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# SHAKESPEARE



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# SHAKESPEARE

ALLARDYCE NICOLL

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by

ALLARDYCE

NICOLL



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## CHAPTER I

### THE BACKGROUND

DURING the last fifty years a vast cry of critics has swooped down on Shakespeare, and as a result the Shakespeare library, already by 1900 alarmingly extensive, has grown to mammoth proportions. Every year sees another yard-long shelf of volumes on the poet's life, his interests, his reading, his plays. Speculation runs riot and specialism rules. Perhaps the time is not far distant when certain scholars, instead of devoting themselves to Shakespeare's works generally, will restrict their attentions to single dramas. Even now it would take a man many years to become thoroughly conversant with the widely-flung literature on *Hamlet* or on *King Lear*.

For this critical activity there is ample justification. The sceptical twenties and thirties were sometimes inclined to regard the great flow of books and articles as merely part of 'The Shakespeare Industry', but of late we have been becoming more and more aware of 'The Shakespeare Wonder', of the unique position Shakespeare occupies in the world's literature. It is true that there are other authors, Homer and Dante for example, who have passed beyond the frontiers of place and time, and whose works give delight both to specialists and to ordinary readers; but not one of these other poets can claim such allegiance as Shakespeare does. During the three hundred years since his death he has not merely

retained his hold upon the English stage and continued to provide popular reading texts, he has also penetrated into the farthest reaches of the globe. The East celebrates his glories hardly less than the West. Beyond religion and politics he has moved serene. Amid the clash of modern ideologies his works are secure. Moscow and Warsaw join with his own London in paying tribute to his genius.

Not one other writer can claim the position he so confidently occupies. Men like Racine and Goethe and Schiller are, like Marlowe's kings, obeyed in their several provinces; only he is the true magician, god-like in his empery, with all things between the quiet poles at his command. To explain and to interpret this eminence demands that his work be scrutinized both minutely and from diverse points of view. Once and for all a lesser, yet still great, poet may be expounded in some brilliant critical volume: the excuse for the innumerable volumes on Shakespeare rests in the fact that the wonder which is in him defies exact description, that it constantly reveals fresh facets and that we can hardly imagine a time when we shall have exhausted the magic and become absolute masters of the mystery.

# I

At the same time, when confronted with the enormous array of critics, jostling one another, stoutly testifying to their several beliefs, debating, contradicting, prophesying, we may feel prepared to put a despairing question: how can anyone hope, in the midst of these warring factions, to reach a reasoned judgement on Shakespeare's works?

There is not a single play which has not become

matter for fierce debate, and whole divisions of critics are arrayed in battle order, with dire threatenings trumpeting forth their challenge. Under one banner stand the historical critics, determined to regard Shakespeare only as an Elizabethan, a practising playwright serving up to naïve spectators what they wanted and not thinking in terms beyond the average of his age. Opposing them are the symbolists, whose Shakespeare is a mystic metaphysician, timeless and supreme, displaying a vision of basic truth. The former see *Hamlet* as a revenge play with many inconsistencies due to the inadequate assimilation of older material, and *Measure for Measure* as a kind of popularly moral fairy-tale; for the latter *Measure for Measure* takes shape as a profound Christian parable and *Hamlet* is a deeply considered whole, with symbolic connotations. Were this all, perhaps the problem would not be so serious, but, even within the serried ranks distinctions appear. During the past few years one of the symbolists finds that the Prince of Denmark is an image of death from whose presence the creatures of earth shrink shudderingly away, against whom they raise their pitiful hands in protest, while another symbolist views the same character as an image of essential life, miserably inhabiting a world of darkness and moral despair. For one critic Isabella's virtue is divine; for his companion that virtue is something rancid.

Besides these larger divisions other troops skirmish about, allying themselves now to one of the greater armies, now to the other. Some declare that Shakespeare belongs wholly to the stage, that only the actors may seek to interpret his lines and that nothing save what can be immediately appreciated by an

audience is worthy of notice. In opposition are those who claim that essentially each one of his plays is a poem, the inner meaning of which can never be fully revealed during the quick traffic of the boards. Scenes which some look upon as spurious because supposedly puerile assume for others a peculiar splendour. This man sees Shakespeare as a Christian, and for that man naught is revealed save a profoundly pagan spirit.

The question with which we started may be repeated. When one book thus cancels out another, what prospect is there, for a reader who is not a specialist in this area, of fashioning an image of Shakespeare that shall not be a portrait dismally confused and lacking all authority? What has this enormous critical activity achieved save removing Shakespeare farther from us?

In seeking an answer to this question, we may as well admit frankly that so far little real attempt has been made at a synthesis of conflicting modern theories. Indeed, we may go even beyond that and confess that the number of these theories is so great and their conclusions so diverse as to make us wonder whether anything less than a great set of volumes could hope to make clear their complexity or could succeed to weave out of their variously coloured threads a comprehensive pattern. Nevertheless, despite these admissions, the fact remains that these variegated researches and speculations have carried us far towards a fuller understanding of Shakespeare's achievement and have largely been responsible for keeping him a living force in our midst.

From Shakespeare we are now removed by three and a half centuries, and the deep chronological

abyss is paralleled by another abyss in thought. Since the days when Des Cartes set up a new philosophy the world has steadily, inexorably and destructively moved forward from scientific discovery to scientific discovery. The whole of life, physical and spiritual, has come to be dominated by the logical thought processes which have borne mankind from Newton's physics to the nuclear physics of the atomic age. The Elizabethan London of Shakespeare's days is separated from us, not simply as are Pope's London or the London of Byron by a lapse of time, but, much more significantly, by a completely different attitude towards the universe, towards nature and towards man. Unaided, we might well now have been unable to contemplate Shakespeare and his companions otherwise than as strangely yet colourfully clad men and women, viewed like mannequins in a museum and instinct with no more vitality than is possessed by wax figures staring fixedly at us with artificially glassy eyes.

Nor is this barrier, imposed by the prevalence of scientific thought, alone. When, some twenty odd years after Shakespeare died, the Puritans took control of England, tore down the maypoles, hacked down the Glastonbury thorn and executed a king, they did more than merely establish a short-lived Protectorate. They effectively set on the people of their own generation and on their descendants a harsh and rigid morality from the influence of which there has been but little escape. In good King Charles's golden days laughter returned for a spell for at least one section of the community, but this laughter was forced and sometimes echoed ominously against the unchanging wall of puritanic sentiment.

Ever since then England has been dominated, consciously or unconsciously, by the influence of the Revolution, thus separating itself off from the mood that inspired the sixteenth century. This was, of course, a world-wide phenomenon, but it affected England possibly more than certain other countries and we may not be wrong in thinking that some modern continental races, particularly the Latin, are, because still largely emotional, nearer in spirit to the Elizabethans than the people of England today.

Fortunately, within recent years, when the intellectual and spiritual cleavage might have banished Shakespeare as a living figure from our midst, many scholars have come forward to provide for us an understanding of his long-lost world. Not only have their efforts provided a counterbalance to the alien weight of scientific thought, it is not too much to say that, collectively, they have placed us in a position even more favourable to the securing of a true appreciation of the Elizabethans than any generation has had since Shakespeare's own time. In the interpretation of his works, the centuries immediately behind us moved darkly, sometimes by sheer intuition reaching a divination of truth but frequently falling into patent errors because in the interim so much that was commonplace to the sixteenth century had been completely forgotten. Now, we stand more securely. Although maybe we do not always make allowance for the disappearance of the Merry England of the past and are consequently inclined to disregard or refute flashes of insight on the part of certain continental critics, so many intimate studies have been made of diverse aspects of Elizabethan life, so many contemporary books have been minutely perused and

so many documents carefully scrutinized, that we can readily, if we are prepared to permit our imagination free play, move back in time to live for a space in Elizabeth's London or to converse with the Stratford citizens of her reign. The knowledge at our disposal goes so far that, if we wished, we could make an almost complete house-to-house register of all the men and women resident in Shakespeare's birth-town for the years of his boyhood or for those of his retirement at New Place; it goes so far that without difficulty we may create in our fancy the average beliefs and aspirations of the time and assess by comparison with them the force of other less orthodox opinions held by small intellectual or sectarian groups. The 'Elizabethan World Picture' has been made familiar to us in books designed both for scholarly and popular reading.

It was a great age that Shakespeare lived in. Perhaps, were we enabled to visit it by the aid of some time machine, we should be shocked by many of its apparent crudities, but, if men of that time lived in constant apprehension of the plague, if an angry dagger's thrust might suddenly end their days, if their eyes were offended by the rotting heads stuck up to view on Tower Bridge, they had compensations a-plenty; we in our times have looked upon vast slaughter and incredible cruelties without comfort of the animating spirit which ruled then. And what deep spiritual force resided in the Elizabethan era is made immediately manifest by the manner in which it not only continues, even now, to exert a mighty spell upon us but also, as it were, seeps back and forward to claim areas not strictly belonging to it. In popular parlance a black-and-white timbered



house built in 1450 will be styled 'Elizabethan', and even scholars writing of the Elizabethan drama are inclined to include everything which appeared on the stage up to 1640. Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, and, if we were to limit ourselves strictly, we should have to refuse the Elizabethan epithet to Shakespeare's greatest triumphs. *Hamlet* would just come in, but *Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, together with the final romances, would all lie outside the pale.

Despite such stretching of chronology, there is yet good reason for thus associating Elizabeth with the whole of the triumphant spirit expressed by Shakespeare and his fellows, and for embracing within this circle something at least which it inherited from the past and much of what it left as legacy for the future. Elizabethan England we now see as a period of extraordinary unity, symbolized in the person of the Queen herself. It was a unity in variety, not the unity dependent upon a drab level of uniformity. A vital democracy existed then, even although (perhaps even because) it was based on such a concept of 'degree' as was so potently expressed by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*. England, the England which moves like an unseen hero through *Richard II*, suddenly assumed for all men a strangely moving spell. Norden and Stow and Camden explored its confines; Holinshed and Hall provided a richly-coloured record of its historical adventures; slightly later, Daniel and Drayton sang its wonders.

This England, too, discovered suddenly its own greatness. Drake and Raleigh carried its little ships over the vast oceans, and in 1588 the Invincible Armada foundered in watery ruin before the stalwart

sailors and the winds of God which aided them. Although the greater part of the treasure of the Indies was passing into the power of Spain, some of these treasures too were being brought to English shores and, more importantly, the very concept of the New World, in the exploration and exploitation of which English voyagers were playing so important a part, was bringing to men's minds fancies rich and strange. 'Fancies' rather than 'thoughts'—because essentially the Elizabethans found their lives coloured, indeed shaped, by their emotions. We have only to read any one of the sonorous sermons of the time to recognize that thought does not follow thought in logical sequence but that emotional concepts burgeon out in luxuriant organic profusion. Instead of the exact exposition of an intellectual prose there is a richly imaginative flow of passionate words. These sermons are symbols of the time. This was not an age conducive to the encouraging of great philosophic inquiry. Men's minds tended to leap forward from passion to passion rather than from idea to idea.

For these men language became primarily an instrument for expressing emotional concepts, and as a consequence it did not require to be bound by the stricter, logical, rational rules which came to be imposed upon it just after Shakespeare's time. His syntax is typical rather than idiosyncratic, with emotional concepts governing the flow of words and often a complete disregard of formal sentence structure. Typical, too, is his obvious intoxication with words. For him and his companions language assumed the glory of a miracle; words became living things and there was a constant delight in observing

their traits, in training them to do tricks, in listening to their bird-song or thrilling to their roar. Those puns which are so frequent in Shakespeare came to him from his age, for word-play of this kind is the result of an enthusiastic attention to sound and significance. When today we conventionally groan as a pun is uttered, we forget that we are unconsciously condemning ourselves: except for our poets, language has lost its living qualities, words have become counters and precise yet vague dictionary definitions have taken the place of subtle inferences.

Every Elizabethan poet and prose-writer was a word-creator, one fetching his trophies from the ancient classical tongues, another unearthing long-forgotten medieval terms, another quarrying in French and Italian mines, still another boldly inventing fresh combinations of sounds to fit fresh concepts. No dictionaries fettered words to the shackles of precise meanings; no grammars imposed heavy rules of behaviour. For the poets, no doubt, the excitement was most intense, but all shared in the current passion. We have but to think of Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Don Armado has just given him some money as remuneration for services rendered. 'Now', says Costard, opening his hand and glancing at the coins,

will I look to his remuneration. Remuneration! O, that's the Latin word for three farthings: three farthings—remuneration. 'What's the price of this inkle?'—'One penny.'—'No, I'll give you a remuneration.' Why, it carries it.—Remuneration!—why it is a fairer name than French crown. I will never buy and sell out of this word.