,
> But rends without regard of person or of time.

One version of the story of Hero and Claudio was to be found in Spenser, and the difference between Spenser's puritan high seriousness and Shakespeare's gentle balancing of good and evil at this period appears in his augmenting and lightening the slender main plot by inventing a counter-theme on the same basis. The device of the witness, so nearly tragic when manipulated by Don John, becomes broadly comic in Dogberry and Verges, and false report which wrecked the bridal of Hero and Claudio brings about the union of those two courtly enemies Beatrice and Benedick. The Blatant Beast has his good points after all when domesticated by friends and well-wishers. The brittle wit of Lyly's encounters between the sexes is transmuted by a warm appreciation of the pride and fear that cause ambivalence of attitude between them.

This same transference of interest from externals to personal relationships governs the handling of *Twelfth Night*, which is likewise largely based on the popular Renaissance contrast between Appearance and Reality, Pretence and Truth, themes intimately treated in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. Here (besides the revolt of the irresponsible against the unco' guid) comic pretence is associated with Viola's disguise and functions as Orsino's page, and the Italianate rehandling of the 'twin' theme of the *Comedy of Errors* is equalled in importance by the sentimental self-deceit of Orsino and Olivia, and the pathos of Viola's position ('I'll do my best / To woo your lady; yet, a barful strife / Whoe'er I woo, myself would be his wife!'); above all by the monumental self-deception of Malvolio.

Both in the ethical and the structural patterns of these and later comedies we can see the favourite Elizabethan habits of

antithetical and parallel thought. The Elizabethans had a fondness for piquant situations, paradoxes, dilemmas, debatable problems, and in the nineties this frequently found literary expression. One thinks of Landi's paradoxes translated by Anthony Munday in *The Defence of Contraries* (1593), and Donne's early *Paradoxes and Problems*, including 'A Defence of Women's Inconstancy', 'That Good is more common than Evil', 'That Nature is our Worst Guide'. Sometimes the aim was to seek a deeper truth behind the apparent absurdity; sometimes there was a jesting pretence of accepting a cynical premise as true and then correcting it; often the intention was a satiric defence of the indefensible, related to topsyturvy encomia such as Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*.

Perhaps we should view in the light of this literature such a set discourse as the Second Murderer's attack on conscience in *Richard III*:

> I'll not meddle with it: it is a dangerous thing. It makes a man a coward; a man cannot steal but it accuseth him; he cannot swear but it checks him; he cannot lie with his neighbour's wife but it detects him. . . . It beggars any man that keeps it. It is turn'd out of towns and cities for a dangerous thing, and every man that means to live well endeavours to trust to himself and live without it. (i. 4)

Similarly Parolles in *All's Well* dispraises virginity (i. 1) and Helena listens with amusement to his argument, which Tillyard called 'both feeble and indecent' but which would appeal to the audience as much as Falstaff's celebrated attack on Honour in *1 Henry IV*, v. i, in the same tradition.

Shakespeare assimilated such paradoxical utterances into the characters of witty villains, whose general unsoundness is easily recognized by their clever reversal of accepted opinion. So we find Iago in *Othello*, i. 3, discoursing to Roderigo of virtue and love; and Edmund in *King Lear*, i. 2, contradicting his father's assertion 'These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us' with 'This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars.'

Here we pass from the Paradox to the Problem with its suggestion of two opposed opinions. The university system of education by debate (which later was to afford Milton opportunity for rhetorical exercise) fostered a liking for the ventilation of problems by pros and cons, such as were exemplified in

The Oratour, translated by L. Piott from the French of Alexander Silvayn (1596). This volume contained 'a hundred severall discourses in forme of declamations' by which 'thou maiest learne Rhettoricke, to inforce a good cause, and art to impugne an ill'. Each 'declamation' began with the statement of some difficult case which was usually followed by two contrasting speeches. Many came from Livy's Roman history, e.g. no. 88, 'Of Horatius who slew his sister that bewailed the death of her husband'; others from later story. Four at least have a bearing on Shakespeare. Thus no. 95, 'Of a Jew, who would for his debt have a pound of the Flesh of a Christian' debates the Shylock-Antonio situation in a manner which may have affected Shakespeare's delineation of the Jew by making him realize that there were two sides to every question. Another relevant topic was in Declamation 68, 'Of a maiden who being ravished, did first require her ravisher for a husband, and afterwards [when he refused her] requested his death' and Declamation 61, 'Of two maidens ravished by one man, for the which the one required his death, and the other desired him for her husband'. Both have a bearing on Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, which clearly would be a 'problem-play' to its first audience because it raised the questions, 'What should Angelo's victim do? Surrender her virginity, or resist him? And later, should she have him executed, or marry him?' Shakespeare wound his way out of the dilemma as Whetstone before him in *Promos and Cassandra* did not.

I refer to Silvayn's *Oratour* not because I think Shakespeare was necessarily influenced by that particular book but because it indicates the kinds of problem in which his characters became more and more involved as his ethical sense deepened and his comedy discussed grave issues more confidently. Student celibacy scarcely deserved debate in *Love's Labour's Lost* where the 'unnatural' oath was ridiculed from the start. But in *1 Henry IV* the quality of true knightly Honour was examined and illustrated in the contrast between Glendower, Hotspur, Falstaff, and Prince Hal, which fortunately Shakespeare expressed, not in Spenserian terms of difference between allegorical types of ethical excess or deprivation, but as an opposition of individual men and their ideals in historical situations. Honour in its various aspects remained a dominant theme in the plays of the next six years. In exploring it Shakespeare shared the preoccupation with the nature of nobility in princes and gentlemen which had inspired much 'courtesy-literature' in the Renaissance.

The problem of Honour, with special reference to birth and breeding, was a central feature of *All's Well That Ends Well*, where the brutal boy Bertram is unwilling to marry the physician's daughter Helena because of her low birth, and is answered by the King (whom she has cured) in a fine speech which goes further than most contemporary moralists:

> 'Tis only title thou disdain'st in her, the which
> I can build up . . .
> If she be
> All that is virtuous,—save what thou dislik'st,
> A poor physician's daughter—thou dislik'st
> Of virtue for the name; but do not so
> . . . Good alone
> Is good without a name. Vileness is so:
> The property by what it is should go,
> Not by the title. She is young, wise, fair;
> In these to nature she's immediate heir,
> And these breed honour, etc.
> (ii. 3. 120–36)

The result is a forced marriage, Bertram's angry refusal of cohabitation except under impossible conditions, and the rest of the play is occupied with Helena's humble but unflagging resolution to fulfil the impossibilities demanded.

In *Measure for Measure* the theme of Honour is explored with regard to justice and sex; in *Troilus and Cressida* with regard to heroism and love, doubtless with a satiric eye on the first instalment of Homer's *Iliad* as translated by Chapman (who may have been the Rival Poet in the *Sonnets*) and on other glorifications of the Troy story presented on the stage.

Through the dilemmas and moral predicaments inherent in these sombre comedies and the tragedies which followed we see Shakespeare's art working more and more deeply into the darker impulses of the human mind. There is no need to explain the change by illness or other speculative biographical occurrences. Shakespeare's mind grew richer and more serious with age. Moreover, as a dramatist he was ever responsive to the shifting moods of his time. So as the Elizabethan age petered out in discord and fears for the future, as satires and epigrams poured from the press and were scarcely quelled by the bishops' prohibition of 1599, as Ovid's elegies and *Ars Amatoria* were read instead of the *Metamorphoses*, as Sidney and Spenser gave place to the wild young Donne and licentious Marston, and as the savage humour plays of Jonson took the stage, Shakespeare too

changed his tone, and returned with a mature appreciation of individual motives to the study of inordinate passions which he had sketched from the outside in his early Histories. In the Roman plays Plutarch helped him now with his penetrating portraits of men marred by mixed motives, and the fullness of Plutarch's anecdotal material led Shakespeare to explore further intimacies of impulse in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. From *Hamlet* onwards it is evident that he sought to enter ever more deeply into minds confused by passionate stresses and torn from their normal moorings by the shock of circumstance and an inner lack of rational control. The psychological categories and terminology used were those of contemporary ethical teaching, but Shakespeare transcended theory by his insight into individual motivation in relation to particular situations. A new conception of tragedy resulted in the period 1600–8, as the sympathetic exploration of a mind disintegrating under stress of passion and producing fatal effects in both private and public conduct.

In *Hamlet* perhaps Shakespeare went no further than to expound the confusion in a youthful mind endowed with the noblest contemporary qualities and fully aware of the lofty potentialities which optimistic Renaissance thinkers had seen in mankind, yet disabled by grief, disillusion, and the need to enact a 'dread command'. Here the confusion is but temporary, though its effects are dire. With *Othello* began a series of tragedies in which the total disintegration of the hero's personality and his submergence in evil result from external wickedness co-operating with a weakness within himself. From Jonson and Marston, Shakespeare had learned the trick of the Malcontent commentator, the coarse cynical railer at goodness and love, whom he had created in Parolles and Thersites to ascribe foul motives to honourable desires and to spew out their own filth on all humanity. Now in Iago the Malcontent becomes the hypocrite tempter in a tragedy of innocence seduced into jealousy and murder, and the gracious mind of Othello gradually declines and takes on the lurid colours of his tempter's until, 'perplex'd in the extreme', he welcomes the abominable suggestion: 'Do it not with poison: strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated.' 'Good, good', he replies, 'the justice of it pleases: very good', and sacrifices Desdemona in passionate credulity.

Here evil breeds within the mind of men without supernatural soliciting. But Shakespeare, who believed in astrology

(so that only self-seekers like Cassius and Edmund reject the stars), also believed in devils and witchcraft, and could not confine the Mystery of Iniquity to the human breast. So in *Macbeth* a topic flattering to James I became a study of evil potential in an ambitious mind becoming actual through opportunity and the suggestion of the devil's agents. By the fusion of two Scottish stories from Holinshed the coarse-grained man of action, 'Bellona's bridegroom lapp'd in proof', becomes the victim of his own will, of his ambitious wife, of the witches' prophecies. He abandons loyalty and honour, and suppressing the gentler part of his nature goes down through murder into ever deepening mistrust, bloodshed, and isolation. *Macbeth* is a dual picture of self-damnation. Lady Macbeth gives herself up to demons:

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here;
> And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
> Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood,
> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th'effect and it . . .
>
> (i. 5. 37–44)

But she cannot wholly unsex herself. Her conscience walks in sleep, and by 'self and violent hands' she takes her life.

Similarly Macbeth soon realizes how vainly he has 'Put rancours in the vessel of my peace', and 'mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man'. He who was willing to 'jump the life to come' if he could avoid 'judgment here', finds judgement in the opposition he arouses, in sleeplessness, and in the realization of utter futility: 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day.' The ultimate irony of their guilt is that, try as they may, they cannot divest themselves of their humanity.

In *King Lear* Shakespeare goes deeper still into the mystery of iniquity, as he portrays a state of society dangerously near the end prophesied by Ulysses, when

> Strength should be lord of imbecility,
> And the rude son should strike his father dead,
> Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong—
> Between whose endless jar justice resides—
> Should lose their names and so should justice too.

Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.
(*T.* & *C.*, i. 3. 114–24)

In the atheistic Edmund and the ravenous sisters 'appetite' is indeed an universal wolf which finally 'eats up itself'. The old King who forgets his duty to his kingdom and his best daughter brings a disproportionate punishment on himself for his double offence against his state and natural kindness. The elements themselves rise indifferently against him and beat down his efforts to rival their ferocity, till in madness he learns his naked equality with his meanest subjects, and comes through senility to patience. Likewise the irascible Gloucester, punished excessively for his bygone sin of sensuality and his virtue of loyalty, finds solace, and dies between joy and grief.

The tragedy here is of sin and regeneration. But what of the end, changed by Shakespeare to insist on Cordelia's execution and Lear's grief and death in hope unjustified? We recall Albany's despairing cry previously:

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come,
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep.
(iv. 2. 46–50)

The heavens do not send down their visible spirits; and despite the bitterness of the end they do not need to do so. Goodness has triumphed, though arduously, and a new order is possible under Edgar. Here Shakespeare attains a tragedy beyond poetic justice, where the only assurance consists in the positive quality of human goodness. *Lear* lacks the explicit faith of that favourite Renaissance biblical hero Job: 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him', and even the hard-won mastery of Milton's last Chorus in *Samson*:

All is best though we oft doubt
What the unsearchable dispose
Of Highest Wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.

Shakespeare knew well that his was a time of cruelty and persecutions, of

> maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
> And right perfection wrongfully disgrac'd, . . .
> And captive good attending captain ill.
> (*Son.* 66)

In *King Lear* he came to terms with it, as we have to with our own age of cruelty and persecution, torture chambers and genocide. As Mr. D. J. Enright wrote in a moving elegy, 'The monsters we must live with.' That Shakespeare had learned to do this was certainly due to his Christian training, which affects his imagery even in this pre-Christian play with allusions to redemption and grace. After this vindication of goodness as the light shining in the world's blackest darkness it is not surprising to find that Shakespeare in his last play makes the magician Duke Prospero turn sorrow to joy and division to reconciliation, with an explicit insistence on repentance and self-knowledge.

Shakespeare was not a philosophical sceptic like Montaigne, who in the words of Professor Don Cameron Allen, 'adorns the skeptical tenets of Pyrrhonism . . . with the green wreaths of Christian approval.'[1] Nor did he ever show the urgent salvationism of Donne or the dreary obsession with his own and the world's misdeeds found in Greville. He was an *anima naturaliter Christiana* who rarely doubted that there was a Providence in the fall of a sparrow, but expressed his love of goodness in purely human terms; a rare habit in that period of religious conflict.

In this address I have tried to call up before your minds the versatile courtly dramatist, the unacademic writer who excels the university wits, the dramatist of romantic love, of Honour in public and personal life, of loyalty and human kindness; whose work grows more penetrating, richer and more profound as he ages, and whose great tragedies, rising above his Senecan beginnings, plumb the depths of human suffering without lasting pessimism or disgust with human nature. This then is 'gentle Shakespeare', gentle indeed but in the Elizabethan senses of noble, courteous, gracious. A dramatist of immense range and dexterity, of supreme imaginative control, of unity in diversity, a creator of storied worlds, and a great humanist.

In 1599 that master of the plain style, Samuel Daniel, wrote in *Musophilus* a defence of learning against barbarism in which

[1] *Doubt's Boundless Sea*, by Don Cameron Allen, Baltimore, 1964, p. 86.

he paid a noble tribute to the English language and its potentialities:

> Power above power, O heavenly Eloquence
> That with the strong rein of commanding words
> Dost manage, guide and master th'eminence
> Of men's affections, more than all their swords.

He went on to prophesy the spread of the English language beyond the seas:

> Or who can tell for what great work in hand
> The greatness of our style is now ordained? . . .
> What powers it shall bring in, what spirits command?
> What thoughts let out, what humours keep restrained?
> What mischief it may powerfully withstand;
> And what fair ends may thereby be attained?

Daniel did not realize that in Shakespeare 'the greatness of our style' was already at work and to what fair ends. Looking back with the hindsight of nearly 400 years we know better today.