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Shakespeare's Religion.

AMONG the papers left by the Rev. Richard Davies, Rector of Sapperton, Gloucestershire, and afterwards Archdeacon of Coventry, who died in 1708, was a brief note on Shakespeare which ended with the abrupt words: "He dyed a Papist."¹ The source of his information is unknown, but it is the only report we possess of Shakespeare's personal faith. It is usually dismissed with ridicule. It is "idle gossip," according to Sir Sidney Lee.² It is "just the kind of story a parson of the time would delight in crediting and circulating about one of those harlotry players," says Dover Wilson.³ And Dr. J. J. Mackail agrees: "Seventeenth century Puritanism, which closed the theatres, was ready to invent or accept anything that was to their discredit, or to the discredit of anyone connected with them."⁴ Nevertheless, the statement is not to be dismissed so lightly. There is no reason for thinking that Davies was a Puritan or that he delighted in recording discreditable stories about players. The note suggests that he was a man of literary tastes, that he was sufficiently interested in Shakespeare to gather what information he could, and even that, when it was made, Shakespeare's fame was secure. Had not Milton the puritan long since laid a wreath upon his tomb? In any inquiry into Shakespeare's religion the note must be taken into account. But the question, if it can be answered at all, must be set in the large context of his age and, with due regard to their dramatic character, of his works.

When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 it cannot be said that England, though anti-papal, was yet a Protestant country. No doubt the Marian persecution had alienated the masses of the people and greatly strengthened the Protestant movement. As Chesterton admits: "It is true, when all is said, that she set herself to burn out 'No Popery' and managed to burn it in."⁵ But, apart from the anti-papal feeling, the people were still Catholic in faith. It was mainly the course of events—the excommunication of the Queen in 1570 and again in 1583, the terrible massacre of St. Bartholomew and consequent immigration of the Huguenots in 1572, the Armada in 1588, and the dangerous Catholic plots—which identified patriotism with the

¹ Chambers: *Short Life of Shakespeare*, 232.

² *Shakespeare: Life and Works (ab. ed.)* 145.

³ *The Essential Shakespeare*, 130.

⁴ *Companion to Shakespeare Studies*.

⁵ *Short History of England*.

Protestant cause, that finally converted England. To all this must be added the religious policy of Elizabeth and her statesmen which in a few years, and for the time, did succeed in including the greater part of Catholics and Protestants in one National Church. But in Shakespeare's time the air was thick with theological controversy, and perhaps not since the days of Athanasius when Arianism was debated in mart and street were the great issues of religion more generally discussed.

Shakespeare was born in 1564 of Catholic parents who were married in Mary's reign. At the time John Shakespeare, his father, was prosperous and owned property in Stratford. In the eighteenth century his will was discovered in the roof of one of his houses in Henley Street. It probably dates from these earlier years, and is conventionally Catholic in its devotional clauses. He died in 1601. Shakespeare's mother, who lived until 1608, was Mary Arden, an heiress in a small way, who came of an ancient county family which was devoutly Catholic. It has been widely thought that John Shakespeare became a Recusant in 1592, when his name appears in a list of persons to be prosecuted "for not comminge monethlie to the church according to hir Majestie's lawes."⁶ But opinions differ as to whether he was a catholic or protestant recusant, though the last seems much the less likely. The probability is that he was neither. He was one of the nine mentioned in an appended note: "It is sayd that these last nine coom not to church for feare of process for debtt." Considering the known state of his finances at the time, and that arrests could be made on Sundays, this is most likely to be the true explanation. There is no evidence that he was a religiously-minded man, and there is ample that, after reaching the civic honours of bailiff, chief alderman, and justice of the peace, he was unfortunate in business. It is generally agreed that Shakespeare was educated at the Stratford Grammar School. The headmaster at the time was almost certainly Simon Hunt, who afterwards became a Jesuit. Another pupil, who may have been contemporary with Shakespeare, was Robert Debdale, who was executed in 1586 for complicity in a Catholic plot.⁷

Beyond his marriage in 1582 and the birth of his children in 1583 and 1585, nothing is known of Shakespeare until 1592, when the famous reference of Robert Greene proves him to be already an actor and a writer of plays, and according to Henry Chettle, of good standing among "divers of worship." But if Sir Edmund Chambers' recent conjecture is correct,⁸ he may be

⁶ Chambers: *op. cit.* 14.

⁷ Fripp, *Shakespeare's Haints*, 30ff.

⁸ *Shakespearean Gleanings*, 53.

identified with the player William Shakeshaft (his grandfather was sometimes so called), to whom, with Fulk Gylom (another Warwickshire name), Alexander Houghton of Lee, Lancashire, in 1581 left an annuity of £2, commending the two to his heir, Thomas Houghton, with a legacy of player's "clothes." If Thomas could not provide for the men, the costumes were to go to Sir Thomas Hesketh with the request that he should engage these players. The Houghtons were Catholics, and one member of the family was certainly a recusant. All this is, of course, assumption, but, if it prove true, it throws much needed light on Shakespeare's career before he emerges in London as a man sufficiently important to be attacked and defended in 1592. However this may be, in 1593 and 1594 he published his poems *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and dedicated them to Henry Wriothesley, the third Earl of Southampton, a great patron of letters. The second dedication is in terms of the warmest devotion: "What I have done is yours; what I have to do is yours; being part in all I have, devoted yours." Southampton ultimately became a Protestant, but at the time of these dedications he was a leading Catholic peer.⁹

It could not be but that the world of poetry and the drama into which Shakespeare entered was affected by the grave religious issues of the time. And, despite the sustained attacks of the puritans, it is demonstrable that many dramatists and players took a serious interest in them. Kyd was charged, wrongly as he pleaded, with Arianism, and was even put to the torture. Marlowe was alleged to be an "Atheist" (a vague charge) or, alternatively, with leanings towards Romanism. Ben Jonson was converted to the Roman Church and remained a Catholic for twelve years. Lodge joined the Roman Church and retired from the drama. Marston, after a period of agnosticism, became an Anglican clergyman. Shirley was in Anglican orders but became a Catholic and turned dramatist. Massinger showed a strong predilection for Catholic observances, presented Catholic characters in a notoriously favourable light, and most probably became a Catholic. And among the leading non-dramatic poets Southwell was, of course, Catholic; Daniel's sympathies were with the Catholics; the closest friends of Thomas Campion were Catholics and it is believed by many that he joined them; and John Donne, the famous Dean of St. Paul's, was born and educated a Catholic, and only after long hesitation became an Anglican, and "his most intimate religious poems indicate very clearly that he never ceased to feel the influence of his Catholic upbringing."¹⁰ There was evidently nothing in Shakespeare's associations as poet, actor

⁹ D.N.B.

¹⁰ *Cambridge H.E.L.*, IV., 198.

or dramatist, to induce a change of religion. Most Catholics conformed to the law of Public Worship.

It is a fair inference that some striking features of his plays illustrate not only the temper of Shakespeare's mind, but the influence of his early training. In several cases where his sources represented the Catholic Church or its representatives in a discreditable light he deliberately departed from them. The earliest instance is in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Friar Lawrence is wise and kindly even though his plan goes awry, and he is called a "holy man." But the corresponding character in Shakespeare's source is a vile creature of the type best known to us in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. *King John* (1598) provides an even more striking example. It is true that it contains a passage that seems decisive on the other side :

Thou canst not, cardinal, devise a name
So slight, unworthy and ridiculous
To charge me to an answer as the Pope (III. i.)

On this John Bailey comments: "No Roman Catholic could ever have set his pen to such insulting words. The attack on the Pope, one may notice, is not doctrinal at all. It is, as the English Reformation was, practical, common-sensical, and political."¹¹ The qualifications seem important. The words are certainly not doctrinal and they are political, and it is to be doubted whether they would give as much offence to the majority of Catholics in Elizabeth's time as they would to-day—we remember Shakespeare's Catholic patron, Southampton. It is doubtful even that they would have offended Catholics in John's own day. J. R. Green's account of the people's reaction to his surrender to the Pope suggests the contrary.¹² The truth is, the English nation had always resented the papal claim to interfere in its affairs, and when Henry VIII. threw off the papal yoke while retaining the Catholic faith, and declared himself Head of the Church, he was supported by the people and in particular by Bishops Bonner and Gardiner, though Bishop Fisher and Sir Thomas More objected even to martyrdom. It is true that the Bishops changed their mind when they saw the Protestant revolution and the greed of Protestant politicians in the reign of Edward VI., and eagerly welcomed the reaction under Mary. But they under-estimated the anti-papal feeling in the country, and when Elizabeth came to power the nation rallied round her, and Catholic and Protestant were united in resisting the Armada, blessed though it was by the Pope. It is difficult to see why any but the conspiring minority of Catholics should have disagreed with the words in

¹¹ *Shakespeare*, 21.

¹² *Short History*, 121.

their context. But of far more significance than these few words in the play is what Shakespeare has left out of it. It is based on an older play, *The Troublesome Raigne of King John of England*. This is a fierce Protestant polemic in which contempt is poured on the old faith, monks are murderous and immoral, and the hermit-prophet Peter is a vulgar impostor. All this is expunged by Shakespeare, and he transforms a violent assault on the Roman Church into a presentation of the political struggle between the papacy and England in which his sympathies are with his own country, as were the sympathies of most Catholics. A third instance of his respect for Catholic institutions may be found in *Measure for Measure*. This is based on an old play, *Promos and Cassandra*. In this, Cassandra yields to the passion of the judge Promos to save her brother. But Isabella, the corresponding character, whom Shakespeare makes a votaress of St. Claire, refuses with indignation. He will not sacrifice the honour of a religious character. By this alteration of the plot at a crucial point, and by introducing a new figure, Mariana of the moated grange, he transforms a story of debauchery and cruelty into one of the greatest and most Christian of his plays.

It is in keeping with this that Shakespeare has no ecclesiastic like the wicked Cardinal in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*. Once a privileged Fool makes ribald reference to "the nun's lip to the friar's mouth" (*All's Well*, 11 ii.), but no such characters appear in the plays. Bishops, priests, monks, nuns, are all dignified figures. As Bradley observes: "We perceive in Shakespeare's tone in regard to them not the faintest trace of dislike or contempt."¹³ This applies also, with exceptions, to his Anglican parsons. He regards with friendly eye "Sir" Nathaniel in *Love's Labour Lost* ("a marvellous good neighbour, faith, and can bowl well" V. ii.), and the good "Sir" Hugh Evans in *The Merry Wives* ("Serve Got and leave your desires, and the fairies will not pinse you" V. v.). It is to be noticed that he makes both humorous characters, as he does not with their Catholic counterparts. But "Sir" Oliver Martext, the "vicar of the next parish," who makes a brief appearance in *As You Like It* (III. iii.) is exposed by Jaques as an incompetent dullard ("this fellow will but join you together as they join wainscot"). And Master Dumble, "our minister," who does not appear in person at all in *2 Henry IV*. 11 iv., is an appropriate spiritual adviser to Mistress Quickly, and only too representative of many of the non-preaching Elizabethan clergy. While Shakespeare looked upon the new order with genial tolerance, it cannot be said that he had the reverence for it he showed for the old. There is some reason, however, for believing that he was

¹³ *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, 350.

acquainted with Hooker's *Ecclesiastical Polity*, the great and classic defence of the Anglican Church.

In his important book, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Dr. Tillyard makes it clear that the general medieval picture of the world survived in outline into the Elizabethan age, though "its existence was by then precarious," and that Shakespeare cannot be fully understood unless this background be taken into account. The world picture, he says, "one can say dogmatically was still solidly theocentric." More particularly, "the Puritans and the courtiers were more united by a common theological bond than they were divided by ethical disagreements. They had in common a mass of basic assumptions about the world which they never disputed and whose importance varied inversely with this very meagreness of controversy."¹⁴ To doctrinal disputes, Shakespeare but rarely alludes. A passing glance can be found in *Love's Labour Lost*.

See, see! my beauty will be saved by merit.
O heresy in fair, fit for these days. (IV., i.)

But we should expect to find many references to the Puritans in his plays. The Puritans waged open war upon the drama, and naturally were assailed with many gibes from the stage. They made repeated attempts to have the London theatres closed, and even in Stratford during Shakespeare's retirement their influence induced the Town Council in 1612 to pass a resolution declaring plays to be unlawful, and increasing the penalties against players. And yet Shakespeare married his daughter Susanna to the Puritan Dr. John Hall; he entertained Puritan preachers at New Place; and he certainly read the Bible in the Geneva Version.¹⁵ If it is clear that his Catholic upbringing permanently influenced him, these facts have led some to think that he had Puritan leanings and even that he chafed against his profession, unwillingly making himself "a motley to the view" (*Sonnet CX.*). This last suggestion is probably unfounded. But it is an arresting fact that he has few references to the Puritans and no attacks upon them, and nothing approaching the caricatures in other dramatists, such as Ben Jonson in *Bartholomew Fair*. Indeed, he never introduced a Puritan character into his drama. The humourless Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* is several times called a puritan by his companions because of his quite reasonable objection to the carousals of Sir Andrew and Sir Toby; but he is no "puritan," only, as Maria says: "Sometimes a kind of puritan" (11 iii.). In the struggle between players and Puritans Shakespeare was, as in other matters, above the war. It is evident that he recognised the noble element in the Puritan move-

¹⁴ chap. 1.

¹⁵ cp. Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*.

ment, and sympathised with its moral fervour. The finest tribute to Marina in *Pericles* is "She would make a Puritan of the Devil if he should cheapen a kiss of her" (IV. vi.). And he knew that Puritan was a name that covered many distinctions, and included men like the nonconformist saint and scholar in whom Thomas Fuller said "the old Puritan may seem to expire."¹⁶ John Dodd disassociated himself from the somewhat unscrupulous controversy of many of his fellows, and was a great lover of natural beauty—"In this flower, saith he, I can see more of God than in all the beautiful buildings in the world." The clown in *All's Well* says: "Though honesty be no puritan, yet it will do no hurt; it will wear the surplice of humility over the black gown of a big heart;" that is, both the white surplice and the puritan gown are honourable. Doubtless this was Shakespeare's own judgement. Even Sir Toby's words in *Twelfth Night*: "I had as lief be a Brownist as a politician" (III. ii.) betray no animus against those victims of episcopal fury. Shakespeare mocked at no man's religion.

And yet Shakespeare was no Puritan. Whatever sympathy he had for their moral earnestness, he regarded their outlook upon human life as too narrow. He puts the criticism, "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" into the mouth of one of his comic characters (*Twelfth Night*, II. iii.), but it expresses his own attitude to the Puritan asceticism. He had an experiencing and enjoying nature, and freely accepted as part of the divine creation the desires and satisfactions upon which the average Puritan stamped his disapproval. His delight in the coherent sensuous beauty of the world, in his art, in music, in the love and laughter of men and women, separated him from many whom, on other grounds, he esteemed. He sang the *Benedicite*, and never so sweetly as in his last plays, "the setting sun and music at the close." Above all, his unequalled gift of humour, and the wisdom that humour brings, would alone have preserved him from the pride of judgement and spiritual arrogance which were the perils of Puritanism. Nor can we associate him with their passion for impossible certainties, their contentions for the shade of a word, and their claim for new ecclesiastical systems that they only were of divine authority. They sometimes deserved the reproach, as did some of their opponents:

'Tis mad idolatry

To make the service greater than the god. (*Troil.* II., ii.)

And on some graver matters, and this not only with reference to the Puritans, though his mind was metaphysical, he had a

¹⁶ Jessop, *Wise Words of Thomas Fuller*, 42.

distaste for speculation on divine and hidden subjects. This is apparent as early as *Love's Labour Lost*, which is not only a gay burlesque of current affectations of speech, but a light satire on a group of intellectuals known as "The School of Night," which met to discuss social and philosophical questions.¹⁷ It is explicit in Lafue's obviously topical words in *All's Well*: "They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence it is that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear." (II. iii.) On the other hand, the "wisdom of Nature" (*Lear* I. ii.), that is, research into the secrets of nature, claimed Shakespeare's interest, and the tragedy of *Lear* especially shows how he read the current manuals on the subject.¹⁸ But his searching mind, like his Hamlet's, was exercised rather with the profound problems of life and death, and rejected the superficial scepticisms of "philosophical persons" withdrawn from the world of nature and man, like the dilettantes of *Love's Labour*, to "painfully to pore upon a book to seek the light of truth" (I. i.). Lockhart says of Sir Walter Scott, who was so akin to Shakespeare, though he had not his deep sense of the mystery that is man and the mystery that encompasses him: "The few passages in his diaries in which he alludes to his own religious feelings and practices show clearly . . . the modesty with which he shrunk from indulging either the presumption of reason, or the extravagance of imagination, in the province of Faith." The words can be applied without alteration to Shakespeare.

In one grave matter, the licentiousness of the age, he was increasingly in sympathy with the puritan spirit in both Catholic and Protestant which strove against the current. In his great tragic period from *Hamlet* to *Timon* (although he wrote other than tragedies in these years), there is an unmistakable loathing of drunkenness and "vices of the blood." As Bradley says: "The undercurrent of disgust seems to become audible."¹⁹ It should not be exaggerated, as it sometimes is, as though it were an obsession. Obsessions of this kind do not produce Hamlets and Lears. But it may well be that his intense realisation of the tragic depths of life made him painfully conscious of the degradation of sensual sins. It was in this period that he wrote *Measure for Measure*, in which he dealt with the moral problem in the very spirit of the gospels. But he did more than this. The Lady in Milton's *Comus* says:

¹⁷ cp. Bradbrook, *The School of Night*.

¹⁸ cp. Gordon, *A Note on the World of King Lear in Shakespearean Comedy and Other Studies*.

¹⁹ *op. cit.*, 329.

To him that dares
Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words
Against the sun-clad power of chastity
Fain would I something say.

And Shakespeare, in his dramatic way, had much to say. From this time on he created a series of lovely characters upon whose chastity emphasis is expressly laid—Marina in *Pericles*, Imogen in *Cymbeline*, Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, and above all, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, whose chastity is a flame of fire :

Were I under terms of death,
Th' impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death, as to a bed
That, longing, have been sick for, ere I'd yield
My body up to shame. (II., iv.)

But perhaps more significant still is his deepened reverence for marriage (though there is not a line in all his plays that makes light of it) as against the "pre-contract." As is well known, in the Elizabethan age, as for centuries before, the betrothal was confirmed by an oath and attested bond, and was regarded as a civil marriage. It will be remembered that the "marriage lines" of Margaret in *The Cloister and the Hearth* was of this nature. In *Twelfth Night* there is a description of such a pre-contract between Olivia and Sebastian :

A contract of eternal bond of love,
Confirm'd by mutual joinder of your hands,
Attested by the holy close of lips,
Strengthen'd by interchangement of your rings;
And all the ceremony of this compact
Seal'd in my function, by my testimony. (V., i.)

And it is to be noticed that Olivia calls him "husband." In *Measure for Measure* again, it is the old betrothal of Mariana to Angelo that justifies her submission to the Duke's plan that she should secretly take Isabella's place in the assignment, an expedient that repels us unless we realise that, according to Elizabethan ideas, she was but enforcing her rights.

Nor, gentle daughter, fear you not at all,
He is your husband on a pre-contract :
To bring you thus together is no sin. (IV., i.)

It is probable that Shakespeare's own relations with Anne Hathaway were governed by such a betrothal. There is not the slightest indication of any disgrace in the arrangements for their subsequent marriage.

And yet in *The Tempest*, his last play, Prospero ruthlessly denounces the common view of the pre-contract. Says he to Ferdinand, whom he has just betrothed to Miranda :

Then, as my gift and thine own acquisition
 Worthily purchas'd, take my daughter: but
 If thou dost break her virgin knot before
 All sanctimonious ceremonies may
 With full and holy rite be minister'd,
 No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
 To make this contract grow. (IV., i.)

It is clear that as he grew older, Shakespeare realised the moral dangers of the pre-contract in an age of increasing laxity, and the importance of the marriage bond as sanctioned by the "holy rite" of religion and the Church. A significant incident marked his closing days. His younger daughter, Judith, married Thomas Quiney on February 10th, 1616, in a season prohibited by canon law, and both were excommunicated. Shakespeare had made his will in January, but in March he altered it, considerably to the detriment of Judith. They cannot be wrong who see in this an indication of his displeasure at the circumstances which brought upon the pair the excommunication of the Church. He died on April 23rd, within a month of signing the amended will.

The now familiar figure of a Shakespeare calmly contemplating all creeds and religions with an inscrutable smile, "the Spinozistic Deity," as Coleridge so solemnly called him,²⁰ is a fantastic illusion which he himself would have blown away with a gust of his great laughter. And Coleridge's further statement, which some modern studies would involve: "I believe Shakespeare was not a whit more intelligible in his own day than he is now to an educated man, except for a few local allusions of no consequence,"²¹ he would have dismissed with a reference to his financial profits. Unintelligible dramatists do not make fortunes. The truth is he was a thorough Elizabethan, and, like all great men whose appeal is to all ages, he was firmly rooted in his own age, and spoke to his own generation whose life and background he shared. It is this that is forgotten or ignored by many modern writers who attribute to him the scepticism of the present century. The assertion that he had no personal religion, in so far as it is not a mere reflection of their own agnosticism, is in the main based on a study of the great tragedies. "His peopled but lonely planet," says Dr. Dixon, "swings as if unrelated to any other in empty space,"²² and he compares Shakespearean tragedy unfavourably in this matter with Greek tragedy, which had a religious background of sacred myth and ritual. It is wholly "secular." Yet certainly it was not written in Hotspur's spirit: "He that kills me some six or seven dozen of Scots at breakfast, washes his hands and says to his wife, 'Fie upon this quiet life! I want work'" (1 *Henry IV.* II. iv.). It is at least as serious

²⁰ *Table Talk*, 12 May, 1830.

²² *Tragedy*, 32.

²¹ *ib.*, 15 Mar., 1834.

as any ancient tragedy. But it is well to bear in mind a note to Bradley's lecture on "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy": "There is one marked difference between ancient and modern tragedy. Speaking roughly, we may say that the former includes, while the latter tends to ignore, the religious ideas of the time," and he explains that the Olympian gods "are in the same element as Art, while this is, on the whole, not so with modern religious ideas. One result would be that Greek tragedy represents the total Greek mind more fully than modern tragedy can the total modern mind."²³ In other words, Greek tragedy was religious and Elizabethan tragedy was not, because the gods were creations of the imagination, and so the myths could be used freely and adapted to their own purposes by the great tragedians, whereas the Christian religion is not mythical but rooted in history and embodied in doctrines which cannot be varied at will. To this it must be added that the Christian religion is a religion of redemption by the historic act of God in Christ, and therefore it is doubtful whether there can be a Christian tragedy. The great Hebrew poet who wrote the *Book of Job* had to ignore the explanatory prologue when he told of the spiritual agonies of that tragic figure. Job had to remain in ignorance. And the Elizabethan tragedians, for the same reason, were compelled to ignore the Christian revelation. Santayana has a long passage on what he calls the absence of religion, that is a religious interpretation of the universe, in Shakespeare, and concludes that he was indifferent to it.²⁴ As the same thing applies to the other dramatists, the conclusion seems hasty. Like them, Shakespeare had to isolate his tragic characters and set them moving in a universe from which, of necessity, the illumination of faith was excluded. But this no more implies that he was not a Christian than it implies that his audiences, or for that matter his present-day readers, who were awed and subdued by his tragic genius, were not Christian. It only implies, to quote Bradley again, that "If, as a private person, he had a religious faith, his tragic view can hardly have been in contradiction with this faith, but must have been included in it, and supplemented, not abolished, by additional ideas."²⁵ And indeed, it was the background of the Christian faith that made the *tremendum* of his tragedies so overwhelming. As Dr. Tillyard says: "Othello's 'chaos is come again,' or Ulysses's 'this chaos, when degree is suffocate' cannot be fully felt apart from orthodox theology." It is because within the bounds of his tragedy Shakespeare presents the grandeur and the flaw of the human soul and the mysteries through which it moves with such preternatural and awful power

²³ *op. cit.*, 95.

²⁴ *Little Essays*, 168.

²⁵ *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 22.

that, beyond all other, it exalts and purifies the spirit. Newman called Shakespeare "a great religious poet," and it is chiefly his tragedies that justify the description. Only the divine tragedy of the Cross is adequate to his tragic universe—God in Christ *crucified*. And it is to be noted also that, as Professor Stoll says: "The moral values and even the social sanctions are unbroken."²⁶ In them Evil is always self-destroyed, while Good, even in outward defeat, shines with unearthly splendour.

There are many who are in no way inclined to the sceptic's account of Shakespeare who are perplexed by his real or apparent silence about immortality. The difficulty is felt most in connection with the great speech in *Measure for Measure*, in which the Duke, disguised as a friar, prepares Claudio, who is under sentence of death, for his execution. There is not a word about the Christian hope. There is much about the vanity of life.

All thy blessed youth
Becomes as aged, and doth beg the alms
Of palsied eld; and when thou art old and rich,
Thou hast neither heat, affection, limb nor beauty,
To make thy riches pleasant. What's yet in this
That bears the name of life? Yet in this life
Lie hid moe thousand deaths: yet death we fear,
That makes these odds all even. (III., i.)

And yet *Measure for Measure*, one of the most splendid of the plays, contains the most eloquent expressions of the Christian faith Shakespeare ever wrote, speeches that are not only "in character," but belong to the very soul and significance of the play.

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once;
And He that might the vantage best have took,
Found out the remedy. (II., iii.)

Well might R. W. Chambers say: "Never does Shakespeare seem more passionately to identify himself with any of his characters than he does with Isabel as she pleads for mercy against strict justice."²⁷ It is certain that in a play that makes such direct appeal to the Christian faith no Elizabethan would dream that Shakespeare questioned immortality. It is only by ignoring the "basic assumptions" Shakespeare shared with his contemporaries that we can think it. The Duke's speech is not only Elizabethan, it is medieval. "'Be absolute for death,' is an epitome of medieval homilies on the contempt of the world," says Dr. Tillyard.²⁸ And as for the Duke's method of consolation, it is enough to remember that one of the most cherished of

²⁶ *op. cit.*, 3.

²⁶ *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (Shakespearean Criticism 1919-35, World's Classics, 76).

²⁷ *Man's Unconquerable Mind*, 286.

books, the one to which Dante turned for comfort when Beatrice died, was the *Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, canonised as St. Severinus. It was translated by King Alfred, by Chaucer, and now by Queen Elizabeth herself. In this beautiful centuries-old book, written by a Christian facing death, there is only a sentence or two about immortality, and the relevant section stresses the transiency and imperfections of all life's gains: "For this is sure, and this is fixed by everlasting law, that naught which is brought to birth shall constant here abide."²⁹ And Bacon could end his essay *Of Death* in the very spirit of the Duke's speech: "But above all, beleve it, the sweetest Canticle is *Nunc Dimittis*." Again and again the same note is struck by contemporary writers as consolation in the face of death, and their faith is not to be doubted. The age was, in fact, "studied in death" (*Macbeth* I. iii.). Perhaps, apart from the medieval heritage, this is not to be wondered at in a time when the Plague was a returning visitor, when sudden turns of fortune were of daily experience, and when the scaffold was always a possibility for the highest in the land. But, most of all, it was due to the intensity of life itself as it coursed through men's hearts. They were alive in every fibre of their beings, and for this reason death was great. And it is possible that our modern indifference to death is a sign not of increased but of decreased vitality. Death dwindles as the individual lessens.

It should be observed, too, that Shakespeare's greatest figures, in whom life is most abundant, are at their greatest in death. Even Lear, redeemed at last by love, dies in an ecstasy, believing that Cordelia is living. Hamlet asks his friend to live to tell his story: "Absent thee from felicity awhile," as though, says Wilson Knight, "it is death, not life, holds the deeper assurance for humanity."³⁰ And Cleopatra, as she approaches death, lifts up her arms: "I have immortal longings in me," and fears lest Iras, who is already dead, will meet Antony first and gain the kiss it is her heaven to have. The last words are "in character," but that death is not the destruction, but in some way the liberation and expansion of the spirit, is clearly implied in the end of all Shakespeare's greatest creations. The timelessness of death is freedom for the spirit, and it is love's own home.

And if we seek for Shakespeare's avowed faith, we have it in the great 146th Sonnet, "Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth," in which he speaks of the "fading mansion" of the body on which he spends "so large cost." He is Platonic like Spenser, Sir John Davies, and most poets.

²⁹ *Book II., Met. iii.*

³⁰ *Wheel of Fire, 50.*

Then, soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
 And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
 Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
 Within be fed, without be rich no more:
 So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
 And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

It is as supreme poet and, as his Hamlet would say, "with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (I. i.) that Shakespeare thought of life and death. He knew that he was far more than "the quintessence of dust."

Such harmony is in immortal souls;
 But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.
 (*Merchant of Venice*, V., i.)

Quiller-Couch once said that if a greater than Ariel were to wing down from heaven and offer him his choice of all the books in the world he would choose *The Tempest*.³¹ Love has its little language and it has its great, and all lovers of *The Tempest* will understand. They will feel, too, with him that it is almost a desecration to lay anatomising hands upon it. It is the last of Shakespeare's plays of which he was the sole author. In it he quite plainly bids farewell to the audience which had waited upon his art for so many years. It is his loveliest and most magical bequest to the world. In its unutterable beauty it is unlike anything else he ever wrote, even the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, to which it has a superficial likeness. It has been variously described as a "Dream," a "work of mystic insight," an "iridescent bubble shot across by divers threads of symbolism and suggestion." It possesses, says Dowden, the "quality of soliciting men to attempt an explanation of it, as of an enigma, and at the same time of baffling their enquiry."³² It is not an allegory, though many have tried to interpret it as one. Lowell, Renan, even in part Dowden himself, and Dover Wilson, have given their own reading of it in this sense. It is a Vision, the crowning work of the greatest of poets with whom thought and imagery were one. As we read it again and again it becomes incandescent with meaning, and meanings below meanings, which cannot be translated into common speech. Its great meaning is in the whole, and not in its parts, as is the "meaning" of a masterpiece of music. We find ourselves held by the suggestiveness of a shipwreck which is yet no wreck; of a sea from whose engulfing waves men emerge with garments unstained but even fresher than before; of an island "full of noises, sounds, and sweet airs," which to one man seems a "desert, uninhabitable, and almost inaccessible," and to another

³¹ *Shakespearean Workmanship*, 299.

³² *Shakespeare: His Mind and Art*, 425.

so rich that it sets him dreaming of ideal commonwealths; of a monster whose lips can be touched with poetry; of an Ariel who is now a sprite of wandering music and now a harpy tearing at the breasts of "three men of sin." We dream significant dreams, from which we are awakened by the voice of Prospero speaking the most famous and beautiful words in the language:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

What does it mean? Is Shakespeare telling us that our life is as insubstantial and unmeaning as an idle dream, that after all it is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (*Macbeth* V. v.)? The play itself contradicts this, for it is full of meaning, and we recall the pregnant words that flash out suddenly from the tempests of *Lear*:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all. (V., ii.)

We observe then, closely attentive to the last words, that, with two exceptions where it has a different meaning altogether, the verb *rounded* in the plays always means encircled or surrounded, as the crown rounds the head of a king or as a soldier is hemmed in by danger. Our little life is enclosed with a sleep, not the end only, but the beginning. It was a commonplace of contemporary belief that the soul *comes* into the body at birth. And we remember Wordsworth's familiar lines:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar.

So Shakespeare and Spenser and others thought. We come from "elsewhere" through the sleep of birth, and we pass elsewhere through the sleep of death. And it is here that we are caught in dreams, dreams of ambition, of desire, of lusts, of banquets of the senses that vanish at a touch, of joys that melt away like mist. "We sleep all the way," said John Donne, "from the womb to the grave we are never thoroughly awake; but pass on with such dreams and imaginations as these." And yet it is not without purpose we are here. The deepest thing in us, deeper than our dreams, is Conscience, which Shakespeare always

believing Christian could have written. But it is clear that religious controversy was repugnant to him, especially the intolerant controversy that raged around him. It was not from indifference to religion that he shunned any reference to it, but from a sense of the many-sidedness of life and truth, and the large charity of his mind. No words in Hooker would appeal to him more than these: "There will come a time when three words, uttered with charity and meekness, shall receive a far more blessed reward than three thousand volumes written with disdainful sharpness of wit."³³ To all who quarrelled in the name of Christ his word would be:

Who should be pitiful if you be not?
Or who should study to prefer a peace
If holy churchmen take delight in broils?

(1 Hen. VI., III., i.)

He was an Elizabethan Christian, or if we prefer the words of Professor Stoll, the enemy of all romantic commentators, "a Christian and a Protestant."³⁴ He was the more a Protestant because of his profound realisation of "the mystery of things" (*Lear* V. ii.), and with all the Christian Humanists of his age rejected the exclusive claim of any Church to possess all the truth of God. To the Church Universal, Shakespeare belonged in mind and soul; and, as Christian, in his broad humanity, his humility, his charity and stress on forgiveness, he was more Christian than Milton or Wordsworth, whose glory mingles with his. To which we may add, with Mark Rutherford: "We need Shakespeare as well as Bunyan."³⁵

We can think of him, therefore, in his closing days in Stratford, as breaking the wand of Prospero with a smile, pruning his roses, gossiping with his neighbours, reading his books and his Geneva Bible, and, on Sundays, attending the church which now enshrines his dust. The polemics of the pulpit stormed unheeded over his head. But he joined in the Confession of the common Faith, bowed in adoration and prayer, and worshipped with the humble, the humblest there. And we hear his own voice in the unexpected appeal of his last *Epilogue* (*The Tempest*):

Now I want
Spirit to enforce, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

B. G. COLLINS.

³³ *Eccles. Pol. Pref.*

³⁴ *op. cit.*, 74.

³⁵ *John Bunyan*, 249.