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*THE ENGLISH HERITAGE SERIES*

EDITED BY

VISCOUNT LEE OF FAREHAM & J. C. SQUIRE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY THE RIGHT HON. STANLEY BALDWIN, M.P.

SHAKESPEARE

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# SHAKESPEARE

*by*

JOHN BAILEY



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## INTRODUCTION

I HAVE been asked to write an introduction to a series of volumes to be published under the general title of "*The English Heritage*" I think the editors and the publishers are to be warmly congratulated on their enterprise, and I find a peculiar pleasure in contributing a few words of welcome in a preface in which I may use the word English without fear of interruption, and speak of England without hearing the acidulated suggestion that I should say Britain.

These books are the more needed because much of what they treat is changing under our eyes, and it may be of interest to our children to look to the rock whence they are hewed; and to others it may be a revealing of the Englishman and of his heritage, for he is not apt to speak before strangers either of his land or of himself, and when he does the less Englishman he.

The choice of subject appears to me to be singularly happy. Think, for a moment, of the centuries packed into a little volume on "The County Spirit." That spirit, tranquil, unperceived, and apparently forgotten in our cities, leaped in a moment into a flame which swept across the battlefields of the world. Quickened, revived, it is in our bones, as it has been since our counties were carved out of the dissipating fragments of the Heptarchy.

Last Whitsuntide I was a pilgrim among our graveyards in Flanders and on the Somme. In one of the most beautiful, where all are beautiful, I met three other pilgrims, large, silent men. Two carried baskets, and one was rapidly scanning each headstone and occasion-

ally stooped to the ground. I approached them, and we spoke together. They had brought out from home a quantity of small white-enamelled tablets with spikes affixed, the device thereon a red rose and the legend, "They win or die who wear the Red Rose of Lancaster," and the stooping man had been placing one at the headstone of every grave which held a Lancastrian soldier. So might their ancestors have murmured the same words over the bloody fields of Barnet and of Tewkesbury.

Happy, too, is he who writes of "The Parish Church." In variety, in beauty of architecture and of situation, they are incomparable. But the parish itself has become a unit so small as to be almost unnoticed in these days of rapid locomotion. Nothing is harder for the post-motor generation to realize than that in an age of horse-drawn vehicles you lived at the centre of a circle with a six-mile radius, or on special occasions one of twice that length. It was impossible for people to go away for week-ends or to visit friends in the next county on a Sunday. The parish church which only opened on Sunday in the days of my childhood became, in fact, the meeting-place of the neighbourhood on that day, and I can see once again the pony-cart and the landau on the road, people in knots of two or three coming down the lanes, and the little crowd that gathered in the churchyard, discussing the events of the past week, while the peal of bells, whose music had been the companion of the last half-hour of our walk, yielded to the urgent shriller note of the five-minutes bell. Then the smell of freshly-baked loaves in the porch, waiting for distribution after the service, the baize door, and we passed into the church to the big pew in which I spent so much time counting the ten torteaux in pile of the episcopal arms in the east window, and

trying to catch the wandering eye of one of our servants in the gallery. Most of the men in the congregation came in tall hats, and the older labourers still wore their smocks.

More than fifty years have passed, and this picture of a vanished England comes before my eyes more vividly each year I live.

But no less happy is the task of him who writes of "The English Road," and it is well that our children should know something of those roads their fathers tramped and loved as did their fathers before them for forty generations. Fifty years hence may be published an up-to-date series of such books as we now offer under the title, "Our Heritage and what we made of it."

I could show you many a ten or twenty miles of road in England where every turn opens out a fresh picture to make you draw in your breath with sheer delight, where the roadside timber is yet undisturbed, and where the black-and-white cottage at the bend, with its garden scented with gillyflowers, makes such an awkward corner for the motorist; and here and there the little inn, even as it was when Glutton met Peronel of Flanders in the days when Langland lay on the slopes of Malvern Hill. And even now when the cider is growing warm in china mugs on the hob in the inner parlour, some bowman on his long journey home from Agincourt or some pikeman from Naseby would find there the same kindly company, the same broad speech, the same wise, tolerant native humour of that world in which he was born.

But I dare not linger in the alehouse; this is a preface, and a preface is like the speech of a chairman introducing a speaker—it cannot be too brief.

How often we find the smithy just outside, and that is as it should be, for the smith's is thirsty work. I had many ambitions as a child; one was to be a blacksmith.

What more exciting than the roar of the blast, and even now I can still feel the thrill which stirred my small heart when I was allowed to work the big bellows. I remember riding down the lane to get my pony shod, and the very spot where I could first hear the ringing of the hammers. How exciting, too, the smell of the smithy! The curious acrid smell of water thrown on the red-hot iron, the warm steam of the cart-horses, the burning hoof when the shoe was being fitted. And how I admired when the smith himself hit the shoe by accident against his palm and nothing happened but the sizzling noise of burnt horn and an exclamation of justifiable dissatisfaction at his own clumsy workmanship. How I longed to have a horny hand!

As these memories crowd back upon me I cannot help thinking of the happiness which these books will bring to countless readers, and I am permitted to envy those who are so fortunate as to write for this series no less than those who will read what they have written.

STANLEY BALDWIN.

## PREFACE

**A** LITTLE book of this kind would obviously not be the place, even if its author were the man, either to propound new critical or biographical theories about Shakespeare, or to give a critical survey of those of others. Its object is much humbler. Plain men ought, indeed, never to lose sight altogether of their debt to learning; and even so modest a book as this owes a great deal to the Shakespearean scholars by whose studies and interpretations we have all been helped to the better understanding of the poems and plays. To one of them I am in debt for more than his books. My friend Professor Dover Wilson was kind enough to read the typed copy of these chapters and to enable me, by the help of his learning, to correct in time several mistakes into which I had fallen. I am very grateful to him. But he must not be held in any way responsible for the book. Indeed I have retained more than one statement with which he disagreed. For whatever mistakes then, which remain, whether of fact or of judgment, the responsibility is wholly mine.

It is not primarily, however, with any sort of specialism or scholarship, that such a book as this is concerned. Its aim is not the suggestion of new problems, the elaboration of new theories, or even the discovery of new facts. It is something much more modest. There are times when we like to enjoy the stars without remembering the astronomers and to lift up our eyes to the hills without thinking of the lessons of the geologists. And so with great books. The volume of Shakespeare which makes so great a part of the heritage of

England is not a collection of puzzles and problems; it is a book of plays in which we Englishmen see the whole world through the eyes of the greatest of our countrymen. That is the essential Shakespeare; and it is only with the essential and universal Shakespeare that we are here concerned. For our present purposes, then, we shall be more inclined to take the text as we find it than to busy ourselves with questions of how or when it was written. Allusions to such matters will be found in these chapters, but they are not dwelt upon at any length. For our purpose they are of secondary interest. The excuse for such a book as this, if it have an excuse at all, is the hope of inducing people to go from its pages to those of Shakespeare himself; it may be for the first time, it may be for the fiftieth. So I have given most of my space to a journey through the poems and plays, from the first, so far as we can tell which are first, to what we rather more confidently believe to be the last. For my aim has been to keep as close as may be to Shakespeare; and the best way of doing that is to keep our eyes fixed on his pages. We shall not all find exactly the same things in them. That is the privilege of genius. It goes to meet every man, and each finds something in it which no one else has found; something, at any rate, which no one else can appropriate in quite the same way. We English, naturally and I think reasonably, believe that the genius of Shakespeare is especially ready to come to meet us, his countrymen. Its only sure method of coming is through his own words. With them before us we may hope that the thoughts and feelings and judgments that arise in us, the impression we get both of the writings and of the man who wrote them, will have enough of him in them never to become fantastic or absurd. They cannot be quite certain of themselves and they will

## *PREFACE*

xi

sometimes be mistaken. But in the pressure upon them of his actual words, in the near presence of that compelling power, they ought to find a safeguard against wandering very far from the truth and poetry which joined together to make that wonderful unity, the man William Shakespeare.

JOHN BAILEY.



TO

S. K. B.

MOST CONSTANT OF SHAKESPEARE'S READERS



## CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION . . . . .	V
PREFACE . . . . .	ix
CHAP.	
I. INTRODUCTORY . . . . .	1
II. THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE	6
III. T H E POEMS . . . . .	49
IV. THE EARLIER PLAYS . . . . .	66
V. THE LATER PLAYS . . . . .	139



# SHAKESPEARE

## CHAPTER I

### *INTRODUCTORY*

**T**HE heritage of England is a whole made up of many parts. It is, above all, a character and a genius, unique, each of them, in all the world. It is also the land on which we live; the hills and fields, the woods and streams, the birds and flowers, which are still ours as they were Chaucer's, and now all the dearer as they retreat more and more before our ever-rising tide of urbanism. It is history and politics: a record and an example which, by a mingling of ideas and practice, have served, and are still serving, the world as no others have served it since the fall of Rome. It is many noble buildings, as we have always known; some of the greatest music in the world, as we did not know or had quite forgotten till the other day; some ancient triumphs of art in glass or on the illuminated page, the pride of which we are now recovering, and some fine things on canvas or in marble, late born in our history, of which we were proud at once and have remained proud ever since. It is an ancient and still very living Church, whose Bible and Prayer Book may perhaps be the most often printed books in all the world. And it is an Empire wider than that of Rome, and free with a freedom of which Rome knew nothing. But above all, perhaps, it is a heritage of glorious names. After all, it is particular men who created these great things for us. And it is of them that we immediately

think when we nurse our faith in the heritage of England. The man of science thinks proudly or, it may be, humbly, in any case gratefully, of Harvey or Newton or Darwin; the man of music of Byrd; the architect of Wren; the artist of Reynolds or Crome; the statesman of Chatham or Burke. And this is truest in the greatest field of all. The literature of England is certainly among the very greatest in the world. English poetry, especially, is of such rich abundance and such extraordinary quality and power that it may well be claimed for it that it ranks first in all the world, or second only, if second at all, to the superlative achievements of the Greeks. But however that may be—and the decision of all such rivalries is at once difficult and unimportant—there can be no doubt that English literature is the most glorious, the most universal and the most enduring of the things which make up the heritage of England. And, as well in our own judgment as in that of the whole world outside, one name stands pre-eminent in that catalogue of glories. Shakespeare has often been over praised by foreigners as well as by his own countrymen. It is not only a matter of extravagance of language stretching truth into falsehood and folly, hiding the real man in a foppery of gilded phrases. It is also that he has often been praised for qualities which he did not possess. He has been made into a teacher of religious truth, into a political philosopher, into a professor of poetry; functions of which he never dreamed and for which, so far as they are professional and technical, he had no sort of qualification. It is proof and part of his greatness that men have pored upon his words, as they have upon those of the Bible, till they have found meanings in them which not only are more than were in his mind when he wrote—there would be nothing strange in that: such meanings are for ever being found in the

words of all great poets—but are contrary to anything that could have been in his mind: meanings which are not revelations of the truth which was in him but distractions and distortions and perversions of it, wisdom transformed to folly, sanity and sense to delusions and even madness. We shall later on see more of how that has worked to the injury of Shakespeare and to the waste of the time of innocent readers who too easily become the prey of that false learning which, more than ignorance, is the curse of letters. *Corruptio optimi pessima*. And not only do the best, when depraved, become the worst, but it is the best whom the worst choose as their victims. It is only books like the Bible and Shakespeare which attract madmen to be their commentators. The sort of miasma which brings itself to think that Shakespeare was a mask for Bacon, or that his plays are political anagrams or acrostics, or that Hamlet was really a woman in love with Horatio, is of the same class as that which identifies the Scarlet Woman with the Pope or the English people with the Lost Tribes of Israel. That is the penalty of genius: its power is so overwhelming, close contact with it an experience so tremendous, that men are often found to go mad under it. But genius remains, for all that, the ornament and pride of humanity: we rejoice as well as wonder that such creatures as we are can claim kinship with these extraordinary men who make new eras in the history of religion or art or science or poetry. And for us in England there is no doubt who the man is who most arouses those feelings. "Thou in our wonder and astonishment Hast built thyself a livelong monument," wrote the young Milton of the man to whom, utterly unlike as they were in all but the supreme fact of genius, he was soon to stand second in glory. Shakespeare had then only been dead a few years and Milton can

only have been half conscious of the full meaning of his words: perhaps not wholly serious in their use. Two hundred years later Carlyle, a man, if possible still more unlike Shakespeare, declared of him that he was "the grandest thing we have yet done." Nothing else that we have, he says, trade or wealth or Empire, is a possession to be compared with Shakespeare. "Indian Empire will go, at any rate some day: but this Shakespeare does not go, he lasts for ever with us: we cannot give up our Shakespeare."

"He lasts for ever." That is why actors continue to perform his plays, and crowds go to see them: them and no other plays, I suppose, so far away from us in time as they are. The Greek dramas are far older, it is true, and have of late given marvellous proof of their vitality. They are so eternally human that they can be, and are, played still after more than two thousand years. But they are not played, as the dramas of Shakespeare are, in all countries and to popular audiences. Corneille and Racine and Moliere, Calderon and Lopez de Vega, are still played to their own countrymen, and, like Shakespeare, have never at any time quite disappeared from the boards. But not one of them, not even the Master of Comedy himself, is played all over the world as Shakespeare is; and besides, they are all, or almost all, less remote from us than Shakespeare, and therefore their survival is the less wonderful. Shakespeare, then, stands alone on the stage. And far more alone in the closet. How many readers has Shakespeare every day? No one can say, of course. But it is safe to say that he has three times as many, and perhaps ten times as many, as any other dramatist whatever. And probably, too, more even than any other poet. That is the proof of his independence of time and country, which is another way of saying the proof of

his genius. And, being that, he will always continue to be discussed by voice and by pen. Men of his order of universal genius are at once the same and not the same to each new century. Indeed every generation, one may almost say every man and woman, rediscovers them, finds in them the old things but also something new and peculiar, something which seems to have been written precisely for peoples or individuals who are separated by centuries from the original writer of the words. We all want to get into personal relation with such a man as Shakespeare: and such is his magic, such is his humanity, that we all feel we can. The attraction is so strong that it leads sometimes even to madness, as we have seen. But that is a drawback we have to accept. Life itself includes and attracts madmen. But that does not deter the rest of us from embracing and enjoying it. So the rest of us, the sane members, as we hope, of the human commonalty, embrace and enjoy Shakespeare. And, the human mind being the questioning thing it is, we cannot refrain from asking what it is that we enjoy and what is the nature and meaning of our enjoyment. And asking is thinking: and thinking is defining: and defining is expressing: and so we express in spoken or written words the answers we come to give to our questions. And, human nature being the sociable thing it is, we do not speak or write to ourselves alone. Wisely or foolishly, we are tempted to offer to others the report of our questions and of the answers we have found to them: such account as we can give of our whole experience in attempting to build a bridge across the vast gulf that separates our puny selves from a man of genius.

## CHAPTER II

### *THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE*

**A**BOUT many of our poets we now know more than there is any real advantage in knowing. Research into trivialities gets in the way of more important things, and time that might be given to reading great poetry is wasted over the rents the poet paid for the houses he lived in, the professions of his uncles or the marriages of his aunts. If we do not suffer from this in the case of Shakespeare the reason is certainly less lack of will than lack of material. We know, indeed, with more or less certainty, the bare facts of his birth, home, family, and death; of his work as a poet and a playwright; of his success as a man of business; of his celebrity during his life and after his death: and that is about all. We have, of course, quite enough evidence of the impression which his genius, both of tongue and pen, made upon his contemporaries to put out of court at once with sane men the fantastic theories of those who suppose him to have been incapable of writing the works that have always passed under his name. It is a strange absurdity to suppose that only University men, or men of high place, can write great books; and yet that notion seems the chief excuse put forward by those who cast about for a philosopher or a great noble to whom the plays of Shakespeare can be transferred. Such fantasies are only instances of what I have already alluded to, the madness induced in some people by works of genius. To suppose that a man who lived an open life in the

public eye, who was thrown continually both by his business and by his pleasures into the company of the best wits and sharpest critics of his day, could go on for twenty-five years falsely passing himself off as the author of works of such genius as the world never saw before or since and remain not merely undiscovered but unsuspected, is midsummer madness of the sort with which sane criticism has nothing to do. The many contemporary mentions of Shakespeare, whether they indicate jealousy, or admiration, or friendship, all plainly indicate a man well known in literary and theatrical circles, far too well known to allow of his playing the part of shadow to anyone.

But the knowledge we have of him is chiefly of the external sort. It proves his fame, his success, his wealth, his wit, his genius. But it tells us little or nothing of his inner life. Except from his writings—and it is always to be remembered that they are mainly dramatic—we know little of the mind and soul of Shakespeare, of what his personal sympathies and convictions were in the great debates, intellectual, political, and above all religious, which agitated the England and the Europe of his time. With him, as with nearly all our older poets, the published works are almost our only biography. The fashion of preserving letters and other memorials of famous men, indeed the practice of writing letters or journals upon any large scale, hardly began before the eighteenth century; and the interest in the study of personality, which may be said to begin with Montaigne, was very long, in England at any rate, before it reached its present proportions. We have only two poetic biographies which are at once first-hand and first-class, and neither of them appeared till after the middle of the nineteenth century. What would we give for such a picture of Shakespeare, drawn at the closest quarters

by a friend whose insight was quickened at once by intimacy and by unlikeness, not less by distance than by nearness, as that work of genius, Hogg's *Life of Shelley*? What would we give for such an intellectual and spiritual autobiography of Shakespeare as *The Prelude* of Wordsworth? Or again, what would we give for such records of what Shakespeare thought and said as Boswell gave of Johnson and Eckermann of Goethe? We have nothing of that sort. Even more with Shakespeare than with Milton we have to rely on such indications as we can find in his books. And of course the difficulty with Milton is very much less. For his writings do not speak to us in the many and inconsistent voices of drama. He is always himself and audibly present in all his works which, indeed, more than most men's, may be read as an indirect but continuous autobiography. With the partial and doubtful exception of the Sonnets we have nothing of that sort left to us by Shakespeare. If we want, as we cannot help wanting, to get at the man Shakespeare, we are driven to piece together the external facts given us by contemporary testimony with our own tentative guessings at the interpretation of the hints about himself which intentionally or unintentionally he has certainly left us in his works. Not even the very genius of drama can quite escape the law that, whatever a writer's subject may be, no man ever wrote a page without telling his readers something about himself. With this, and with such contemporary statements about him as exist, we must be content. These statements do not enable us to put Shakespeare's opinions of &rt or life beside those of other great men, but at least they give us the general impression made on his contemporaries both by his character and by his genius. Few poets of any age have been liked better or more generally

admired. There is a general agreement among the tributes paid to Shakespeare which is exceptional. Of course, there was a little inevitable jealousy contributed by rivals who saw themselves outstripped by his genius and good fortune. Before he was thirty the dying Greene was angrily complaining of his success. But even at that early date his character for "civil demeanour" and "uprightness of dealing" was so established that Greene's own publisher was prompt to pay his testimony to them and express his regret for Greene's jealous abuse. That early tribute was to be echoed many times during Shakespeare's life and after his death. He was, plainly, from first to last, a man whom all sorts of people, his patrons and fellow-actors, his friends and fellow-townsmen of Stratford, knew they could trust. That "civil demeanour" of which Chettle spoke becomes something more in the mouths of others; it becomes a graciousness and gentleness of disposition which won from Jonson the famous tribute: "I loved the man and do honour his memory, on this side idolatry as much as any. He was indeed honest and of an open and free nature." The word "honest" had a stronger meaning then than now. What Jonson means is that Shakespeare had the free and generous character of the best kind of gentleman. So also "gentle" was the epithet applied by Jonson in "Discoveries" to Shakespeare's expressions, and to the man himself in the well-known lines

This Figure, that thou here seest put,  
It was for gentle Shakespeare cut:

which were set opposite to Droeshout's engraving in the First Folio by its editors, Shakespeare's friends, John Heminge and Henry Condell. All the evidence,

in fact, both of those who knew him personally and of those who handed down early traditions about him, gives us the picture of an easy, kindly, sensible, social and rather convivial man, whose genius, though widely recognised, never made him formidable or forbidding in the ordinary intercourse of life.

But it is plain that this easiness and "gentleness" were by no means inconsistent either with independence or with a turn for practical life. Even the youthful friendship of the Sonnets is not at all that of a nobleman's hanger-on, and it has been remarked as significant that in that age of poems of compliment and condolence Shakespeare wrote nothing of the sort, not even on the death of Elizabeth. So his whole career shows his gift for practical affairs. There is a common belief that poets are generally shiftless men, incapable of acquiring property and pretty sure to let any which they inherit slip through their fingers. This notion is not borne out by such facts as are known of the lives of the greatest poets, either of antiquity or of the Christian world. Least of all, perhaps, is it true of the great English poets. Milton, no doubt, was comparatively rich in early life and died comparatively poor. Spenser also died poor. But neither of them owed his poverty to waste, idleness, incapacity, or indifference to the practical concerns of life. In fact, among our greater poets, Coleridge is perhaps the only instance of what is supposed to be the typical poetic incompetence for affairs; while several of the greatest, Chaucer, Pope, Tennyson, Browning, and even Wordsworth, showed conspicuous shrewdness in matters of business. And none showed so much as the greatest of all. Shakespeare left Stratford an obscure and penniless young man and returned before he was fifty to spend his closing years there as an owner of house, lands and tithes, a man of

## CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE 11

recognised wealth and importance. There are people to-day to whom this fact is unwelcome. They may not be averse from wealth for themselves, but they like their "heroes" to be poor. Probably Shakespeare would hardly have understood this prejudice. It seems certain, both from his words and practice, that if he had heard it expressed he would have met it with a smile of half-contemptuous indulgence. We have grown familiar in the last half-century or more with great Russian writers who continually make the chief figures in their stories incompetent dreamers who mismanage their property, dissipate their fortunes, drift aimlessly through life, and become nuisances, sometimes lovable and sometimes unlovable, not only to their families but to themselves. Shakespeare gives us one such "hero": a king, whose mouth he fills with lovely words which move us to a mingled pity and delight; something like the luxury of sentiment with which the poor king utters them. Of course, he becomes, in Shakespeare's hands, very human; and we feel for him, and a little with him, as we do with murderers like Macbeth, and even with meaner criminals like Shylock; as we do, perhaps, with all the characters of whom Shakespeare tells us much, except Richard III and Iago. But, whatever we feel of pity for Richard II or of aesthetic pleasure in his eloquence, we never suppose that Shakespeare admired that sort of king, or resembled or liked that sort of man. Even if the play stood alone, even if there were no *Henry IV* or *Henry V* or *King John*, there is enough in its own five acts to confirm the impression given us by everything we know about Shakespeare, whether from others or from himself, that he was the last man to think fine words or fine fancies a sufficient compensation for lack of character and courage, of sense and will. It may be that he had seen too much of the

results of shiftless incompetence in the career of his own father, who, if there is truth in old and very uncertain tales about him, might very well have filled the chief place in one of the stories of *A Sportsman's Sketch-Book*. Anyhow, it seems certain that he, the greatest of all poets, is the very last to encourage the identification of imaginative genius with practical incapacity. His mind was always ranging far beyond the limits of Stratford or London, the theatre or the Court, far beyond the England of his day and the ways and thoughts of those among whom he lived and worked. Of that we may be quite sure. But there is no less doubt, as his whole life shows, that he never forgot England in the world, or this life in eternity, or common sense in the visions of his imagination. It is precisely this combination of apparently unlike qualities that makes him seem the completest man who ever lived. The great Russians give us sometimes hell and sometimes heaven, but seldom our common earth as we know it; sometimes the soul and sometimes the body, each in every extreme of violence, but seldom the mind at its normal task of ordering and rationalising our everyday life. Shakespeare gives us all: mind as well as soul and body, earth as well as heaven and hell. The creator of Hamlet and Lear and Othello would be an immeasurably less wonderful man if he were not also the creator of Falstaff and the Bastard. Indeed we do not know his greatness till we read his work as a whole and see Richard II balanced by Henry V, and Desdemona by Cleopatra. Such a poetic gift as his, so abundant, lovely and "sweet"—as his contemporaries liked calling it—and at the same time so profound, so tremendous, so far out of the reach of ordinary experience or thought, would have lost itself, perhaps, as Shelley's so often did, in an abstract loveliness or an abstract vision-

ariness, unless it had been held to earth and everyday life by that other side of the man which practised, enjoyed and observed the ordinary ways of ordinary men.

At the same time there have been people who have exaggerated the ordinariness of Shakespeare and used it to misrepresent him. His best biographer, Sir Sidney Lee, was one of them. Lee's *Life* brought out two important facts which had previously been ignored or obscured: first, that we have a good deal more contemporary evidence for the character and career of Shakespeare than had generally been supposed; and, second, that he early became, and remained more and more to the end of his life, a prosperous man who possessed "the shrewd capacity of a man of business" and was far from disdaining its natural reward. This is true. But Lee went on to quote with approval Pope's

For gain not glory winged his roving flight,  
And grew immortal in his own despite;

and to assert of Shakespeare that "his literary attainments and successes were chiefly valued as serving the prosaic end of making a permanent provision for himself and his daughters." This is the madness of prose, as Mr. Yeats's notion of Richard II as Shakespeare's ideal man is the madness of poetry, or at least of a poet. No one really understands what poetry is who can suppose that the creator of Othello or Lear ever thought during their creation of what profit they might bring him in pounds, shillings and pence. It is not conceivable that anybody who had gone through the tremendous experience of imagining and giving poetic form and life to beings whose actions and sufferings were on a scale so superhuman could ever look back upon that experi-

ence as a successful business transaction. No, Shakespeare was no idle dreamer in the affairs of this world. But equally certainly he did not make them the measure of his mind or his imagination. He saw and used what other men see and use. But he also saw what others do not see, and made of it a life for himself and for us.

It must be remembered, however, that his picturing of that life is the record of an imaginative experience, not the statement of a creed or of a code, not an act either of intellectual assent or of moral approval. To suppose that Shakespeare wished to be like Richard II because in his play he has taken us so completely inside the king's character is merely absurd: as absurd as to suppose he thought Cleopatra an ideal wife, Antony an ideal general, Lear a wise father and king, or FalstarT a satisfactory friend for a young prince; as absurd as to suppose that Dickens admired Micawber, or Thackeray old Mr. Osborne. It is the business of imaginative or poetic genius to give itself and us those experiences. It makes its voyages into all the remotest secret places, not only of the earth of the human soul, but of its hell and its heaven. But travellers who come back from unknown countries bringing us a tale of the strange enormities, both of man and of nature, which they have seen there, and perhaps suffered from, are not to be understood as advising us to go and live in those countries. Shakespeare found scope for his full genius in writing *lear*, and for much of it in writing *Richard II*. But if anything is certain about him it is that he had no desire to have such daughters as Goneril and Regan, and was glad that the sovereign under whom he lived had in her more of Henry V and the Bastard than of Lear or Richard. He knew, we may be sure, that it was a far higher thing to be a poet than to be a successful man of

## CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE 15

affairs, a thing altogether of a different order of being. But he also knew that the fact that a poet's imagination goes everywhere is no proof at all that his conscience, or mind, or practical sense, thinks all places equally worth staying in, or supposes that the place which provides the richest food for the imagination necessarily, or even commonly, provides the most wholesome food for life. Shakespeare must have immeasurably enriched his own inner life, as he has ours, by his imaginative penetration into all sorts of human minds and characters. But the characters on whom he most lavished his imagination, Hamlet and Brutus, Lear and Othello and Cleopatra, were, apparently, exceptionally unlike his own. What a man's imagination most powerfully and even sympathetically enters into as done or suffered by others is not what his will or his conscience or his judgment leads him to do or suffer himself. The plays themselves often contain hints of this. And not only the plays of Shakespeare. Sophocles, if we may judge from what we are told of him, was a man of wise and temperate nature. Yet he shows his dramatic genius chiefly in portraying the tremendous actions and agonies of an Oedipus or an Antigone. The reader or spectator necessarily notices them more than the Choral Songs with their praises of moderation and the middle way; just as the reader of Shakespeare cannot but notice Falstaff and Richard II more than Henry V, and Lear more than Kent or Albany. But what asked and received most of the poet, whether Sophocles or Shakespeare, was not at all necessarily what most commended itself to the man. Indeed, we can in each case be fairly sure that the reverse of this was true. Life is a poor thing without art, and art that does not cling close to life is stillborn. But it remains true that art is one thing and life another.

So far, then, the picture we make for ourselves of Shakespeare, from what we are told about him by those who knew him and by what we think we hear him unconsciously telling us himself, is of a man kindly, friendly, gentle, genial; of a poetic genius so great as perhaps to have no rival in human history; yet also of a strong common sense and sure instinct for the practical conduct of life. Is not this significant? Is it not deserving of emphasis in a book belonging to a series which deals with the heritage of England? For are not these exactly the qualities which England has exhibited again and again to all the world? The Latin is apt to connect strength of will with obstinacy and violence of temper. He is puzzled at finding how tenacious the English are in pursuing things of which they all the time make a joke. Frenchmen and Germans were alike puzzled in the Great War at the almost entire absence in the English soldiers of the spirit embodied in the German "Hymn of Hate." Our men even sang that Hymn as a joke—a joke quite unintelligible either to their allies or their enemies. But Shakespeare would have sung it; and so would his John Bates. Of course, in this as in other matters, he was much more than an Englishman. He added, no doubt, to English good temper a quickness of social understanding, an accessibility and receptivity in which Englishmen are, for the most part, conspicuously lacking. But if he had what we have not, no one has more of what we have. All we know and all we guess join to convince us that no one ever was more English than he, in easygoing friendliness, in freedom from malice or rancour, in quick forgetfulness of injuries and quarrels. One of the worst curses of Ireland, and a little of Scotland, too, is that clans and families, and even regiments, cling obstinately to the memory of old wrongs suffered at each other's hands a hundred, or two hundred

years ago. There is a story that when, not very long ago, a certain colonel, whose name was Campbell, marched his regiment through the Pass of Glencoe, an old woman who was, I suppose, a MacDonald, said angrily, "It's unco' soon after the massacree, I'm thinking." Follies of this sort are entirely unknown in England, and we may be sure that no one ever had less of these ugliest of unwisdoms than the typical Englishman, William Shakespeare. Then, side by side with his good nature and his practical sense there is his genius. That, of course, cannot be an English characteristic. To have genius is to be not like but unlike one's fellow-countrymen, whatever nation one belongs to. But there is this to be said. In the history of the arts Englishmen, on the whole, play a much smaller part than Frenchmen or Italians, possibly even than Germans. But in the art of arts, in the art which depends most on pure imaginative genius and less than the others on hand and eye and ear or on any mere technical accomplishment, Englishmen, as we believe, have easily taken the first place since the fall of antiquity. If Shakespeare, then, was to be a man of genius, he is very English in the form his genius took. We were once, it seems, in the long past, at the head of the world in painting as painting was then; in a later age, as we now learn, we were at its head in music. But it remains true that for every English painter, musician, architect of distinction, there may be counted three or four notable poets. Poetry has been the distinctive English art; and, in being a poet, as well as in more obvious ways, Shakespeare shows himself once more English of the English.

There is no need, and certainly I have no desire, to force a point one inch beyond the facts. But it is the simple and interesting truth that this Englishness is written all over all of the writings of Shakespeare and over all

we know of the facts of his life. Here is a man who, early in life, came to London to seek his fortune, found it in abundance, and returned to his little native town to enjoy it and to die. What Frenchman who has attained his fame in Paris ever leaves its loud and pleasant metropolitan echoes behind him? London was in Shakespeare's day a far greater part of England than Paris of France. But London has never held Englishmen as Paris holds the French. And that for several reasons. Not in Shakespeare's time, but not so very much later, Paris absorbed all the intellectual and political life of France as London never has absorbed that of England. We have always had and still have a municipal and provincial life of a vigorous independence, and London, though the intellectual centre of the country, has always had rivals in the Universities and often in some of the great provincial towns. To leave London, then, has never been so difficult for an intellectual Englishman as for an intellectual Frenchman to leave Paris. And that is not only because London has never swallowed England as Paris has swallowed France. It is still more because, while the French civilisation is of Latin origin and therefore urban, that of England has always been and is even to-day very rural in spirit and sympathy. Just as an accountant or a solicitor in a London office to-day has constantly in his mind, not only the country holiday he is soon to have, but very often the country retirement he means to enjoy twenty or thirty years hence; just as Mr. Baldwin was always looking wistfully from Downing Street to Worcestershire, so it may well have been with Shakespeare. We can imagine him making many an escape of the spirit from the noisy, dirty streets of Southwark, and the petty jealousies and quarrellings that have always been the curse of life in a theatre, and, too often, of life among men of letters; and

letting his dreams, so lovely and so practical, like everything else of his, carry him away to the banks of the Avon, the little streets of Stratford or the Forest of Arden.

And those dreams would not have been merely the dreams of a countryman. They would have been, as all the plays and poems show, those of a sportsman too. Shakespeare left the country a young man and returned to it at an age which was then thought elderly. But in his day there was no spot in England, not even in the very centre of London, from which a man could not easily walk into the country. And between what he saw every day in his youth and afterwards often on his holidays, he plainly had a keen eye and a healthy liking for field sports. A whole book has been written to show how many of his phrases, obscure to bookish men who never leave their studies, are clear as day to those who bring the light of hunting and hawking and the rest to their interpretation. Here again he is what other Englishmen are, but something more as well. Those stanzas about the hare which are among the loveliest in *Venus and Adonis*, strike a note which the common sportsman hardly strikes to-day, and, for certain, seldom or never struck in Elizabethan days.

By this, poor Wat, far off upon a hill,  
 Stands on his hinder legs with listening ear  
 To hearken if his foes pursue him still:  
 Anon their loud alarms he doth hear;  
     And now his grief may be compared well  
     To one sore sick that hears the passing-bell.

And that heart of Shakespeare's, which went everywhere and saw things from all points of view, not only that of kings but that of peasants, not only that of men but

even that of animals, is found striking the same note about the hunted stag in the plays. He was no sentimentalist. Fifty passages giving the joy of huntsman and hounds show that he was too centrally-minded to have ever taken up the attitude of the modern societies which hate and denounce sport as merely cruel. Yet he plainly felt that it had that side and wished others to feel it too. He would, one fancies, when out with a hunt, have felt many of those about him to be, if not cruel, at least rather callous. But if he had been at a meeting of modern humanitarians he would probably have felt equally out of his own element in another way. There would have been, for him, something wanting in the jolly stupidity of the sportsman: in the self-righteous sentimentalism of the intellectual and moral crank there would have been something exasperating and absurd, something unaware of the largeness and variety of life. Just there, no doubt, lay his quarrel with the Puritans who were beginning to come into prominence in his day. "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" We know little or nothing of Shakespeare's religious beliefs; but it hardly needed Sir Toby's question, which does not stand alone, to tell us that Shakespeare was no precisian. In this greatest, as in smaller matters, everything points to Shakespeare's mind having preserved its sane centrality. One of his very few allusions to the ecclesiastical controversies of his day is the scoffing reference in *Airs Well* to the quarrel between the rival adherents of the surplice and the black gown, which seems (for the passage is very obscure) to make "honesty" wear both. The Shakespeare who lived his life in the theatre and was content to make the jokes he made was assuredly no Puritan. Even more certainly the man who wrote such bitter and scornful lines of anti-papal eloquence as he did

cannot possibly have had any backward looks towards Rome. No Roman Catholic could ever have set his pen to such insulting words as:

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

The attack on the Pope, one may notice, is not doctrinal at all. It is, as the English Reformation largely was, practical, common-sensical, and political. It deals with the injustice and absurdity of the sale of pardons and the paying of tithes and tolls to an Italian ecclesiastic: just as the attacks on the Puritans to be found in the plays hit at the unreasonableness and ridiculousness of their narrow scrupulosity. Shakespeare stood, one may be sure, at the centre. No one ever had a more spacious circumference than he, and he is always making imaginative excursions to it in every direction. But he never forgets the centre or fails to return to it. His complaint, one expects, against the Puritans lay not so much in what they were as in what they were not. He knew a good man when he saw one and the difference between a good man and a bad. No one knew those things better. He must have seen that Puritans were commonly men of better conduct than the generality of their neighbours. He would have honoured that, and would never have joined in such silly abuse of them as is common to-day. He did not live to see either their best or their worst, but he saw the beginnings of both: and, as the genial humanist laughed at the follies which were so soon to become tyrannies, so the grave dramatist, who knew that though conduct cannot defy fate, yet it lies at the very heart of the issues of life and death, cannot have

looked entirely without sympathy on the men who were teaching England that sense of duty which, as only fools doubt, has been her greatest strength ever since. He is not likely to have cared for formal observances of any sort: either for the fasts of the Catholics or the long sermons of the Protestants. "Serve Got and leave your desires, and fairies will not pmse you," says Sir Hugh the parson to Falstaff. That, and neither sour faces, nor saying of beads, nor any confident dogmatisings, whether of Rome or Geneva, was, one feels sure, for Shakespeare the essence of the business; and one fancies he would have sympathy alike with the "Cease your fooling, Sir' by which Cromwell silenced the long-winded Presbyterian, and with the sensible answer which that worse than poor creature, "Monsieur," Louis XIV's brother, got from a priest whom he asked whether it would be a breach of his Communion fast if he drank the juice of an orange: "Eh, Monsieur," said the honest man, "eat a whole ox if you like, but live like a Christian, and pay your debts." In this, as in other matters, one feels sure, Shakespeare was the centrally-minded man with his eye fixed on realities and essentials who, in English eyes at least, is at once the ideal and typical Englishman. It is not easy to think of him as definitely a Churchman of any Church or creed. The language which he puts into the mouths of his greatest characters, at their greatest moments, especially when they are looking death closely in the face, is not language which a man to whom the Christian faith was the truth of truths transcending all others would have been likely to employ even in drama. It has nothing to say about what may follow death; the note of it is simply one of agnosticism, at best of resignation before the great mystery; "the rest is silence." Yet he seems to be equally far from the aggressive anti-Christianity which was already making

itself often heard among the wits and scholars of his day. His clergy, whether called friars or priests or parsons, are sometimes comic, but never odious figures, as they so easily and not unfairly might then have been. Of the vices of all sorts, so freely attributed to priests by mediaeval and Renaissance writers, there is nothing in Shakespeare. His Friar in *Romeo and Juliet* is transformed from the wicked plotter of the old story into the best type of wise, good, kindly, and practical clergyman. His parson in *The Merry Wives* is at least as honest as he is ridiculous, and is plainly meant to be as much respected for his character as laughed at for his oddities. The married clergy of the Anglican settlement, no longer a celibate caste marked off from the rest of the world but men who lived like other men, with homes and wives and children, were still perhaps something to which laymen had hardly got accustomed. Elizabeth was probably as representative of her people in the words with which she met Mrs. Parker as in everything else she said and did. But the new clergy receive no insults from Shakespeare. His tone about them is one of humorous friendliness: "a marvellous good neighbour in sooth; and a very good bowler." Shakespeare is, in fact, an Elizabethan Englishman: tolerant, kindly, indifferent to the niceties of dogma and the shibboleths of ecclesiastical parties, exhibiting a temper which began in England before Elizabeth reigned and did not die with her death. He has no taste for the violences of religious faction. It is noteworthy that, though his love of freedom and life naturally made him no friend to the Puritans, he never follows his contemporary playwrights in violent abuse of them. So, if we have heard him defy the Pope as loudly as the fiercest Protestant when the issue was one of national pride and national independence, we may observe him in that very same play of *King John* showing

his "gentleness" by cutting out the violent sackings of the abbeys which were part of the old play he was revising. He clearly knew little of Roman theology or Roman services on the one hand, and apparently not much of the English Bible on the other. The versions of the Bible already selling so fast in his day seem to have affected his language scarcely at all. There is nothing in his plays to prove that he had caught the new passion for reading the Bible. Perhaps the last circle to which that passion spread was the one to which he belonged, the dramatists and men of letters of the capital. By a hundred years later all English literature is full of the Bible, and so it has remained down to our own time, or at least to the end of the Victorian Age. But its day had not quite come while Shakespeare lived. Perhaps it could not come till the Authorised Version had absorbed and extinguished all the others and become the one book known to all Englishmen who could read. But though Shakespeare was plainly neither any sort of ecclesiastically minded man, nor a "Bible Christian," nor, almost certainly, a man whose inmost faith expressed itself in any devoutness of language, observances or life, yet he was plainly too great a man to be an atheist. And certainly too great a poet. A master of English, who was himself not particularly religious and not at all orthodox, once said, "An irreligious poet is a monster." No one has ever known more of the wonder of this world of ours than Shakespeare, and no one would be more sure than he to echo the saying of his great contemporary, "I had rather believe all the fables in the legends or the Talmud or the Alcoran than that this universal frame is without a mind." And perhaps it is not pressing his language too much to go a little further. It is true that when he seems nearest to making his confession of his own attitude to the supreme mystery,

when his genius, that is, is at its intensest working, the note struck is, as we have seen, simply that of doubt and awe and silence. But it is also true that again and again in his plays, in *Hamlet* and *Othello* and several others, above all in *Henry V*, he puts the language of orthodox Christianity into the mouths of his characters, and does so with a gravity and a tenderness which seem to suggest some sympathy of his own.

These are questions which we cannot help asking ourselves. But we cannot answer them. This at least, however, we can say. Shakespeare is as far as man can be from the delusion of our own day that literature is not concerned with ethics. Every great play he has left us turns round a problem of conduct, and sets us face to face with a moral issue. Nobody ever soaked himself in the plays without being the better man for it. Everywhere in them we feel ourselves to be in touch with one who plainly preferred good men to bad, and showed mercilessly, again and again, the ruin that awaits defiance of those laws which all men in their heart of hearts know to be imperative, universal and eternal. Especially in the matter of sex and sexual morality he is as sane and healthy as some of his contemporaries, and many of ours, are the reverse. "Love is not love which alteration finds" was, for him, no mere momentary cry of personal emotion; it was his settled view of what was best worth recording in the story of life. Mr. C. H. Herford has written an interesting essay on the "The Normality of Shakespeare as illustrated in his Treatment of Love and Marriage"; and he has, of course, no difficulty in showing the contrast between Shakespeare and those dramatists or novelists whose choice of subject takes them to the eccentric, the fantastic, or the pathological. Love, for Shakespeare, is generally love at first

sight and for life; it looks to marriage; and it recoils from any suggestion of anticipating those rites which belong only to marriage. Severity on this subject is to be found in many plays; nowhere more remarkably than in the last of all, where Prospero threatens Ferdinand with heavy curses if he acts as a husband before "sanctimonious ceremonies" have made him one. The speech, it is true, is curious evidence of the looseness of that age as compared, not merely with the Victorians, but with ourselves. For who to-day would utter or even feel such fears of such a man as Ferdinand and such a girl as Miranda? But it is still more interesting as evidence of Shakespeare's strictness in these matters. Whenever he is serious there is, for him, no right sexual relation but that of marriage. Other types of love he uses on occasion, for some independent dramatic purpose; but this is, for him, the right and normal way and life of love. It may be, as some will think, to his loss, or, as others will feel, to his gain; but, anyhow, the fact remains that "the immense field of dramatic motives based upon infringement of marriage, so fertile in the hand of his successors, and in most other schools of drama, did not attract Shakespeare, and he touched it only occasionally and for particular purposes." In this, as in other matters, the magnifying mirror of his art, which has so enlarged all the bounds of humanity, is a development, not a distortion. Bound by no narrow rules of edification, it intensifies, heightens, quickens, sets in absolute freedom, the nature of man; and it does not shrink, if dramatic need so calls, from showing that that freedom may result in a Macbeth, an Iago, or an Angelo. But these abnormal developments are never taken out of the presence of the norm, never delivered from its contrasting judgment, never, above all, what we often see to-day, put in its place, or at least allowed

to claim an equal right with it to be the expression of the true nature of man.

The truth is that man, as Shakespeare shows him to us, is partly the creature of forces outside him, but also partly a being who makes himself. Of the tremendous importance of that making, of its awful possibilities, Shakespeare is always showing us his sense in every play he writes. We watch him at it as we hear the words of Richard II, or Hamlet, or Macbeth, or Iago. The man who created the world of good and evil in Shakespeare's plays knew, as few men have known, how subtly they run into each other, how they grow together in a society and in an individual, how hard it is to pronounce always which is which, and yet how certain it is, with a certainty belonging to nothing else, that the distinction between them is the one distinction that matters supremely and above all others. That is what Englishmen were to feel more and more in the years which followed Shakespeare's death. But their feeling it was no new thing. Even from Anglo-Saxon days there had been a strong ethical note continually struck in English literature. And even in the intellectual and spiritual turmoil of Elizabethanism it was still struck by the greatest figures, notably by Sidney and Spenser, and, in his freer way, by Shakespeare himself. Such a man, as we think we see him, might live among wits and Bohemians, free livers and free spenders and free thinkers. And not without sympathy with them: not without being partly one of all of them himself. Yet as the loose carelessness of Bohemianism did not prevent his having his eye all the while on the prosperous return to Stratford, so no recklessness of talk or life would ever blind him to the ultimate issues of things. The world was turned upside down in his day: the old landmarks gone and the new scarcely fixed. But strong

men are not to be washed away in a flood of mere negation. Shakespeare's positive and practical nature made itself felt, no doubt, in spiritual things as well as in temporal. His private thoughts and questionings were his own; he was not the man to let Queen or Council or Parliament fix them for him. But neither was he the man to refuse his part in the national expression of faith and conduct; and one sees him at his parish church in London or Stratford, not merely because the law ordered him to be there, but because he found in the Book that was read there, in the Prayers that were offered and the Psalms that were sung, words that came nearer than any others he knew to uttering the unutterable thoughts and hopes and fears of the deepest moments of his life. How little he can have dreamt, as he sat or stood in his place, that in centuries to come he himself and his stage plays would make a third to rank for ever in English affections with those two incomparable master-pieces, so unlike his own in everything but greatness, the English Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.

We hear in his plays a good deal more of politics than of religion. Indeed a large number of them, the Histories and the Roman plays, and even, in a sense, all the tragedies, have politics as their subject, or at least as their background. And here again Shakespeare is plainly at once the Elizabethan and the Englishman. Henry VII and Henry VIII and Elizabeth gave rule and order to an unruly and disordered world. And especially Shakespeare's own sovereign, Elizabeth, gave England the unity which her predecessors had destroyed and her successors failed to preserve. As she is the most English of our sovereigns, so he is the most English of our poets. All that we read in the plays, whenever they touch upon politics, seems to be the expression, conscious or unconscious, of the poet's

admiring allegiance to the great Queen's policy of unity and patriotism, order and sanity; at once the expansion and the discipline of England. The political plays deal almost exclusively with monarchy and aristocracy. That was what the histories from which he took them dealt with; and here, as elsewhere, he preferred using to inventing. Indeed, of course, in the Middle Age, which is the period of his English Histories, kings and nobles divided the political stage; the people were only heard as a very occasional "confused noise without." Even in the three Roman plays, where the people might truthfully have been given a larger part, they are nothing at all in the latest, and, in the other two, a mere rabble, odious, or at best contemptible. And both the political and the social references to the common people as a class are most often expressions of contempt or dislike. One small point may be noticed. Shakespeare appears to have been particularly sensitive to disagreeable smells. That may be one of the explanations of his apparent dislike of dogs. At any rate, it appears many times in his references to the "people"; to the artisan and labouring classes. Probably our present sensitive noses, if transferred to those days, when there were no baths and very few washings either of person or of linen, would find close proximity even to great lords and ladies an unpleasant experience. In their case the unpleasantness was often tempered—or possibly, as some of us to-day would feel, made even worse—by the use of scents. But in the poor it was, of course, just the untutored and undoctored smell of honest but unwashed labour. A newspaper correspondent of our time, who had had experience of all the crowds of Europe, once recorded his opinion that it was an English crowd which his nose disliked most of all, presumably because the practice of wearing washable working clothes is

rarer in England than elsewhere. Anyhow, very evidently, Shakespeare's nose was ill at ease in such company. This is just a physical fact of little importance in itself. But it goes with others of greater importance. It seems impossible to doubt that Shakespeare was not at all what is now called democratic in his political or social sympathies. There is nothing surprising in that: very few people were in those days. And Shakespeare is always a man of his own time as well as of all times. But the fact is there, staring us, as it seems to me, in the face, and there is no use in trying to deny it with Sir Arthur Quiller Couch, who complains of those who want to make Shakespeare a snob. There are few things which the plays tell us more plainly than that Shakespeare despised and hated, or at least disliked, both the intellectual and the political mob. That is everywhere, in all the Histories, in *Julius Ccesar*, in *Troilus*, in *Coriolanus*, in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. If it makes a man a "snob" to see in a political mob something extraordinarily gullible, and therefore extraordinarily fickle, and therefore very untrustworthy and dangerous, Shakespeare is certainly a "snob." If to find imaginative attraction in the splendours and pageantries and ceremonial courtesies of royalty and nobility is to be a snob, he again stands plainly convicted. And if there is no escape from that conviction except by the way of a faith in equality, by the acceptance of the notion that no state can be well ordered whose citizens are socially and politically unequal, he neither escapes nor tries to escape. He not merely accepted the inequality of his age: he used it gladly for his own purposes, adorned it, praised it, and, without any doubt, valued it. Nor could a man of his powers be afraid for one moment of the accusation of another kind of snobbery, an intellectual snobbery, often brought to-day against those who deny another

doctrine of equality. It is often asserted or implied to-day that one man's judgment is as good as another's in the greatest matters in which judgment can be exercised, in religion and ethics, in philosophy and literature and art. That was certainly not the belief of Shakespeare. The writer of *Hamlet* knew that in these matters what is "caviare to the general" may be "excellent" for all that; and that to those who can think as well as count the verdict of one "judicious" will often "o'erweigh a whole theatre of others." Assuredly Shakespeare was not one of those people, so numerous to-day, who suppose that all the great questions, and especially those called "questions of taste," are questions to which there is no answer, or so many different answers of equal value that there might just as well be none at all. In this as in other matters the truth is that Shakespeare was a man who saw things as they were and therefore could not but see that ignorance is not the equal of knowledge, nor folly of wisdom, nor a London mob of the Queen's Privy Council. There can be no snobbishness in sincerity or in recognition of facts. Shakespeare took the world as he found it; he accepted the facts of Monarchy and Aristocracy, and the social gulf which separated a player from a nobleman, much as St. Paul accepted the unequal facts of his world, from Csesar on his throne to the slave who lived every day at his master's mercy. And, being perhaps more politically-minded than St. Paul, he expands the Apostle's "Fear God," "Honour the King," "Submit to them that have the rule over you" into many panegyrics of order and obedience, of the necessity and use of the differing ranks of men and of the hierarchy of rising place and power which forms them into a well-governed State. We may agree or disagree with such opinions. We may prefer the doctrine of the American Declaration of

Independence and believe, if we choose, that all men are born free and equal. Or we may think that Shakespeare's political creed was sound enough in his day but unsound and even absurd in ours. But we are here more concerned with what he thought than with the rightness or wrongness of his thinking, and that, like most men of his day, he took a monarchical and aristocratic view of society and politics cannot, as it seems to me, be seriously questioned.

But what a curious form this "snobbishness" of his took! The true snob is, one would suppose, the man who takes high-sounding titles and full purses and fine clothes at their face value. For him a king can indeed do no wrong; a lord passes unquestioned as a great man; a rich man has an obvious fitness for office or power; a well-dressed man is a gentleman. But is there anything of this sort in Shakespeare? His characters are mostly kings, lords, and gentlemen. Is it a rosy picture, the snob's picture, that he gives us of them? He draws, or redraws, for us the portraits of seven English kings. Are they flattered? Are they even spared? With the exception of his hero, Henry V, what a gallery of criminals and fools they present! The treacherous and cruel incompetence of John, the elegant and rhetorical incompetence of Richard II, the usurper Henry IV, the weakling Henry VI, the criminal lunatic Richard III, the faithless husband and ungrateful master Henry VIII: what a succession of pictures for a Monarchist to paint! And the nobles are no better than the kings. Here is, plainly, no courtier's history of England. No republican could ask a better text for a sermon against monarchy and aristocracy than scene after scene in these plays. What incompetence, treachery, cruelty, indifference to any interests except their own, kings and nobles everywhere exhibit! Treachery, in particular, treachery

of the grossest and basest sort is on every page. Look at *King John*. The disloyalties are so bewildering that one is confused and lost in them. One moment Philip is all for Arthur and Constance; the next, he has deserted them and is in alliance with John. He and Austria have no sooner betrayed Arthur than they betray John. The marriage of Lewis and Blanche is no sooner made than broken. Pandulph betrays Philip and then John. Lewis betrays first Arthur, then Blanche, and then the English lords. John defies the Pope in language which still hurts the ears of Catholics and delights those of ultra-Protestants, and before his loud words have ceased to echo we find him ready to hold the kingdom as the vassal of the Pope. So with the lords. They have the excuse, of course, that by the very fact of their rank they are forced to spend their lives in a game of which their own heads are the stakes. But there are hardly any of them—the Bishop of Carlisle in *Richard II* is one of the very few—to whom it seems ever to occur that honesty can possibly be duty or even policy. The nobles in *King John* have hardly sworn their faith to Lewis before they transfer it to John. Those of *Richard II* are no more loyal to each other than to the King. Mowbray confesses that he had attempted Gaunt's life and Gaunt that he had had a share in Woodstock's death; Aumerle lies to Bolingbroke, Richard to Gaunt; they all lie about Gloucester's death; everybody is false to everybody else except the Bishop of Carlisle and the poor groom who follows Richard to his prison and tells the tale of "roan Barbary." So in *Henry IV*: the treachery of the king is rewarded by treachery, and that treachery is tricked to its punishment by a peculiarly base breach of honour on the part of the virtuous Prince John. *Henry V* begins with treachery; *Henry VI* and *Richard III* contain little else. Even in *Henry VIII* Buckingham is betrayed

by treachery; and the King's conduct to the Queen and to Wolsey is a monument of ingratitude and desertion.

They are strange plays to perform before a Queen who wished to be, and was, at once an idolised and an all-powerful ruler of her people. And strange things to be produced by the servants of great nobles, the heirs or successors of these aristocratic scoundrels! Yet there is no record of the Queen having shown any sensitiveness to any part of this story of royal and noble crime, with the single exception of the deposition of *Richard 17*, which, being played at the time of the conspiracy of Essex, aroused her suspicions; nor any evidence that any of Shakespeare's aristocratic patrons ever took exception to his uncourtly picture of nobility.

It is clear, then, that if the political doctrines suggested by the plays are chiefly those of order and discipline, it was no blind worshipper of rank or power who held them. Nor was the scorner of the political mob a scorner or disliker of the plain man. English history lays a great deal of stress on liberty and none at all on equality, and, till lately, even less on "sovereignty of the people" or any theories of that sort. Here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare is a consenting part of that history. His book, for all its rank and order, is a book of free men. If he had been a man of political theory, which he is not very likely to have been, he would probably have said that the only freedom worth having was that of order and law, each man free to play his own part, and none envying the part of any other. Who is freer or happier than Lancelot Gobbo, and Touchstone, and Autolycus? Which is the gayer and more human figure, Olivia or Maria? These servants and "clowns" are constantly more living than their masters. Shakespeare not only understands them, not only is amused by them; he obviously likes, and even loves,

these plainest children of earth. If he seldom puts the sorrows of the people on his stage he almost anticipates Dickens in the evident pleasure with which he paints for us their gaiety and good humour, the fun they manage to get out of lives of service and privation. Chaucer's Host of the Tabard may perhaps be the first appearance in our literature of the ordinary jolly Englishman who makes no pretence to be a gentleman. But Shakespeare gave him seconds of much humbler rank, who enjoy a joke and a story, a mug of ale and a laugh at their betters, every whit as well as he. Shakespeare often pays a great price for the almost formless freedom of the drama which he partly inherited and partly created. But one of the compensations he got out of it was the room it gave him to expand his minor personages into something more than mere followers and servants of the great; to make them living men and women themselves, no mere shadows of others, but able to stay, as themselves, in our delighted memories. The stricter form of France, which gains so much by its strictness, pays for it by finding no place for this variety. Racine may recall Euripides and Moliere surpass Terence. But each has to keep to his own business. It is only the loose English theatre which allows its dramatists to be all things to all men, and only Shakespeare's genius which can use its liberty so as, without incongruity, to introduce scenes which recall Aristophanes into tragedies which rival Eschylus. Into that vast variety of his he brings, as Matthew Arnold said, the whole pell-mell of human existence: men and women at love and at war, at politics and at play, at home and abroad, in the streets and in the fields. His universality is one of sympathy as well as of knowledge and is quite incompatible with anything like a class point of view. His nobles are often hidden behind their pomp and circumstance of clothes

and language: we see what they look like, but hardly what they are. But his poor men have nothing to hide them; and if the space they occupy is small it is one which is always shone upon by the daylight of truth. And there is another way in which the free variety of his theatre helps his humanity. A hero of Corneille has to be always a hero: the method and convention of the French theatre do not allow him to be anything else. Even the Greeks, who were less strict, kept their satirical drama, even if written by the same author, separate from the tragedies which preceded it. But for Shakespeare, as for the Socrates of the *Symposium*, the genius of tragedy and comedy is the same. He can do more than introduce comic action into a tragedy. He can subject his tragic personages to the weaknesses of common humanity. It is scarcely more by the death of Cordelia than by the hunger, cold, and misery of the night spent with clown and beggar on the heath that Lear is made entirely human to us. And so with more conventional heroes. Shakespeare can do what Corneille could not have done: he can make room in his ideal king, not only for a youth of lawless tavern-hunting, but for a mature manhood of such jollity and unconventionality as royal robes could not stifle; which can play its pranks with common soldiers, and almost turn the wooing of a queen into a jest against itself. John Bates is not more simply human than Henry V: small beer is in both their thoughts on a thirsty day; and both go to prove that, though Shakespeare knew that the soldier's business was to obey and the king's to command, what he cared most about in both was what he and we, who are neither kings nor soldiers, share with each of them, the heart and temper of a man.

Is it fanciful to suggest that this also is an English characteristic? Have we not always—sometimes to our

disadvantage—liked to think of our soldiers as unprofessional amateurs? And is not that, for good or evil, our note in other matters than soldiering? Have not the members of Parliament who make our laws, and the justices of the peace who administer them, always been amateurs? Were not our very clergy, till recent changes of very doubtful advantage were introduced, equally without any professional training? And has not our whole system of education—at least that part of it which is purely English, the great Public Schools—aimed always at producing, not lawyers or soldiers or doctors of divinity or medicine, but just gentlemen; men who are or ought to be qualified to "serve God in Church or State," fit, in Milton's language, so far as education can fit them, "to perform justly, skilfully and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war"? Shakespeare was a less definite man than Milton in every way, and would scarcely have used language of this sort, setting out a precise moral and political goal in education. It is possible indeed that, like Milton, he had been, for a short time, a schoolmaster. Mr. J. S. Smart, whose *Shakespeare: Truth and Tradition* is one of the best recent books about the poet's life, inclines to believe the old story that he taught at Stratford School in his early days. At any rate, as Mr. Smart shows, there is more to be said for this than for Aubrey's other tale that he began life as a butcher; and much more than for the more popular legend of his having been a poacher, which was quite unknown at Stratford for at least seventy years after his death. Mr. Smart even makes it pretty certain that there was no deer-park at Charlecote before 1618, and that consequently Sir Thomas Lucy had no deer for Shakespeare to poach. The picturesque poacher, then, disappears in favour of a possible or probable

schoolmaster. And the schoolmaster may be confirmed by the well-known scenes in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Merry Wives*. If so, these scenes would suggest that Shakespeare had little of that authoritative temper of the schoolmaster of which Milton had much, and nothing at all of the pedantry of which he had something. The goal of the schooling he would have cared about was not minute scholarship nor curious learning of any kind. The ideal written all over his plays, histories and tragedies and romantic comedies, is that of the free and gentle mind in the free and active body. He puts it once into a direct piece of advice given to a young man entering a University:

Let's be no stoics nor no stocks, I pray;  
Or so devote to Aristotle's checks  
As Ovid be an outcast quite abjured:

Music and Poesy use to quicken you:

No profit grows where is no pleasure ta'en.  
In brief, sir, study what you most affect.

This is pleasant doctrine, and safe enough with a Shakespeare who "affected" everything he came in contact with. It is a mistake to suppose, as many have supposed, that he exhibits any very unusual knowledge of books, art, nature, law, or anything else; almost as great a mistake as the other one of supposing he went to London an ignorant clown. He was neither ignoramus nor scholar. What is remarkable in him is no sudden miracle of omniscience grown out of ignorance, but his response to every human experience of mind or body. That could not give him the exact knowledge which belongs to science or scholarship. It could and

did make him the man who saw and understood and felt—felt both for sorrow and for delight—more of human life than any other man who ever lived.

This breadth of sympathy distinguishes him from those poets—and some of the very greatest are among them—who may almost be called propagandists from the definiteness of their liking of some and disliking of others among the characters and opinions of men. Shakespeare has neither the definiteness of mind nor the somewhat narrow fervour of Lucretius or Milton, for instance, who knew so exactly the kind of man and the kind of creed they hated. He is utterly remote, both as artist and as man, from the mathematical intellect and not much less mathematical temper of Dante, who can state his faith like a problem of geometry and arrange his poem in a design of rigidly observed mathematical proportions. And yet Shakespeare wins more Christian readers than Dante, more Puritans than Milton, more of the sceptical and anti-theological than Lucretius. Why? Because he has a mind and heart as great as theirs, with experience and sympathies so much wider, more varied, and indeed more generous. He has such a liking for all sorts and conditions of men as was not possible to the fierce pride of Dante, the conscious virtue of Milton, the sad intellectualism of Lucretius. Dante would have seen nothing in Falstaff but an old ruffian ready for hell fire; Milton certainly could not have invented, and almost certainly could not have enjoyed, the gay chaff of Beatrice and Benedick; and if Lucretius had lived a few years longer and become a contemporary of Cleopatra, he would certainly have regarded her with Virgil's horror and not with Shakespeare's dazzled and half-admiring fascination. Men who, like these, are filled with a sense of the sins or follies of mankind, and with a conviction that they

themselves possess the secret of the remedy, cannot stay to take the world as it is and make the best of it, as Shakespeare does. They are too busy judging it, condemning it and re-shaping it after the pattern of perfection in their own minds, to spare time or patience for Shakespeare's indulgent curiosity.

That indulgent, that universal, curiosity is probably a necessary condition of the possession of humour. We in England admit the superiority of the French in wit, but we believe ourselves to have no rivals in the much less easily definable gift of humour. Whatever that is, it seems plainly to require not merely an interest in but a liking for all sorts and conditions of men. A wit can live, as Pope, our greatest, did, in envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness. Their own the wits may love because they are their own, but the rest of the world is nothing to them; nothing, or, if anything at all, just material for their satire, cynicism, and contempt. Humour cannot live in that atmosphere. The humorous men, Goldsmith and Lamb and Walter Scott, are men of easy, kindly, indulgent nature, with a visible touch of something in them recalling to us Bacon's saying about him who had an "aspect as if he pitied men." But with Shakespeare, at any rate, the pity included no contempt. Tremendous as his tragedies are, they would never leave us, even if they stood alone, with the sense that human life was not worth living. He was not the man to say with Sophocles that the best thing is never to have been born and the next best to escape into the darkness as soon as may be. Sophocles lived at the most wonderful moment in the history of Athens, as Shakespeare lived just when the English spring was flowering into such a glory of colour as it has never known again. One can hardly suppose that either of them, even Sophocles, who lived to see very dark clouds gather

over Athens, can have missed feeling what Wordsworth felt in the presence of another outburst of life destined to be more rudely and rapidly shattered than those of Periclean Athens or Elizabethan England:

Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.

Indeed, both Sophocles and Shakespeare, being what they were and living when they did, were evidently overcome at times with the thought of the miracle of the body and mind and spirit of man. Hamlet's "What a piece of work is a man" is Shakespeare's parallel to the great chorus of the *Antigone*:

Many are the wonders of the world; none more wonderful than the spirit of man.

Shakespeare can go deep down into the darkness; as deep, indeed, if we think of certain scenes in *Hamlet* and *Othello*, above all in *Lear*, as Sophocles ever went. But the difference is that we cannot be certain that Sophocles did not stay there. We can be certain that the creator of Falstaff and Juliet, the Merry Wives and Miranda did not. He must have felt that not all the shafts of fate nor all the uglinesses of character could make it anything but a joy to be alive in such an amusing, beautiful, exciting world as this. He gives, as it has been given nowhere else, the mystery, tragedy, even the despair, of human life. But he is too universal and too genial a man to make the mistake made by the great tragic writer whom England has just lost. In Hardy the hopes of youth are always deceived, love always betrayed and happiness crushed, by accident or fate, or by human perversity, which is only fate's instrument or plaything. And no consolation is left to us except just

the beauty of the telling of it, the beauty of relentless but not unloving truth. But when we have been through a course of Hardy's novels we feel that this may be and indeed is truth, but not Shakespeare's truth, not the whole. Our world, as we know it, is not merely what Hardy presents to us; it is not, in fact, our experience of life that the only trains of any kind which anybody ever catches are those which are just going to run off the line. Shakespeare knew better than that because he knew more of life. His humour, his invention, his eloquence, all work on and in joy as well as grief, because the whole of life is their material and they find joy in it as well as grief, and joy which is sometimes an abiding presence, saying the last word of all and leaving us to rest in it. His world is a many-sided place, with the miracle of grace and beauty and utterly unlooked-for happiness in it as well as the mystery of inexplicable darkness and doom. The Romantic Comedies have as much of his nature, and perhaps as much of his experience, in them as *Othello* and *Lear*, though not so much of his genius. And it is noteworthy that, for whatever reason, his last plays are his happiest, with touches at times of an almost mystical serenity in them, and that his very last words of all, by an accident which may or may not be significant, speak of that which by piercing mercy frees from faults: and the name given to it is prayer.

I have been speaking rather of the man than of the poet, and what is to be said of the poet is perhaps best left over till we come to deal with the poems and plays. But the nature of the man affects the methods of the poet, and so a word of them may be said here. Evidently, this easy, genial, indulgent man was no more likely to be severe with himself than with others. It is not for no reason that English drama claimed for itself liberties which the dramatists of other countries made it their

pride to do without. And it is certainly not without significance that Shakespeare, the most English of men, used these liberties to the full. And it is not merely as a dramatist but as a writer that he visibly prefers, as English writers commonly have, the part of free man indulging his genius to that of artist perfecting his work. He is as unlike as a man can be to our supreme artist, Milton, who, except in one or two controversial sonnets, never left a line that has not upon it the stamp of consummate workmanship. Of that sort of proud conscience of the master-craftsman Shakespeare seems to have had nothing. And still less, of course, of the sterilising torture of self-criticism which kept such a writer as Flaubert for hours at his barren desk, rejecting every thought and phrase that came; which sometimes, in its tyranny at once demanding and refusing production, cut him off for weeks at a time from speech with any human being till art, in killing life, had killed itself. For Shakespeare life is greater than art, and—a more dangerous truth—freedom more precious than law. But it was not always freedom or life that was the gainer by his continual sacrifices of law and art. Is there any use in attempting to deny that he is sometimes almost the worst writer of English as well as sometimes quite the best? If his verse is sometimes the loveliest ever written, it is also sometimes a wilderness of confused thought, contradictory metaphors and overstrained or pedantic language. Eloquence, music, force, brilliance, subtlety, lucidity were all at his command as perhaps never, to an equal degree, at any other man's. But how the casualness of his temper joined with the exuberance of his genius to disfigure his pages, sometimes with false rhetoric, more often with tedious quibbles, more often still with dull jokes! How bored as well as disgusted one is with his unending repetition of the stupid tavern

joke about cuckolds and horns 1 How his entire lack of artistic conscience jars upon us when it makes its puns in the presence of death! How strange it is that a man of his supreme genius could not rise enough above the fashions of his day to feel that such a thing as

the sleeping and the dead  
Are but as pictures

cannot be followed by a paltry quibble like

I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal  
For it must seem their guilt,

without striking on our ears the ugliest of false notes. Such things are everywhere in the plays. A few lines further on, in this same tragedy, we get such a frigid conceit as

His silver skin laced with his golden blood,  
almost spoiling for us before it comes that loveliest of lines, soon to be said of the same Duncan:

After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

No man escapes his time and country altogether, and the England of Elizabeth was still, in part, a clever child playing with its new toy of language and pleasing itself by arranging the verbal and intellectual pieces in the most fantastic designs. But we have a right to ask of a man so great as Shakespeare that he should be more aware of the weaknesses of his age than he appears to have been, and that if he cannot rise as much above the level of the affectations of Elizabethanism as Milton rose above those of Puritanism, he should, at least, show himself as disdainful of those dexterities of virtuosity

## CHARACTER OF SHAKESPEARE 45

which were the literary disease of his contemporaries as Dryden showed himself superior to the thin French politenesses which were the disease of his. But he wrote generally in a hurry, probably with little idea of ever being read and well aware that the ears of playgoers can seldom be anything but hasty and careless critics of literature. And having little or no sense of the responsibilities of an artist to his art—only too like in that to the man who, two hundred years after his death, showed a larger fragment of his genius than has ever been shown by anyone else—he put no curb on his own facility. And the result is that there are in his writings passages, now of involved and confused chaos, now of legal or semi-scholastic quibbles as long drawn out as they are tasteless, now of verbal preciosities, now of gross, dull, and clownish jests.

These are profane words. But Shakespeare is great enough to bear the truth. And we English, who so seldom keep any conscience in matters of art, must bear with our great English genius who is only too like us in that as in so many other respects. If we sum up his characteristics as poet and as man, we seem to have found him rich in freedom and imagination, the admitted gift of English poetry, rich in common sense, the admitted gift of the English mind: a man of free and varied life and generous sympathies with all sorts of men and women; a believer in order and discipline and the hierarchies of office and rank, as the English have always been, but no more than they a believer in caste or any sort of rights, divine or theoretical; a lover of the country, country ways and country sports; a practical man with an eye to wealth and position; to his casual acquaintances a hearty, kindly, friendly, humorous, but also shrewd and sensible man; to his intimate friends a wit and a genius; to himself, in his lonely hours, a thinker

of some of the profoundest thoughts that have ever passed through the human mind. Much of all this may be seen in little wherever Englishmen are gathered together. But how immeasurably Shakespeare transcends and exalts the common ideal of our race! He is an Englishman who has been endowed with a miraculous expansion of the spirit, as he is an Elizabethan who passes beyond his age and country, and a man of the Reformation and Renaissance who has in him all the freedom of both and few of the limitations of either. It was not for him to write—he could not have written—the Catholic dramas of Calderon or the Anglican poems of Donne, the Puritan poems of Milton or the revolutionary of Shelley. These creeds and sects were not large enough for his spacious generousities of heart and intellect. His humanity and sanity brooked no narrowing of man's life; would have felt the unbalanced strain, what we have come to call the quixotry, in the noble creation of Cervantes; and, if *The Imitation of Christ* ever came into his hands, would probably have been blinded to its spiritual genius, which still moves the souls of men to their very depths, by its diseased denial of God's gifts of health and love and friendship and joy. He knew—no man better—that he had a body as well as a soul, and a body made for something happier than chains and tortures; that he was living in this world, not in another, a life of men and women, not of celibates and solitaries; and that if that world, given to him for his wonder and sorrow and joy, to understand it and renew it in the life of art, was a world of crimes undreamt of by the author of the *Imitation*, it was also a world of a wisdom, strength and goodness unknown to the denizens of cloisters. This universal and central man equally represents the ordinary and the extraordinary. The prince's scoff at Poin would have been no mere scoff

to him: "Thou art a blessed fellow to think as every man thinks: never a man's thought in the world keeps the roadway better than thine." It is his strength that we plain folk all find ourselves in his pages. But then Pains could not leave the roadway. In Shakespeare's world ordinary and extraordinary are subtly interwoven. Kent and Lear, Hamlet and Horatio, play their parts together, and the essence of his dramatic genius is to show that there is more in both than either they or their friends were quite aware of. "There are more things in heaven and earth," Hamlet tells Horatio, than philosophy can explain or has even dreamt of. To make a dream of them was the business of Shakespeare; he does not make philosophy's mistake of pretending to explain them. So in his hands all life takes on a new interest and beauty. The lover did not know what a magical thing his own love was till he saw or read the loves of Romeo and Juliet; the philosopher who has lived among intellectual abstractions finds his cold questionings suddenly take on them a hot and urgent vitality which is flashed upon his eyes and burnt into his mind and heart as he reads the soliloquies of Hamlet or Macbeth; the ears that have never listened to music, whether of voice or verse or instrument, the eyes that have never noticed flowers and seldom dwelt on faces, are in a moment delightedly aware of the gift that is in them; the artist finds here all his rules broken, but there all his secrets guessed, or perhaps, without thought of rules or secrets, all his miracles swiftly and easily overpassed; the sensualist sees his own life as he turns the pages of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and in those large and splendid letters reads it as what it is: not a mere delusion, as preachers and ascetics tell him, still less the only real pleasure, as his own folly would persuade him, but a strange mixture of reality and delusion, the most actual

of pleasures, the most transitory of triumphs, the body finding a luxurious delight in what—even before bodily eyes—is destroying mind and will and making straight the way of ruin and death. So too—most universal of all—the plain man sees himself in Shakespeare's mirror, finds in his face ugly features of which he was unaware, but finds also there that without ceasing to be a plain man he can save the State with Kent and the Bastard; can mount the throne and make it a throne of fame and glory with Henry V.; can be the ideal friend with Horatio; can see and utter with the Fools those truths of common life which the wise are always missing; can with Falstaff be drunkard and scoundrel, coward and liar, and yet somehow keep with him a warm place in wise men's hearts; can be plainest, even grossest, of plain men and yet have a gift of converting all that into speech that defies all the wits of all the world; can turn ordinariness into very genius, and yet blunder into disgraces which ordinariness would have easily known how to avoid; can be seen digging the grave of his own hopes, not by folly into which wit and even genius easily slip, but by such stupidity as is seldom found even in the plainest of plain men.

So we see them all: genius and plainness, art and love, poetry and action, vice and virtue, moving in the mind, and then on the stage, of this miraculous man. And one of the strangest things about them is that they are at once so English and universal. We are in Italy, France, Troy, Athens, Rome; in heaven and hell and fairyland; and yet somehow in England all the while; sitting in English manors or taverns, walking in English woods and by the banks of English streams. The classics of all times and countries live this double life, or they would not be the classics; but which of them lives it with such ease and certainty as Shakespeare?

### CHAPTER III

## THE POEMS

THE works of Shakespeare, like those books which we call the Bible, are to be found in the houses of all Englishmen who are not wholly illiterate; and with them as with the Bible the occupants are assumed to be familiar. But in many, perhaps in most, this assumption does not really cover much more than the "taken as read" of the Minutes of a Committee or the Report at the annual meeting of a commercial company. Yet, plainly, knowledge of that sort is nothing to the purpose with such books as these. *Hamlet* and the Psalms may as well not be read at all, may, in fact, as well never have been heard of, as be "taken as read." Their names are nothing, nor their facts. A few isolated sayings from them, debased and flattened by misuse and overuse, are very little; they demand many readings, and readings careful, intimate, affectionate. Great books are inexhaustible; that is the essence of their greatness and the reason why they make their way into times and countries remote from their own. Everybody has something to find in them; not some riddle or anagram, some fantastic secret of contemporary politics or prophetic anticipation, which the foolish author is supposed to have buried so deep that it could not be discovered till it was of no interest or importance to anybody; not even new facts of social or literary history which, however real, are discoverable only by the few. None of these things, but a greater: the relation between the reader and the writer who, if truly classical and universal, may

almost be said to bring to every fresh reader an experience in which there is something peculiar to himself. That is why efforts are always being made by those who have had these experiences to induce others to have them too; to have their own, that is, which are the same and not the same. That is why a volume on Shakespeare is included in the present series. The object of the series is to open the eyes of Englishmen to the greatness of their heritage and invite them to stretch out their hands and take their share of it. There is no part of it which is greater than Shakespeare, and none which is more available and accessible. The glories of Newton and Faraday can never, for most men, be more than facts accepted on authority; the glory of Shakespeare is an experience which almost every man can enjoy for himself.

So we read the books Shakespeare has left us and invite others to read them. And so this chapter will begin an account of what they are, which will also be, so far as it can, an explanation of why they are so well worth reading and hold such a great place among English possessions. And it will try to discriminate. For discrimination, provided it be modest and cautious, is really desirable and even necessary. The lack of it has injured Shakespeare as it has the Bible, though, of course, not so much. The maddest Shakespeare worshipper has never thought his every word inspired. But when I was a boy it was the fashion in many religious homes to read the Bible straight through from the beginning to the end, as if it were one book by one author, omitting nothing, neither the dull legalities of Leviticus nor the extremest crudities and barbarisms of the historical books. Johnson, in his great Preface, might seem to recommend the same practice in the case of Shakespeare. "Let him that is yet unacquainted with

the powers of Shakespeare, and who desires to feel the highest pleasure that the drama can give, read every play, from the first scene to the last, with utter negligence of all his commentators." But the point which Johnson is making is not the reading of every play but the ignoring of the commentators. The plain fact is that there are several plays of Shakespeare, as there are several books of the Bible, which, if read before the rest, are likely to prevent ordinary men from ever reading the rest at all. Shakespeare has suffered a little from the superstition of receiving as unquestioned all that has ever passed in his name, and much more from the notion, so common in critics, so contrary to the obvious facts of life, that a man, and especially a writer, is always himself, and his powers never far below their highest. It has been thought necessary to discover subtlety in *Titus Andronicus*, and humanity, to say nothing of poetry, in *The Taming of the Shrew*. That sort of blindness and perversity has inevitably injured the author of *Othello* and *Lear*. The truth is that Shakespeare is of all writers the least equal. That is one thing. But there is also the other. When we find in Shakespeare something which disappoints us, the explanation is not always that even Shakespeare cannot always be at his best. It may be, and certainly sometimes is, that what disappoints us is not his work at all. For though, as it seems to me, there is no good reason for doubting that the volume or volumes called *The Works of Shakespeare* are, in substance, the work of one man and that man William Shakespeare, yet it is, as we shall later see in detail, difficult to deny that there are whole scenes, and perhaps even one or two whole plays, which are by other hands. We need not, then, make canonical scriptures of them all, and perhaps we shall be wise to vary Johnson's advice a little and invite "him that is yet unacquainted with the

powers of Shakespeare," not, as Johnson proposed, to travel through the whole Folio from *The Tempest* to *Pericles*, but to take and read a dozen or half-dozen of the plays in which those powers are undoubted and undiluted: *As You "Like"*, perhaps, and *Twelfth Night* for comedies, *Henry IV* and *Henry K* for histories, and, for tragedies, *Lear* and *Othello*. This half-dozen will do as well as another. Let him go straight through them "with utter negligence" of unfamiliar words and difficult constructions and obscure sentences, drain at one draught the cup of genius, and experience in his heart and mind the onset of the greatest of all revealers of the majesty and mystery, the wonder and wickedness, the laughter and beauty and delight of this world of ours. That great impression once gained, he will have the whole in his possession, and be able to face, if he chooses, the doubts that are thrown on the authenticity of some parts, the contentious attempts made by rival commentators at the elucidation of dark places, and all the true and false learning which has been piled up on disputed points about Shakespeare's language and metre, his art, his sources, his relations to earlier and to contemporary writers.

So much may be said by way of general preface. But even in saying this we have anticipated. The plays inevitably dominate our minds directly we speak of Shakespeare; and so, in beginning a study of his works and suggesting the right way of approach to them, I have not been able to avoid thinking chiefly of the plays. But they do not come first in the order of his life or of his fame. He had certainly written some plays before 1593; how many we cannot be quite sure. But they were not printed, and probably did not carry his fame far beyond theatrical circles. It was a poem, not a play, which first made him famous. In that year, 1593, he published

*Venus and Adonis*, in his own name, with a dedicatory letter offering it to his patron, the Earl of Southampton. He was then twenty-nine, and this publication marks an important step in his career. We may think little of *Venus and Adonis* and much of some of the earliest plays, but that is not how things appeared to Shakespeare's contemporaries. A poem carefully printed and issued to the public with the author's name and under the patronage of a magnificent and cultivated young nobleman, one of the most brilliant ornaments of Elizabeth's Court, was a very different thing from a few anonymous and unprinted plays, heard at the theatre and forgotten. It was the challenge of a place among the poets of England. And the challenge was completely successful. The poet began at once to hear the pleasant sound of his brother-poets' praises, and the public absorbed six editions of the poem before 1602. Shakespeare had begun to take his own place, which was ultimately to be the greatest of all, among the English poets.

Characteristically enough, his challenge is not one of originality. It is more often the mediocre writer than the great genius who seeks to arrest attention by novelty and strangeness. Shakespeare is content to begin by adapting other people's plays for the theatre and writing a poetic exercise on a hackneyed story. Many Italians, Frenchmen, and Englishmen had told the tale of Venus and Adonis. And of course Ovid had told it; and from Golding's translation of Ovid Shakespeare contentedly takes many lines almost word for word, as he afterwards took greater words to greater purpose from other books, especially Plutarch's *Lives*. If he did not disdain the use of other men's words when he was at the fullness of his powers he was not likely to do so when he was a young man just beginning to be conscious of them. Naturally, therefore, the poem is all a very

youthful affair, with no very great substance in it, and nothing that can be called solidity or strength. It is an exercise in versifying; there is no sign in it as yet that its writer will soon be the greatest master of the knowledge of human life. It has a good deal of the mawkishness, lusciousness, overheated and over-painted ornamentalities in which youth often delights. It has been said that "sweet" is, to the end, Shakespeare's favourite epithet; it is the epithet which Milton superlatively applied to him. And certainly whatever is pleasant in *Venus and Adonis* comes from "sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child." Fancy is Elizabethan for love, of course; and there is only too much of love and of sweetness in it. And it constantly runs that risk of which it speaks itself when it confesses that love's

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 copious stories, oftentimes begun,  
 End without audience, and are never done.

Much of it is rather empty and verbose, more is crude in taste, at once sensuous and sentimental, without reserve or reticence, dignity or manliness or morals. Spenser had used this same stanza a few years earlier for his *Astropbel*, and he has the same story to tell of the youth killed by the boar. But to what heights he lifts it up, heights of art and of spirit too!

But that immortal spirit which was decked  
 With all the dowries of celestial grace;  
 By sovereign choice from th' heavenly quires select  
 And lineally derived from Angels' race,  
     O what is now of it become, aread;  
     Ay me, can so divine a thing be dead?

Shakespeare is, certainly as yet, no poet after that

fashion. Indeed, in pure poetry, as distinct from drama, he hardly ever comes near that miraculous art of Spenser's which seems to unite by anticipation something of Shakespeare's ease and sweetness with something of Milton's weight and splendour, and has been the delight and despair of poets ever since.

Yet if the tale of *Venus and Adonis* is at once very youthful, rather indecent and rather absurd, it does contain some charming things. If, in Johnson's phrase, one "abandons one's mind" to it, one may read it with a pleasure that lulls one half-asleep. It is all very easy and gracious. Shakespeare has hardly begun his later practice of twisting phrases and thoughts into shapes so distorted that they become nearly unrecognisable. And it is full of delightful escapes from the rather tedious story. It is a relief to get away from the sentimental indecencies of Venus to the fierce animal realities of the horse and the "breeding jennet, lusty, young and proud." And it is pleasant to see, for the first time, what we shall see all through, that the Shakespeare of books and theatres and London life never forgets the country. We have the boar, and the roe, and the horse, and the snail; and the loveliest things in the poem are provided by the hare and the lark. One of the five stanzas, all brimful of knowledge, sympathy, and art, which describe the hunting of the hare, has already been quoted. Here is the lark awakening the dawn:

Lo, here the gentle lark, weary of rest,  
From his moist cabinet mounts up on high,  
And wakes the morning from whose silver breast  
The sun ariseth in his majesty:  
Who doth the world so gloriously behold  
That cedar-tops and hills seem burnish'd gold.

It is these episodes and illustrations which best keep the poem alive to-day; they, and a few lovely lines or phrases such as that which Venus finds for Adonis:

O fairest mover on this mortal round:

or the couplet in which she sums up all her pleadings:

O learn to love: the lesson is but plain,  
And once made perfect, never lost again;

or that ninetieth stanza in which we almost catch a glimpse of Romeo and Juliet on the balcony:

" Now let me say 'Good night and so say you:  
If you will say so you shall have a kiss."  
"Good night," quoth she, and, ere he says "Adieu,"  
The honey fee of parting tender'd is:  
Her arms do lend his neck a sweet embrace:  
Incorporate then they seem: face grows to face.

*Venus and Adonis* was followed in 1594 by another exercise in the versifying of ancient story, *Lucrece*. Much of what has been said of Shakespeare's first appearance in print applies also to this second. It is a little less simple and youthful, and the story has, of course, more substance in it. It is a relief to exchange the thin absurdities of the amorous Venus and the coy Adonis for the lust of Tarquin and the agony of Lucrece, which, however rhetorical, are very real. And perhaps it may be said that Shakespeare the dramatist makes his first tentative appearance in *Lucrece*. For, while Venus and Adonis are mere pictures, we do see glimpses of the heart and conscience both of Tarquin and Lucrece. Still, the poem is essentially an exercise; and if exercises

of this sort live at all, it is by the charm of their execution. They are, like Latin verses by classical scholars, nothing in themselves, but can be so prettily done that their prettiness becomes a sort of originality. There is more of that sort of charm in *Venus* than in *Lucrece*, I think, partly because the action of *Venus* is all in the open air and much in the hunting-field, where the young Shakespeare was most at home, and partly because the story, though so much less interesting, is better held together. No doubt the young poet had gained in confidence by the success of his first effort, and that is not the same thing as gaining in art. The consequence is that *Lucrece* is very much longer than its predecessor; that the heroine, after the departure of Tarquin, indulges in a declamation about three hundred lines long; and that, after she has got to action and sent the messenger for her husband, the poet gives us a description, two hundred lines long, of a picture of the Trojan War on one of her walls. Prolixities of this sort, whatever beauties they include, are survivals of the incoherent irrelevancies of a Middle Age which had always too much time on its hands. They remind us of those very long lanes for which Chaucer sometimes allows himself to desert his main road of action. But the Shakespeare of *Iucrece* is very far from being Chaucer's equal, and the compensations which he provides for his delays are much less satisfying.

Still, there is no denying that those include one or two splendid outbursts of that art of eloquence which, till to-day, youth has always loved, and which has generally most flourished in the most civilised ages of all countries. Or perhaps what we get here is rather rhetoric than eloquence; rather the splendid phrasing of a set theme than the perfect utterance of convictions that cannot keep silence. That must wait perhaps for the

great tragedies. Meanwhile *Lucrece* certainly offers us something, by whatever name we call it, which cannot be heard without some quickening of pleasure at such words, so finely chosen and ordered, and to such fine uses; unless, indeed, by those who have no ears to tell them that the right use of language is an art; that is to say, such an activity of the aesthetic as well as of the practical faculty of man that the doing rivals the thing done, or rather is an inseparable part of it. The art of *Lucrece* is, no doubt, rather young, and it would not be difficult to pick holes in it. But only deaf ears and dull minds can remain quite unmoved when the great old commonplaces are so splendidly new-born as some of them, such as, for instance, the sins of Opportunity, are here, in the hands of Shakespeare.

It will be convenient to say something here of Shakespeare's Sonnets, all, or nearly all of which were certainly written in these early years, as is proved by their language and tone, which are certainly not that of the later Shakespeare, and are often such as may not unfairly be described as a certain Francis Meres described them, when he wrote in 1598 of the "sugared sonnets among his private friends" of the "mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare," and praised the Ovidian art and sweetness which appear in them as well as in *Venus* and *Lwrece*. After the fashion of the day they were, no doubt, much circulated in manuscript; but they were not printed till 1609, and then without Shakespeare's authority, by a piratical publisher, and with a curious dedication to a certain "Mr. W. H.," on the interpretation of which rivers of too ingenious ink have been poured out in the last hundred years. It is noteworthy that when the Sonnets were reprinted in 1640 among the "Poems of Shakespeare," real and spurious, this dedication was omitted, and the order in which they

were arranged was not quite the same. They were almost unknown in the eighteenth century, but have since been more read and discussed than all but a few of the plays.

Much or most of that discussion seems to me to have been among the most barren, because among the most fantastic, of critical efforts. One is reminded by it of the famous definition, according to which the student of metaphysics is one who spends his life in a dark room looking for a black hat which is not there. The black hat of the Sonnets is a Shakespearean autobiography. And the dark room is a collection (not, it is to be remembered, a series) of poems of unknown date or occasion into whose shadows we peer to catch dim glimpses of the poet gliding in and out among the shifting and evasive figures of a young man who was probably a nobleman, a young woman who was neither noble nor virtuous, of a rival poet, and a certain "Mr. W. H.," who is foisted into the Sonnets on the shoulders of the pirate publisher, and possibly or probably had nothing to do with Shakespeare at all. Of course, any smallest fragment of autobiography by such a man as Shakespeare is of supremest interest. A few such fragments are certainly to be found in the Sonnets. But they are no foundation for the elaborate structures which claim to rest upon them, but rest, in fact, on conjectural air. It is mere waste of time to hunt those wills-o'-the-wisp, the friend and the lady and the rival poet, because no material exists for identifying them, and it is even possible that they were not real persons at all. All, as Sir Sidney Lee conclusively showed, are common figures appearing and reappearing in the fashionable sonneteering exercises of the time. And, as he also shows, there is ample confessional evidence left us by several contemporary writers of such sonnets that what they wrote was poetic fiction not autobiographical fact.

And if history cannot be got out of sonnets which were published by their authors in books as sequences, how is it likely to be got out of Shakespeare's, which were not published by him, can only be defended as a sequence by very far-fetched and dubious arguments, and may well owe what arrangement is to be found in them, not to the poet who wrote them, but to the pirate who stole them?

The truth is that the builders of these autobiographical castles in the air might have saved themselves much labour and ink if they had approached the question from a wider point of view. It is not merely contemporary practice in the matter of sonnets which tells us not to expect to find a *Life of Shakespeare in the Sonnets*. It is the nature of poetry itself. Poetry is imagination, not fact; the universal, not the particular, or, if the particular, then seen, not by itself alone, but in the light of the universal. And this has perhaps been especially true of the poetry of love. From the days of Petrarch, even from those of Dante, and earlier still, it had been a fashion to write poetry which, under the form of passionate affection for an individual, gave the poet an opportunity of pouring out his dissatisfaction with life as it is, and his aspirations after another life as it might be. With the Renaissance Platonism came into ail this, and we see Shakespeare himself identifying his friend with the archetypal Idea of Beauty of which all other beauties are shadows. Is not this enough by itself to show the absurdity of any literalist interpretation of the *Sonnets*? The loves of the poets, from Dante and Beatrice to Waller and Sacharissa, have in fact always occupied a much larger space in their poetry than in their lives. The loves that have been great events in

See, for instance, Mr J. A. Fort's "Two Dated Sonnets of Shakespeare."

their lives sometimes hardly appear in their poetry; those which do so appear have been made part of the universal and have left the particular facts, if there actually were any, far behind them, forgetting history to become a greater thing, to become poetry. We may see this among poets centuries later than Shakespeare. Shelley has little poetry about Harriet or Mary, much about Jane; and his most astonishing outburst of all is about Emilia Viviani, whom he only knew for a few weeks or months, and of whom we know little, indeed, but quite enough to tell us that she was very unlike the heroine of *Epipsychidion*. Even the most exact and veracious poets decline to make their love-poems matter for biography. Of Annette Wordsworth wrote nothing, and of his wife very little; of the Lucy of those love-poems which are among the greatest in the language we do not certainly know even that she ever existed. The right thing, then, to do with the Sonnets is to treat them as what they are, which is poetry. There is fact behind them, no doubt. A young man going through the friendships and loves, the jealousies and quarrels and despairs, of youth, and, because he was a man of genius and a poet, transmuting all this metal of experience—whether thin or rich, fine or coarse, we cannot now tell—into the pure gold of poetry. Let us not waste time in trying to undo his work, but rather accept and enjoy the gold he has given us. What is it? Well, it is the earliest poetry of his, I suppose, which everybody wants to learn by heart. The experiences which lie behind the Sonnets, whatever they were, have given them a larger and deeper note than could be struck by *Venus* and *Lucrece*, which were mere exercises, with only books and no life behind them. The Sonnets are, no doubt, partly exercises still; and many of them are tedious, affected, and unreal. Shakespeare has made a certain contribution to that poetry of

the lamenting and protesting, absent or rejected lover, which is the most wearisome that has ever been written. But he does not often stop there. In him, as in Dante and in the best of Petrarch, the poetry goes infinitely beyond and outside the experience, heightening and deepening, colouring and darkening it, making it more passionate and more splendid and more terrible, often leaving it altogether behind. That is, of course, partly because the reaction of the spirit to all experience is immensely greater and richer in men like Dante and Shakespeare than it is in ordinary men; and partly because poets move out at once, as other men do not, from their own particular joy or sorrow to the joys and sorrows of the whole world. To an onlooker the few meetings between Dante and Beatrice would have exhibited nothing remarkable; they provided no material of facts for Dante's biography; but entering into his soul they made the *Vita Nuova* and partly made the *Divine Comedy*. If we knew all that the commentators vainly inquire after of the facts that lie behind Shakespeare's Sonnets, it is likely enough that they would be such as neither struck contemporaries nor would interest posterity. But to the stir they secretly created in the heart and mind of Shakespeare we owe this wonderful collection of poems.

It is one of the inexplicables of literary history that such poetry should have been so long neglected. Of some of Shakespeare's greatest gifts, his humour, his miraculously varied knowledge of men and manners, his instinct for a great dramatic situation, they can, of course, exhibit nothing. Nor did they provide opportunity for the Herculean energies of his mature style. But in sheer loveliness of diction he never exceeded the finest of them; and some of them are, except one or two songs, the greatest lyrical poems which even he ever

wrote. Every one who cares for poetry has been irresistibly driven to get some of them by heart. Not every one makes the same choice. George Wyndham, who edited them, thought the ninetieth was the finest of all; and it is a miracle of easy moving in this strict and confined form of the sonnet, as well as one of those which have most the note of an actual and personal experience. Others will prefer those which most openly pass beyond the immediate occasion, whatever it was, seldom, indeed, forgetting it altogether, but dissolving it in life and death and the common things in which lovers are no more than other men. Out of the hundred and fifty-four, I suppose there may be forty or fifty, whether of the personal or general sort, which everybody would like to have in his memory as permanent possession. But few of us secure so many. For myself, if I may be so egotistical as to speak of myself (and an occasional confession is the touchstone of reality in criticism), my own list is one of no more than eleven. And they are: No. 18, Shall I compare thee to a summer's day; No. 29, When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes; No. 30, When to the sessions of sweet silent thought; No. 32, If thou survive my well-contented day; No. 60, Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore; No. 66, Tired with all these, for restful death I cry; No. 71, No longer mourn for me when I am dead; No. 73, That time of year thou mayst in me behold; No. 116, Let me not to the marriage of true minds; No. 129, The expense of spirit in a waste of shame; and No. 146, Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth. Perhaps my choice is over grave, but the deepest passion of lyric, whatever its professed subject, has never in any age kept long away from the thought of death. Certainly Shakespeare's does not. And it is remarkable that two of the greatest of all, the tremendous

No. 129 and the partly Platonic and partly Pauline No. 146, illustrate, as the very grave passages about lust in *Venus* and *'Lucrece* have already illustrated, how stern a vein of ethical seriousness there already was in this youthful and romantic child of the pleasure-loving Renaissance. That is the miracle of genius. It sees all sides of life, even enters into them all. The same man who will at one moment seem to put the whole of himself into an outburst of amorous sentimentalism, as in some of the Sonnets, at another, as often in the plays, will treat the sexual relation as no more than matter for merriment, at another, as in "The expense of spirit," and again often in the plays, will see in it the most terrible of the issues, making for life or death, which have to be faced by the bodies and souls of men. These Sonnets of Shakespeare, lovely as they are, are very far from being all loveliness. They are among the greatest of all meditations on the mystery of human nature, which is the mystery of a mortality which can never be content that the love and beauty it has known should be less than eternal. That is the greatest and most continuous of all their subjects. But they have also in them all sorts of other things. We find in them that wonderful England of Elizabeth's days, full of love and joy and beauty and of that consciousness of a new birth and of the opening of a new era which gives all such times so peculiar a fascination. And there are all the eternal sights and sounds of earth of which poets are for ever making for us new experiences: the dawn and the sunset; day and night; winter and summer; autumn and spring; the "rough winds" that "shake the darling buds of May"; the roses of whose "sweet deaths are sweetest odours made"; the lark with which the poet identifies himself, which "at break of day arising From sullen earth, sings hymns at Heaven's gate"; the night-

ingale whose "mournful hymn did hush the night," but only for a while, till the coming of summer, when "wild music burthens every bough"; these, and a hundred such details, both of nature and of life, in themselves commonplace enough till the poet touched them, make the Sonnets a picture of that same world which has wakened young poets to their first verses in all ages and countries. There are things less universal, too; things belonging to the contemporary England, but not to that heroic and poetic England which the word Elizabethan chiefly calls up to us; rather to the new business and prosperity which came of Tudor rule and Tudor peace; the "unperfect actor on the stage" of the new theatres which meant so much to Shakespeare; the even more important lawyer with his charters and bonds, his misprisions and his patents, too often present in all Shakespeare's verse; the traveller in a wet climate with a weary horse; the "pebbled shores" of England, then beginning to send their ships across all the oceans, shores which, perhaps, Shakespeare never saw, though his exactly truthful words come to our minds before the waves on every beach; the misgoverned world of ambition and intrigue in court and city, of which, though he saw so much less than Spenser and Sidney and Raleigh, he yet saw enough to cry almost as loudly as they did for any escape from it, even the escape of "restful death." It is all these things, universal and particular, contemporary and eternal, love and death and life, spring and summer, Stratford and England, which the wisest reader looks for in the Sonnets; not the facts of an entangled, undecipherable, and at least partially unreal autobiography, but the poetry of nature, passion, and truth.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE *EARLIER PLAYS*

**WE** may now come to the plays which are, for all the world, much more than anything else, the works of Shakespeare. I have already briefly alluded to the fact that doubts have been thrown on his authorship of some, or even of any, of them, and have admitted that we cannot now maintain that every word in the volume of the plays, every scene, or even every play, comes to us from the hand and brain of Shakespeare. Perhaps a word or two more should be said before beginning the detailed discussion of the plays, though anything like a survey or discussion of these critical problems would be impossible here even if it were in place, and out of place even if it were possible. It is right that the plain reader should be aware that such doubts and problems exist. The truth is that few authors who died three hundred years ago can altogether escape them; and least of all one whose writings have reached us by such casual processes as Shakespeare's, with little or no supervising care on his part. None of Shakespeare's works were published by himself except the two poems which we have already discussed. Those on which his fame chiefly rests were plays, and in those days plays were either not printed at all or printed in piratical, surreptitious, or at least unauthorised ways. Their authors did not care to issue them, and neither their authors nor anyone else treated them seriously as literature. So late as 1616 Ben Jonson, who published his, was laughed at for describing them as "Works." Plays

were the property of acting companies, and seem to have been often adapted or wholly rewritten for stage purposes, sometimes by authors who had had nothing to do with them in their original shape. If they were printed, the printer had to rely, at worst on stolen notes, at best on the copy belonging to the theatre, which had often undergone revisions of this sort. It is inevitable that plays written and printed in this fashion should raise problems of authorship and authenticity of text. And such problems are raised by a large number of the plays of Shakespeare.

It is true that a few years after his death his plays were published in book form by John Heminge and Henry Condell, two actors of his company who had been his intimate friends, and that their title-page claims that they have printed all the plays "according to the true originall copies," while their preface, to which they affix their signatures, declares that plays previously "maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors" are now "offered to your view, cured and perfect of their limbs," while "all the rest" are "absolute in their numbers as he conceived them; who, as he was a happy imitator of nature, was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together, and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers." This language has usually and naturally been taken to be an assertion that the editors of the book which we call the First Folio had Shakespeare's manuscripts before them. And consequently these friends of Shakespeare, who speak of him with such affection and of whom we wish to think well, have been generally accused of disingenuousness, if not of worse. For it is certain that many, at any rate, of the plays in the Folio are not printed from the author's manuscript. That is

clear from the fact that they sometimes reproduce the printer's errors of the Quarto editions, adding others of their own, while of two readings, both of which were already in print, they sometimes give the one which is plainly wrong; so that in these cases they provide a text not better but worse than was already in existence, which they could not have done if they had always had the poet's manuscript before them.

What, then, are we to make of the "stolen and surreptitious copies, maimed and deformed by the frauds and stealths of injurious impostors" which the editors claim to have "cured" and made "perfect"? What of the plays given "absolute in their numbers as he conceived them"? And what of the poet's papers in which his friends scarcely found a "blot"? Either Heminge and Condell were just vulgar advertising liars, or their words do not mean what they appear to mean. The first we are very unwilling to think. For they were Shakespeare's friends, they write like honest as well as friendly men, and they have so honest a man as Ben Jonson co-operating with them in this venture. And, beside these rational grounds of unwillingness, there is a powerful irrational one. We owe them too much to like thinking badly of them. It is to them more than to anyone else that we owe our knowledge of the greatest of Englishmen and of poets. Indeed there are twenty of his plays which they were the first to print, and which but for them might never have been printed at all. So we cannot easily bring ourselves to believe they were liars. We are driven, then, to the other alternative which has the support of many recent scholars. Those who wish to study it in detail will probably not find a better short statement of it than that of Professor Dover Wilson in his lecture, "The Task of Heminge and Condell," published in a volume called *Studies in the*

*First Folio*, issued by the Shakespeare Association in 1924. It is briefly this. Heminge and Condell were not what we call editors, but, according to their own three times repeated statement, rather collectors who chose and supplied copy of the plays to the printers. "We have but collected them and done an office to the dead to procure his orphans guardians." They regret that Shakespeare did not "oversee his own writings"; they make no claim to have done it for him. Their business was only the very important business of deciding what plays to include and which of two or more versions to follow when there were more than one existing. That is the first point. The second is that if their words are examined closely they do not assert that all existing editions of the plays were "stolen and surreptitious," but only that some or many were, which is certainly true. The third point is that, being men of the theatre, they naturally took, as good copy to print from, the playhouse material which had been used for performance. "Accordingly," says Professor Dover Wilson, "most of the texts supplied to the printers of the Folio in 1623 were, we cannot doubt, prompt-books from the theatre." The nearness of these prompt-books to Shakespeare's original manuscript would vary, and cannot now be precisely ascertained, especially as, in 1623, it was already ten or more years since he had retired, while the manuscripts had been in use ever since they first came to the theatre, and had probably received alterations from time to time, some of which might well be recent and come from other hands than Shakespeare's. Of this Heminge and Condell would, of course, be aware; but they would hold themselves justified if they gave the best text they could find of any play with which Shakespeare had had anything substantial to do.

That is, then, the position. They did not print, and,

rightly understood, do not claim to have printed, from Shakespeare's "papers," except so far as those "papers" may have survived at the theatre. When they refer to his papers and to their having "scarce received a blot" in them, they refer, not to manuscripts supplied to them by his executors or friends, but to what had often "lain beneath their eyes," as Mr. Wilson says, in the course of their work at the theatre.

There remains, indeed, the further difficulty that the title-page of the Folio claims that the plays were printed "according to the true originall copies." This Mr. Wilson gets rid of by dismissing it as "publisher's puff," for which Heminge and Condell, who were merely "collectors" and contributed nothing but the selection of the plays and their own signed dedications, must not be made responsible. So we shift the lie on to shoulders to whose burdens we are indifferent.

All this is ingenious and persuasive, and I hope we may accept it as a true explanation of the riddle of Heminge and Condell, and may find in it as probable an account as is obtainable of the making of their great book. It has, indeed, the disadvantage which attends all attempts to alter by explanations the natural meaning of words as they strike the plain reader. But here the plain reader's impression cannot possibly be the truth, and it seems more reasonable, as well as pleasanter, to believe that Heminge and Condell never meant to assert more than the reduced and true statement which is all that a strict interpretation finds in their words. Moreover they may well have been justified in expecting not to be misunderstood by their contemporaries who knew so much more than we have known till quite lately about the conditions which then governed the printing of plays.

So much, perhaps, has been worth saying as just

indicating to the ordinary reader that when he reads the plays of Shakespeare he is not necessarily reading the exact words which Shakespeare once wrote, and as giving him a suggestion of the kind of problems which lie under the text which he reads so smoothly. It is enough, perhaps more than enough, for the present purpose. Those who wish to make any detailed study, either of the text or the sources of the plays, must be referred to the books of the professional critics. In so referring them a word of warning may perhaps be uttered without impertinence. Every lover of great literature, whether Biblical, classical, or English, owes a great debt to the critics who, during the last hundred years, have thrown so much light on its history, authorship and composition. But critics have unfortunately often been men with more knowledge of archaeology or philology than of literature, and partially or completely unaware that the best interpreter of literature is not learning, useful as that is if kept in its place, but life. And they have often been men who loved theory more than fact, preferred reconstruction to acceptance, and were generally confident that they knew much better than either printed page or manuscript could tell them what the author wrote or did not write. Too many of them were victims of the absurd delusion already referred to that authors are never inconsistent with themselves either in thought or in style, and indeed are always at their best, a delusion from which an examination of any fairly long-lived modern author might have saved them. There is in truth no author, not even Milton, of whom such an assumption is true, and none of whom it is less true than of Shakespeare, even of the Shakespeare left to us by these critics after their prunings. And there has been another delusion, the most fatal of all: that it is easy for a critic, however

little endowed with style himself, to pronounce confidently, "This verse is, and that verse cannot possibly be, by St. Paul or St. Luke"; "These lines are certainly Marlowe and those undoubtedly Chapman." Shakespeare has not suffered so much as the Bible from these various forms of intellectual perversity; nor perhaps so much as some of the ancient classics. But suffered he has from most of them. Indeed, there is more excuse in his case for such critical ingenuities than there is in the ancient or Biblical writers. For, admittedly, he was often a reviser of other men's work, and is not likely to have always rewritten the whole of the plays he was handling. Still, it is to be remembered that if plays in those days were often rewritten and may often, for that reason, exhibit more hands than one, yet that very fact has another side to it. In a world like that of the Elizabethan theatre, where many men of dramatic talent were daily competing with each other, it is certain beforehand that one would often catch for a moment another's manner of writing, and that even in the incomparably greatest of them there would often be passing echoes of the tricks and peculiarities of men whom, at his highest, he is utterly unlike and far above. I am far from wishing to speak disrespectfully of such studies which, confined within proper limits, are not only inevitable but right. Only it will be well for readers who decide to travel beyond the text to begin their studies with caution and even distrust, and to remember Johnson's characteristically sane warning that those who gave us the texts we have and ascribed them to Shakespeare were much nearer to him and to the facts than we are, and are therefore *prim a facie* very much more likely to be right. "They who had the copy before their eyes were more likely to read it right than we who read it only by imagination." This warning should never be

out of our minds when we hear doubts raised about the text of Shakespeare, or indeed of any other ancient author. And if the critic replies, as he fairly may, that we cannot be at all certain that Shakespeare's editors "had the copy before their eyes," we may answer again that at least they had something which Shakespeare might himself have seen, something certainly nearer to him than anything we have ever seen. With these cautions and warnings we may plunge, if we will, into the interesting but dangerous thickets of the textual and critical problems of Shakespeare. There are plenty of guides ready to escort us there: some generally cautious and sane, others, unfortunately, generally insane, and therefore exceptionally confident.

There is one kind of Shakespearean critic, not textual, but rather pseudo-biographical, against whom a word of special caution ought to be uttered. A large library of books has come into existence in support of one or other version of the fantastic theory that Shakespeare was merely a name masking that of the real author of the plays and poems, who was in truth Bacon, Lord Derby, or some other distinguished person. That theory cannot be discussed here. It has secured widespread attention because it makes good journalistic copy of the sensational order. But it does not deserve serious, or at any rate detailed, refutation. No parallel is alleged for such a masquerade of authorship. Nor is it possible that such a secret could so long be concealed. A hundred answers might be made to it. But one is sufficient. The editors of the First Folio and Ben Jonson were men who knew and had long known the London theatre. They speak of Shakespeare's authorship with the intimacy of personal knowledge. Their testimony is confirmed by all the contemporary evidence of which there is a considerable amount. Many contemporary writers spoke

of Shakespeare as the author of the plays; none throws any doubt on his authorship, none gives a hint of suspecting Bacon or anybody else of being concealed behind Shakespeare's name. When Bacon came to his trial, and his enemies wished to rake up everything that could be said against him, what more effective weapon could they have found, as Mr. Smart asks, than this tale, which, if true, must have been well known at least to the people of the theatre, that Bacon had long been a secret writer of stage plays?

We may therefore dismiss at once this ingeniously absurd theory as the baseless fabric of a dream. And in the end, perhaps, we shall turn away altogether from the commentators, sane and insane, leaving them with a mixture of gratitude, amusement and indignation, and going back to what the plain man has generally been content to follow the tradition in calling Shakespeare. For, even if all questions of authorship could be authoritatively settled, it would remain true that the value of a book, as of a picture, really depends on itself, not on who wrote or painted it; on what we find in it, not on what we or anyone else can discover about its origin. If the wine is good we need not bother about the vintage; if it is not, no most authentic record of the year and place of its birth will induce the judicious to sit long over it. Here, then, and for our present purposes, we will take the works of Shakespeare as tradition has described them, and enjoy them for what they are, confident that what we enjoy is, without any kind of doubt, mainly the gift to us of William Shakespeare of Stratford-on-Avon; and as to what we do not enjoy, content to pass it over without any too urgently curious inquiry whether it is to him, as it certainly is sometimes, or to others, as it may well more often be, that we owe our irritation or our weariness.

We will now proceed to a brief survey of each play in its turn. And we will follow, not the old order of the First Folio and its successors, but a roughly chronological order. The exact order in which the plays were written cannot now be known. It is a matter of less important but more hopeful inquiry than the problem of the authorship of this or that scene. But the material is insufficient and will never provide us with certainty. Many plays as we now have them were not all written at one time. Some almost certainly include scenes either retained from the earlier plays, whether his own or the work of others, which Shakespeare was adapting or reshaping. A single play may therefore have, in a sense, several dates. Those who are interested in these problems will find them discussed with great ingenuity and great learning by Mr. Dover Wilson in the *Cambridge Shakespeare*. In my notes on the plays I have sometimes briefly referred to his arguments. But these, again, are discussions which lie outside the scope of such a volume as this. We must here be content with the fact that there is enough general agreement as to the chronological order of the plays, if not as to the details of their composition, to enable us to travel from the earliest plays to the latest without fear of departing very widely from the truth.

It is generally believed that the first of all is *Love's Labour's Lost*, which was probably written in 1591; two years, that is, before *Venus and Adonis* was printed. It has all sorts of faults, but it at once showed that there was a new hand working for the theatre which would make it something which it never had been before. Johnson's summings-up of the separate plays are, for the most part, strangely lacking in the qualities which make the strength of his great Preface. But of this play he states the essential facts in a couple of sentences.

There are in it, as he says, "many passages mean, childish and vulgar. But there are scattered through the whole many sparks of genius: nor is there any play that has more evident marks of the hand of Shakespeare." That is the striking thing about it; how at once, in his very first appearance, he stands out by himself, combining in his single genius the eloquence of Marlowe with much more than the cleverness of Lyly and much more than the humour of Peele. The story is fantastic, of course, but that Shakespeare never minded. And there is an immense amount of the verbal quibbling which was at all times, as Johnson said, "the Cleopatra for which he was content to lose the world," and would certainly have lost it if he had not been able to buy it back by other gifts. The other gifts are young here, as yet; the questioning quips and answering repartees of Biron and Rosabelle suggest but do not equal Benedick and Beatrice; the fooling of Sir Nathaniel and Holofernes, Dull and Costard, provides some good and very English humour, but not yet that of Dogberry and Verges. Still, that humour is a new thing of Shakespeare's very own, which no one has given us before or since, and very pleasant it is. How alive it is to-day; as alive as the verbal wit is, nearly all of it, utterly dead. Shakespeare already possesses the most useful of his gifts: a practical knowledge of the theatre. The business of the four lovelorn traitors to their vows overheard by each other betraying their lapses must always have been very effective on the stage. And though this play gives Shakespeare no great opportunities for eloquence, he already has the secret of the mighty line in which he followed and overpassed Marlowe. One has not read a dozen lines before one comes upon "the huge army of the world's desires"; and Biron's praises of love—

And, when love speaks, the voice of all the Gods  
Makes heaven drowsy with the harmony—

are already of the kind that will compel the world to listen. Best of all, there are the lyrics, the only matter in which Peele was fit to carry Shakespeare's shoes. Lovers of pure poetry will feel as they read "On a day (alack the day!)" and "When daisies pied and violets blue," that here, at any rate, as in Peele's *Old Wives*, the whole play will not weigh in the balance against a few lines of song. It is not very flattering to our conceit to-day to note that such poetry as this could then be said or sung before a popular audience. Nor, I am afraid, can we afford to look down on an audience which was quick enough to follow Shakespeare's conversational dialectic and knew enough of foreign languages not to be annoyed by the scraps of Latin and Italian and French which he introduces into the dialogue in this and so many other of his plays. But we need not, I think, attribute to them the supernatural acuteness supposed by the critics, who find in the play a series of political and personal allusions. There is no doubt that "Biron" and the "King of Navarre" would make them think of France and that famous King of Navarre who was soon to be the greatest of the kings of France. But to suppose that so innocent a phrase as "wars of civility" was an allusion to the French Civil War, or that "chapmen's tongues" is a reference to the poet Chapman, or that Sir Nathaniel's request to Holofernes to "abrogate scurrility" is more than a parson's protection of his "cloth"; all these are ingenious huntings after wills-o'-the-wisp, which only distract us from attending to our proper business of enjoying the action and poetry of the play.

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is certainly another very

early play, possibly even earlier than *Love's Labour's Lost*. Still, there are signs of development. It has not got so many "sonnets" in it, and it has a more important action. Nobody can care a serious farthing about what happens to anybody in *Love's Labour's Lost*, but here we care intensely for Julia and a good deal for Silvia and Valentine. The play is again all about love except that part of it which is about friendship; the extravagant sort of friendship which we see in Montaigne, Shakespeare's Sonnets, and other books of the Renaissance, and which is the only possible explanation of the last scene of this play—"All that was mine in Silvia I give thee"—if it was written by Shakespeare, as there are some good grounds for hoping it was not. The Cambridge editors, Sir Arthur Quiller Couch and Mr. Dover Wilson, are sure that it is part of a cutting down of Shakespeare's play by another hand. But as they are equally confident that the whole part of Speed is too dull to be by Shakespeare, and support their theories by detailed inconsistencies of time and place which I am sure would not have perturbed Shakespeare, I do not feel as safely delivered of Valentine's pseudo-generous callousness, the brutality of Proteus and the general absurdity of the behaviour of everybody as I should like to be. Speed's jokes and quibbles are certainly no worse than those of many other of Shakespeare's fools. And in the last scene itself there are certainly some things that have the ring of Shakespeare in them: "O heaven, were man But constant he were perfect"; "I dare not say I have one friend alive." Besides, this is not the only play which suggests that it is difficult to be quite sure that there is anything Shakespeare would forbid himself when he wanted to get a play wound up. Still, we rejoice in the evidence, such as it is, of a later revision by some other writer, and cling to the hope

that such a horror of ugliness as the last scene is not Shakespeare's; that, in fact, his heart would have recoiled from it and his head despised it.

But however that may be, we are still here in a very youthful world in which rationality and probability are almost the last things that matter to the story-teller. Shakespeare is still rather a lyric than a dramatic writer. "Who is Silvia" is as immeasurably the best thing in the *Two Gentlemen* as "When icicles hang by the wall" and the other verses were in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The characters behave with absurd improbability. There is nothing to prepare us for the instant, and at once infinite, baseness of Proteus; no one in all Shakespeare is quite so silly as Valentine when he betrays his own plan to the Duke. The quibbles are all through very tedious. We have scarcely read twenty lines before they are upon us with the thinnest puns about "over boots in love"—and we seldom get free of them for long. In fact, there are all sorts of unattractive absurdities in the play, even though we need not worry ourselves, as many people have, about travellers going by ship and catching the tide when they journey from one inland town to another, for Mr. Smart has shown us that that is only a stage convention as old as Plautus, who places a harbour at Thebes and generally makes all characters arriving from a distance enter the stage from the side where the harbour was supposed to be. In fact, Shakespeare and Plautus knew what modern editors so continually forget, that, on the stage, Thebes and Athens, Verona and Padua and Pisa, are all fictions of the imagination, and the imagination can take us there as well by sea as by land.

Still, with all its faults, the play is a charming thing and will always have ten readers or spectators for one that *Love's Labour* can boast. It is pleasant to catch in it all sorts of rehearsals for greater things that were to

come. Here is a balcony and a love-scene and a friar and an exile; and they get a glory not quite their own from what Shakespeare will soon make of them in a greater play. And here are other shadowy scenes and figures that will presently reappear in the daylight of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. Shakespeare is a young man touching his instrument uncertainly and imperfectly as yet. Yet how pretty it all is. Love and prettiness and romance fill up the spaces that yet remain empty, and we ask for nothing more as we hear Valentine declare that

Love's a mighty lord  
And hath so humbled me as I confess  
There is no woe to his correction,  
Nor to his service no such joy on earth;

or Julia teaching Lucetta that love, like a river, only grows more violent by being checked:

But when his fair course is not hindered  
He makes sweet music with the enameird stones,  
Giving a gentle kiss to every sedge  
He overtaketh in his pilgrimage.

It might be the young Keats; in whom, indeed, we may often see reborn that young Shakespeare who was a poet of love and the moon, the spring and the flowers, of old songs and old tales; a young poet, pure and simple, who, but for accidents, might never have been a dramatist at all.

*The Comedy of Errors*, if it came after this, is a step backward. In fact, it has less of Shakespeare's genius than anything else to which his name is attached. There is little poetry in it, little drama, almost no wit. The

whole plot is absurd beyond the allowed absurdity and impossibility of farce. The double twinship of indistinguishable persons makes a demand on our powers of credulity and surrender to illusion to which they refuse to respond. The situation is founded on that of the Mencechmi of Plautus, who, however, has only one pair of twins; and it is characteristic of Shakespeare's easy-going recklessness that he calls double to Plautus without stopping to consider for a moment that Plautus had the help of masks in doing for two men what he without masks was trying to do for four. I have never seen it acted, but I imagine that for us it is nearly impossible on the stage. No doubt Elizabethan audiences, so long as they got either poetry and eloquence, or violent action, or the boisterous fun which did not fail them here, were not exacting about probability. Perhaps they were wiser than we. But our picture stage makes demands which theirs did not; and we of to-day are what we are, born critical realists in an age of science, not what they were, born believers and adventurers in an age of miracle and wonder.

If, contrary to what one would expect, it does go well on the stage, as is asserted by some good judges, it must be because Shakespeare's boisterous briskness and jollity sweep everything before them. In spite of its touches of pathos in the business of Egeon, Shakespeare never wrote anything fuller of rough-and-tumble confusion of fun. It is of much better quality in *The Merry Wives*, but there is not more of it. Think of Bacon or Milton writing anything of the sort! Perhaps in all our line of great men no one except Burns had in him jolliness enough to carry through such a business. Yet it is Shakespeare in harness, penned in within absurdly narrow limits. The imitation of Plautus is much too small a business for so great a comic genius. The fun

is mostly very primitive and the boisterousness that of village football-players; and the play gives far too little scope for Shakespeare's unique achievement (which is English, not Roman or Italian or French), that of blending comedy with poetry and romance. That breaks in even here at times with passages of such poetry as Plautus and Moliere knew nothing about. But they are only passages. *The Comedy of Errors* is not poetry, not even drama : it is just farce.

Meanwhile, before he threw off this farce, Shakespeare had made at any rate his first sketch of a play which showed that a dramatist had arisen of such genius as the world had not seen since the decay of Athens. *Borneo and Juliet*, like most of the plays, cannot be precisely dated; like so many of them, it underwent retouchings. There are reasons for thinking that it was first written about 1591 and received its final shape not later than 1596. It at once gained a popularity which it has never lost, and can never lose till men's ears have grown deaf to the music of words, till their pulses no longer quicken at those old tales of young love and pitiless death of which this is the most passionate and the loveliest. Shakespeare was still young when he wrote it, and it has youth in its every scene. There were powers in him, held in reserve, or dormant, or as yet undeveloped, which are not to be found here. But here, for the first time, dominating a whole play, continuously present and visible, is that genius of his which, in the things which came before, was only seen here and there, in a line or a phrase. Here for the first time we see the true dramatist's gift of exhibiting our human nature at once as it is and as much greater than it is; giving us the truth, but, as Flaubert once said, the truth seen in a mirror which magnifies it. *Romeo and Juliet* are what all lovers are, but also what all lovers are not but dream

of being, hope to be, please themselves by fancying that they are. And their fate is only the quickest and most tragic of all realisations of that shadow of death which is never far away from the intervals of thought which force themselves into the presence of all passionate delights. Men, in that exalted state, hear whisperings of their doom before it comes, as here, in the first act, Romeo's "mind misgives, Some consequence, yet hanging in the stars, Shall bitterly begin his fearful date, With this night's revels"; and then, when it is very near, they rush blindly, unconsciously, even gladly, upon it, as we see him in the last act, crying, as if "fey":

My bosom's lord sits lightly in his throne  
And, all this day, an unaccustom'd spirit  
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts.

Fate, as in all great tragedy, is in the air, and, as always, not silent yet never speaking plain. This is the first of its comings into Shakespeare's world; later on they will be more awful, with the doom of all mankind in them. They will then set us thinking more, but perhaps not one of them will ever touch us to more pathos than this which affects only a single pair of lovers.

The play has its defects, of course. It gets into puns in the very first lines and there are too many afterwards, some very poor specimens of this sort of fooling coming even from Romeo himself. And there are other things illustrative of Shakespeare's curious critical insensitivity, one of the worst being Romeo's dying speech, which, after the magnificent

Shake the yoke of inauspicious stars  
From this world-wearied flesh

can sink immediately into translating his surrender of Juliet to death by an attorney's metaphor about seals and engrossings and dateless bargains. And what can be more irritatingly absurd than old Montagu's complaint about Romeo's bad manners in dying before his father? So, to my ears at any rate, the famous speech of Mercutio about Queen Mab is a tedious purple patch, entirely irrelevant, and perhaps introduced by the good-natured Shakespeare merely to give some actor a show speech to spout. But all these trifles are forgotten in the rush and swing, the force and beauty, of the main action, and in the glory of its poetry. Again and again we hear that unique miracle of Shakespeare's poetry, in its youngest manner—

How silver sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,  
Like softest music to attending ears—

or, in a riper way, like—

every cat and dog  
And little mouse, every unworthy thing  
Live here in heaven, and may look on her;  
But Romeo may not.

Nothing, one may safely say, in all dramatic poetry is fuller of mere beauty than the scenes between the two lovers. But that is by no means all. What fine dramatic touches there are in the handling of both; such as, one among many, the no-answer-at-all, not a word of anger or even of contempt, with which Juliet meets the Nurse's infamous suggestion that she should accept Paris. Nor, of course, are the lovers alone in revealing Shakespeare's dramatic genius. Only he has ever had the secret of such things as

not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door:  
but 'tis enough, 'twill serve: ask for me to-morrow  
and you shall find me a grave man,

which alone is worth many times over all the artifice and cleverness of the Queen Mab speech. And only he can make what he makes of unimportant figures like the servants, who, from the admirable first scene which strikes the note of the whole to the banquet scene and all through the play, are such human and convincing figures. The Nurse, of course, is more than that and far from unimportant in the action. She is, besides, in herself an incomparable creation; the first complete figure of human comedy in Shakespeare's long gallery. All that she says is exactly right, and every word she utters adds to our knowledge of her, so individually herself and at the same time so representative of the shallowness, vanity, treachery, grossness, of "*la femme moyenne sensuelle*" So again how wonderfully Shakespeare has transformed the friar of doubtful character whom he found in the poem which was his principal source into this kindly, human, even humorous, and yet truly spiritual counsellor, the best, wisest, and most convincing of Shakespeare's clergymen. And how living old Capulet is! We have all known such a fussy, bustling, hospitable, foolish old gentleman, allowing no impertinences of cousins or disobedience of daughters; with so little seriousness that he forgets his words as soon as he has uttered them, and has hardly told Paris Juliet cannot marry for two years before he is telling her she must marry in two days. One other touch may be noted in a minor character. Perhaps it is fanciful, but it is difficult not to think that there was meaning in the first words put into the mouth of the first of the speakers who play an independent part in the action. What are

the first words of Benvolio before the play has run a hundred lines?

Part, fools:

Put up your swords: you know not what you do.

Of *Titus Andronicus* which belongs to this time, I need say nothing, as scarcely anyone thinks Shakespeare wrote it. There is, it is true, the ugly fact that his friends, Heminge and Condell, who ought to have had much better means of knowing than we, included it in the First Folio. The only explanation that can be offered of that is that he had at some time touched it up, adding a very few lines of his own, and so perhaps allowed it to pass under his name. That is quite bad enough. Happily even his own indifference cannot make us take it for his. In style and manner, in its whole ethical atmosphere, this drama of horrors in which barbarities and tortures are everyday events is utterly unlike all we know of Shakespeare.

A very different play written, or first written, about this time is *The Merchant of Venice*, one of the most delightful, as it has always been one of the most popular, of Shakespeare's creations. None illustrates better his central characteristic as a dramatic artist, the power of blending into a single whole all the kinds and moods of drama. Here we have tragedy and comedy, romance and fairy tale and farce, all joined together in one play. And none gives finer proof of a still more indubitable service rendered by Shakespeare to the theatre. His stories may be, often are, full of absurdities, but the men and women who play their parts in them are in his hands no longer dolls, or names, or types; they have come alive and are completely human beings. This is, of course, notably true of his Jew, Shylock. He takes the traditional Jew who, even in Marlowe, had been merely a monster, something we can see only from out-

side and shrink from the sight, and sets us inside him, leaving him, it is true, still a monster, but a human monster, so human that we can see things from his point of view and feel for him as well as hate him. He is, indeed, made at moments so human that, for the last half-century or more, actors desiring to advertise their originality or to exploit the modern weakness for pitying criminals rather than their victims have tried to turn him into a sympathetic figure. This is, of course, absurd, and a flat defiance of Shakespeare's intention, which—and no virtuosity of actors—is the important thing for us. It is sufficiently put out of court by the very first words Shakespeare makes Shylock utter when he is alone:

If I can catch him once upon the hip  
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.

That is Shakespeare's Jew, the typical or traditional Jew: no audience of that day would have tolerated any other. Nor will it do to suggest, with the new Cambridge editors, that Shakespeare deliberately invited at least partial sympathy for his Jew by making his cruelty the result of the abduction of his daughter. There are three conclusive answers to any such attempt to excuse him. First, Antonio had nothing to do with stealing his daughter; second, when he justifies his cruelty he says not one word about his daughter; and, third, when he hears of his daughter's flight, it is not she but his money and his jewels whose loss stabs deepest into his heart:

I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and  
the jewels in her ear.

No; none of that will do. It is truer to say, as Sir

Arthur Quiller Couch goes on to say, that Shakespeare got carried away by Shylock as he was afterwards by Falstaff, and as Cervantes was by Don Quixote. When that happens we get, as in all these instances, something very great but not perfectly consistent with the original scheme of the story.

There is one other point about Shylock and the trial scene. It is suggested that the famous speech about mercy was an indirect appeal for mercy to a Portuguese Jew, one Dr. Lopez, who was tried and hanged in June 1594 for plotting against the life of Elizabeth. It is very doubtful whether he was really guilty, but there was great excitement on the subject fomented by the friends of Essex who presided at the trial. I confess that here, for once, the contemporary or topical allusion seems to me at any rate possible, especially as in Gratiano's speech:

thy currish spirit  
 Govern'd a wolf who, hang'd for human slaughter  
 Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,

may well allude to some criminal who could be described as "Wolf"; and "Lopez" is not too far away from "lupus," which is wolf, for such an Elizabethan pun as would be intelligible to part, at any rate, of the audience. But it seems more likely that Shakespeare, as a man of business, would provide a Jew play as likely to interest a public excited about the Lopez affair than that he should indirectly attack the prosecution with which Essex, the friend of his patron Southampton, was identified.

In any case, the play itself is the thing, here as always; not possible references to Portuguese Jews, and still less such fancifulnesses as those which search for a real person

behind Gratiano's "Sir Oracle," or discover allusions to Henri IV or Queen Elizabeth in such mere common-places of rhetoric as Portia's "true subjects" bowing to their "new crowned monarch," or her "buzzing pleased multitude" applauding an "oration fairly spoke By a beloved prince." And we must take the characters as Shakespeare offers them to us, not worry ourselves as to the cause of Antonio's melancholy, as if there were no such thing in the world as a naturally low-spirited man, or denounce Bassanio as a heartless cad because we are virtuous and do not approve of fashionable young men living beyond their means. The answer to all that is clear enough. Antonio thought Bassanio good enough to be his friend and Portia thought him good enough to be her husband; and, if more answer is required, we may go for it to the pit or the stalls which have never yet been puzzled by Antonio's melancholy or scandalised by Bassanio's debts. It is much more profitable to think of the genius which could take one old fairy tale about a choice of caskets and another about a pound of flesh and melt their hard absurdities into the liquid and lovely graciousness of the final scene which crowns this delightful play. The absurdities are still there, of course, and you may go below the surface for them, if you are unwise enough, and fish them up and force us to look at them. But if we are left to ourselves and to Shakespeare we shall know nothing about them, whether we are in the theatre listening to the actors or in our chairs at home turning over the pages of the book. And as we close the book or leave the theatre our memories will be of the most famous trial scene in poetry, a miracle in which the life and truth of every spoken word (except the bits of law) strike into utter oblivion the barbarous incredibility of the main issue with which they deal; or of Portia, the first of Shakespeare's queenly

and ruling women, who act with such quick decision and think and feel with such beautiful sweetness and modesty; or of what are perhaps the plainest of all the proofs of Shakespeare's intimate and personal experience of music. The play is full of them:

I am never merry when I hear sweet music,

and

such it is  
As are those dulcet sounds in break of day  
That creep into the dreaming bridegroom's ear  
And summon him to marriage,

and

Methinks it sounds much sweeter than by day.

All these will linger always in our happy and wondering memories; and the wonder at the Portia scenes will be all the greater if we happen to know that in the original story it was a witch who filled the place of this delightful creature, so that her making is an even greater achievement than the transforming of the old Jew ogre into the Shylock who had his turquoise ring of Leah when he was a bachelor. But for some people there is another thing which will haunt them longer still. There are those who love drama less than poetry; history less than romance; and are never better pleased than with the exquisite artistries which this great and careless writer has always at his command when he chooses to give himself the trouble to produce and perfect them. They are of his younger kind as yet, of course; but who that loves such things ever forgets the pretty turn and re-turn of—

If you did know to whom I gave the ring,  
or the lovely echoings of the six times repeated "In  
such a night" of Lorenzo and Jessica. Did even Shake-  
speare ever write more delicious verses than

In such a night  
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand  
Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love  
To come again to Carthage.

Shakespeare was always an Englishman, a lover of the country and a romantic poet. But these characteristics show themselves most in the work he did before he was thirty-five, less at the full flowering maturity of his dramatic powers, returning again, some of them very conspicuously, in his last plays. Few or none show more of them than his two escapes from the Court to the forest, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *As You Like It*. As usual, it is difficult to date them exactly, and not every word or even scene of either of them may have been written in the same year. But *As You Like It* seems to be connected with Marlowe and Marlowe's death which occurred in 1593. The *Dream* is perhaps even earlier. And, whatever retouchings they received, both seem certainly to have reached their final shape before 1600. Both are full of Warwickshire and the Forest of Arden and the English peasant; and the Puck of the *Dream*, fairy though he be, is almost as English as those "hard-handed men that work in Athens here" who avow their Englishry, not merely by every word they utter, but by their very names. Both are full of romance, the essence of which is escape from the workaday world of reality and prose; the Forest of Arden is almost as far away from that as the bower of Titania.

And both, particularly the *Dream*, are full of pure poetry, belonging in spirit at least, if not in form, to that lyrical order in which Shakespeare's genius is as natural and typical as in drama it is solitary and supreme.

*Midsummer Night's Dream!* What a name for a play and how richly it performs its promise! It is full of Dream and Night and Midsummer. An attempt has lately been made to show that for Shakespeare, "the associations of night were, normally, of a disquieting nature." And even this play, of all things, has been called in aid in support of this notion, on account of Puck's

Now the hungry lion roars  
And the wolf behowls the moon

at the end of it. But who carries away from it an unpleasant impression of night? No doubt the realities of night, in the unlighted and unpoliced Elizabethan days, included such unpleasant possibilities as stumbling into a quagmire or into the arms of a footpad, and there was more fear of ghosts than now. But who believes that Shakespeare was the man to be afraid either of ghosts or thieves? And who believes that the man who wrote this play, and the "In such a night" scene of *The Merchant*, and that of Romeo and Juliet on the balcony, was not far more sensitive to the magical charm which night exercises upon the imagination and the spirit than to the discomfort and nervousness it inflicts upon the body and the mind? It is true that of the many dreams here not all are pleasant or result at once in pleasant things. But we never doubt for a moment that it is a happy fairyland of midsummer and poetry that we are in, or that presently all will be well.

Philomel with melody  
Sing in our sweet lullaby,  
Lulla, lulla, lullaby: lulla, lulla, lullaby:  
Never harm,  
Nor spell, nor charm,  
Come our lovely lady nigh;  
So good night, with lullaby.

That is the note of it all, and, in spite of the rather tedious complications of Helena and Hermia, we are always really assured that no harm will come near any of our lovely ladies, or indeed any of the players in our piece, who are all enchanted indeed, but enchanted into a world of love and play and happiness.

As a drama it is nothing, but as a dream it is perfect, a dream into which breaks the humorous realism of Bottom and his company. What effects—denied to stricter forms of drama—Shakespeare is always getting in *Much Ado* and *Love's Labour* and here and elsewhere, out of setting country bumpkins or street mechanics side by side with his noble and courtly personages! How ridiculous Bottom and his men are! The fear of democracy was not yet, and Shakespeare is not afraid to make fun of the ignorance and awkwardness of working men. But how human they are! What good fellows at heart, how loyal to their prince, how honest and jolly with each other! And how living and true all the business of the rehearsing and acting is; that business which Shakespeare knew so well, perhaps better than he wished to know it, and liked to introduce into his work; a play within the play, as in *Hamlet* and *Love's Labour* and here. And how full of England and the English countryside it is! As usual with the Elizabethans, it is the England of the spring, not really of the summer, which it gives us. Even in these comfortable days the

spring means more to us every year we live: "how old to speak of, how new to see," as FitzGerald said. But it can never be for us what it was for the Elizabethans and the men of the Middle Age: a deliverance from a long torture of cold and darkness and salt meat. So every word the old poets say of the spring has joy and welcome in it. Like *Hermia's* tongue:

More tuneable than lark to shepherd's ear  
When wheat is green, when hawthorn buds appear.

Again and again here Shakespeare works back to his youth among the woods and fields of the Stratford country: when he would lie, like *Hermia* and *Lysander*, "upon faint primrose beds" or, like *Amiens*, "under the greenwood tree"; and wander, with the fairy, "over hill, over dale, thorough bush, thorough briar," or, with *Titania*, "by paved fountain or by rushy brook," or by *Oberon's*

Bank where the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows;

listening, perhaps, with *Bottom*, to

The ousel cock, so black of hue,  
With orange-tawry bill,  
The throstle with his note so true,  
The wren with little quill;

or with *Hippolyta* to the "gallant chiding" and "musical discord" of a pack of hounds; or (but this, like the hounds, would be a little earlier or later in the year) with *Puck*, watching the

wild geese that the creeping fowler eye:

or how

the russet-pated choughs, many in sort,  
Rising and cawing at the gun's report,  
Sever themselves and madly sweep the sky.

Every play, especially every early play, is full of these pictures of England; showing no exact or curious knowledge, but a delight in observing and remembering the common sights and sounds which common men see and hear with little notice and no special delight.

How strangely we lost our proper national liking for the poetry of the country and of the dreams and fairies of the country is to be seen in the melancholy stage history of this play as reported in the Cambridge Edition. Puritanism closed the theatres, and, when they were reopened, politeness soon got control of them; and, for the age of politeness, to which we owe so much, *Midsummer Night's Dream* was unluckily a thing too airy and fanciful to be endured as a play. So, to the new rationalism it became what Pepys called it, "the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life." And, as a result, in order to get on to the stage at all, it had to give up its claim to be a play and submit to be mutilated into a spectacle with "a chorus of Chinese and a dance of six monkeys," to become an interlude in a concert, to be adapted into an opera. Nor was it till the nineteenth century was half through its course that Oberon and Puck, Bottom and Theseus, the Court and the lovers, the clowns and the fairies and the flowers, found their way back to the stage on which Shakespeare had placed them, and showed again before our eyes, in his picture as he made it, the dreams and the realities, the poetry and truth, of an English summer night of three hundred years ago.

*As You Like It* is a riper and better, but not a prettier

play. The business of the drama is to move, and there is no doubt that we are more concerned for Orlando and Rosalind than we are for Hermia and Lysander. And, the characters in *As You Like It* being all human, the play can be, and is, much more closely knit. But I do not know that we are happier with Amiens and Jaques than we are with Titania and Puck, or that Shakespeare's Arden is any lovelier when called by its own name than when it is supposed to be a wood that lies "a league without the town" of Athens. The truth is that in both of them we are too happy to ask questions or make comparisons.

Shakespeare gets his story, first from Lodge's *Iluphues Golden Legacie*, which, in turn, came partly from Chaucer's *Tale of Gamelyn*. How pleasant it must have been for him to feel himself following Chaucer, with whom he had so much in common, especially the Englishry of which they two have more than any of our poets; how pleasant when he acted old Adam, as they say he did, to feel that his Adam was Chaucer's Adam too, "Adam the Spencer" as Chaucer called him! And pleasanter still, perhaps, to change Lodge's Belgian Ardennes into his own Warwickshire Arden from which his mother had her name. Altogether he must have been as happy in writing as we in reading *As You Like It*.

No play is more plainly written by "the gentle Shakespeare"; the Shakespeare who dislikes to find "the breaking of ribs" treated as "sport for ladies" to witness, and is as tender here over the

poor sequestered stag  
That from the hunters' aim had ta'en a hurt

as he had been over the hare in *Venus and Adonis*. It is all full of grace and charm and poetry, as the *Dream*

was. It ends, as that did, with a scene, perhaps not by Shakespeare, which seems to connect it with some marriage festivity; and, as there the lovers and fairies get an added beauty out of the contrast with Bottom, so here the poetry and pastoralism of Arden and Rosalind are saved from any risk of insipidity by the salt of Touchstone's humorous and realistic prose. What poetry it is and what prose! As in the *Dream*, the splendid flight of "the poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling" is set against Bottom's "I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let's have the tongs and the bones," so here such poetry as the Duke's

This wide and universal theatre  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in:

and his

Sweet are the uses of adversity :

and Jaques's

All the world's a stage:

and Orlando's

If ever you have look'd on better days  
If ever been where bells have knoll'd to church:

and such lovely songs as

Under the greenwood tree:

and

It was a lover and his lass;

G

s.

and all the prettiness of the love-makings, are set against Touchstone's sense of the body and of the prosaic present, and of men and women, not as singing lovers or idealising and moralising poets, but as creatures who know when their legs are weary and their stomachs empty. "Ay, now am I in Arden: the more fool I: when I was at home I was in a better place." So the Duke gets the answer to his talk of "this life more sweet than that of painted pomp." But for my part I do not follow Sir Arthur Quiller Couch in thinking that this means that the Duke is a humbug. No, the Duke's is one truth and Touchstone's is another. The very business of poetry and of all great literature is to give that universality which means that one thing is true here and in this man's mouth, and another, the exact opposite, there and in the mouth of another man. Life is poetry and prose, common sense and romanticism, the ideal and the real; and neither, whether in art or in experience, is worth much without the other. Indeed, at the best of life and art these contraries are both present in the same character; as here Rosalind will first tell us (and at least half fear that she is telling the truth) that "men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love," and then, a very little later, will confess: "O coz, coz, coz, my pretty little coz, that thou didst know how many fathom deep I am in love!" certainly not without a hope that the love which can so drown women will not altogether leave men in their dry skins.

Rosalind is much the liveliest and most boyish of the many girls—Julia, Viola, Imogen—who masquerade as boys in Shakespeare's plays. Of course, this practice was convenient in those days when women's parts were played by boys, and the masquerading must have been much more plausible then than it can be now. We have

seen Sarah Bernhardt trying to be a boy and never succeeding for a moment. But a clever boy might do both parts of *Rosalind* very well. Anyhow, she is one of Shakespeare's most Shakespearean creations. Nobody else has ever mixed heart and brain, wit and common sense and kindness, exactly after this fashion. We shall see her again, older and wittier, but not more lovable as Benedick's Beatrice, as we shall see an altogether greater, subtler, and more human Jaques in *Hamlet*. The whole play is among the busiest and liveliest as well as prettiest of Shakespeare's comedies. There is plenty of action, grave and gay, and never a dull moment in it, except perhaps the absurdity of the conversion of Oliver and the wicked Duke into saints and hermits. But, as we have seen, Shakespeare never worried about incongruities ; and I do not suppose he would be greatly disturbed if his attention could be called to the fact that in revising the play he confused the two Dukes and made *Rosalind* the taller of the two girls, who had once been the shorter. He would have laughed at the critical acuteness of Cambridge which discovers that Orlando recognised *Rosalind* all the while. "If I had meant that," he would say, "do you think I should have bungled my meaning so that it had to wait for you to discover it?"

One other small point pleases lovers of English poetry in these two plays which I have put together. Here in *As You Like It* the story, as we have seen, partly comes from Chaucer: it is Shakespeare's nearest link to the "maister dre and fader reverent" of our poets. But there are, or may be, nearer links still, both here and in the *Dream*, with another great poet, the greatest name among Shakespeare's contemporaries. The words of Theseus about the offered entertainment, which is described as

The thrice three Muses mourning for the death  
Of Learning, late deceased in beggary

have sometimes been taken as a reference to Spenser's "Teares of the Muses"; and possibly as an allusion to his death. This may or may not be; for my part I feel very doubtful, but one likes to fancy Shakespeare linked, even in this casual way, with the poet who has been loved of poets as no other in our line has been. But, however that be, of the other reference there is no doubt. When he makes Rosalind say:

Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might,  
"Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"

we know he is quoting his own master in drama: not a poet in the same world with Spenser, but a great dramatist and Shakespeare's friend and fellow-worker. Christopher Marlowe died in May 1593; and this, whether written soon after his death and quoted from some copy of Marlowe's *Hero and ILeander* passed about in manuscript, or added later after the poem was published in 1598, was Shakespeare's affectionate farewell to his friend.

Let us turn from comedies of the country to comedies of the town. Not that town was, in those days, ever town in our modern way. Even those who lived in London itself, already by far the largest city in Europe, could then walk into the country at any moment they pleased. So the country commonly finds its way more or less into the city plays of Shakespeare's time. And it does, to some extent, in *The Taming of the Shrew*, the whole action of which is as far as possible removed from that politeness which is, as its name implies, the product and pride of urban life. It is rather strange that the play is

still acted, for it is, to tell the truth, an ugly and barbarous as well as a very confused, prosaic, and tedious affair. The action is more difficult to follow than that of *The Comedy of Errors*, and the *Shrew* is not redeemed by a single passing glimpse of poetry. A German professor, lecturing on it at Oxford before the War, made a true and remarkably honest remark. He said that he had heard that Shakespeare's plays were more often performed in Germany than in England, and that this was treated as a disgrace to the English people and a proof that they cared little for their great dramatist. Whether the plays were, in actual fact, less frequently performed here than in Germany, he did not know. But if they were, he thought that there were two obvious explanations of the fact, without supposing any English lack of appreciation of Shakespeare. One was that in Germany Shakespeare speaks contemporary German, and is immediately understood. In England he speaks a language three hundred years old, and is often unintelligible or obscure, even to scholars, and much more to an audience at a theatre. The other reason, one very startling in his mouth, was that much of Shakespeare's comic business appeals to a taste for rough horse-play and even brutal practical joking which has been long dead in France and England, but still survives in Germany. No play exhibits more of this obsolete form of amusement than *The Taming of the Shrew*, and the fact that it still appears on the stage goes some way to deprive us of the credit for civilisation which this generous German was ready to give us.

Happily those whose business is with Shakespeare are not called on to say much of it, for it is very doubtful whether more than a little of it is his work. Many scholars have regarded it as an adaptation of an existing play, *The Taming of a Shrew*, published in 1594. An

attempt has, however, recently been made to prove that *A Shrew* comes from *The Shrew*, and not the other way. Anyhow, our play first appeared in the Folio of 1623 and must, almost certainly, be Shakespeare's revision of some older play which came into his hands. How much is his no one can say. Certainly the humorous Induction must be, though it is true there have even been doubters of that. But to attempt, as some critics do, to go through the play, assigning here a scene, and there a part of a scene or a few lines, to Shakespeare, is the vainest of occupations. No author, as we have already had reason to insist, has a single style; no critic has glasses magnifying enough to make plain the shadowy lines which separate the differences between an author and himself or those between his own work and that of his contemporaries, fellow-workers and imitators. The attempt to find and use such glasses seems even to deprive critics of the use of the natural eyes by which plain men see. So one critic, who goes in for these discriminations, decides that Sly's comments at the end of the first scene of the first act "are certainly not Shakespeare's," whereas, to at least one plain person who would like to think he knows something of Shakespeare's voice, the only possible comment on "'Tis a very excellent piece of work, madam lady: would 'twere done!" is *ant Ccesar ant nmlns; ant Shakespeare ant diabolns.*

Another play of the town, later than the *Shrew*, and later than all but the last of the Histories, to which we must soon turn, is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Like the *Shrew* it is boisterous and full of horse-play. But unlike that piece it is alive all through and not merely in parts. In the *Shrew* no one comes alive but Katharine and Petruchio. The *Merry Wives* has in it eight or ten persons who are distinct human beings with a character

of their own and a part to play in the action. On the whole, it seems to me to have been curiously underrated in recent times. It has suffered, of course, from having Falstaff as its principal figure, and a Falstaff who is no longer the king of all companies but a butt and a dupe. If the story is true which makes the play grow out of a desire of Queen Elizabeth to see Falstaff in love, Johnson's comment is one of the soundest and best that even he ever made. "Shakespeare knew, what the Queen, if the story be true, seems not to have known, that by any real passion of tenderness the selfish craft and the lazy luxury of Falstaff must have suffered so much abatement that little of his former cast would have remained. Falstaff could not love but by ceasing to be Falstaff. He could only counterfeit love, and his professions could be prompted, not by the hope of pleasure but of money." This is true; and as Falstaff does not cease to be himself he is not in love; and as love was the commanded business of the play, it can only be business, and degrading or farcical business, not passion or emotion at all. Yet even these scenes of Falstaff's discomfiture never sink quite to the level of farce, which is comedy without character. For not only Falstaff but Ford and Mrs. Ford, and Page and Mrs. Page, sketches as they are, are all alive with character. In farce which is only farce it is the mere incident which amuses us, as in *The Comedy of Errors* and the *Shrew*. Here what amuses us is the incident as happening to such persons as these; the fooling of Falstaff and the fooling of Ford owe their comic force largely to Falstaff being Falstaff and Ford Ford. Both these foolings are exactly in the manner of those comedies of Moliere which approach farce: *Scapin*, the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and others. And here, as always in Moliere, the dominant sense of pleasantness, even in the roughest comic business, is

saved by our being able to sympathise, as we are not able in the *Shrew*, with the castigation administered, and with those who administer it. Altogether the play seems to me by far the most amusing of the unromantic comedies. Johnson truly said of it that "perhaps it never yet had reader or spectator who did not think it too soon at the end." Tom Warton, no contemptible judge, thought it "the most complete specimen of Shakespeare's comic powers." That is going a long way, especially as it inevitably calls the other Falstaff of *Henry IV* to our minds. But *Henry IV* is far from being all comedy, and, if our laugh as we read it is a much more intellectual, it is a much less continuous action than in *The Merry Wives*. There are very few comedies in the world in which the comic business is so continuous and so entertaining. It is not merely Falstaff and Ford who provide it, nor is what they provide the finest of it. Does anyone doubt that the scene which follows Slender's "I had rather than forty shillings I had my book of Songs and Sonnets here" is first-class comedy, as good as any in the world? Or his chiming in after his uncle's "Mistress Anne, my cousin loves you" with "Ay, that I do: as well as I love any woman in Gloucestershire"; or Mrs. Quickly's "'tis not good that children should know any wickedness: old folks, you know, have discretion, as they say, and know the world"; or Shallow's "Bodykins, Master Page, though I now be old, and of the peace, if I see a sword out, my finger itches to make one: though we are justices and doctors and churchmen, Master Page, we have some salt of our youth in us: we are the sons of women, Master Page." And how admirable, with the finest comedy of truth in it, is almost every word said by the honest Welsh parson, Sir Hugh. It is pleasant to note that this choleric little man never quite forgets his profession or his faith, so

that he Ukes his flock to make up their quarrels and speak "as a Christians ought to speak"; and he is himself always glad to "do my benevolence, to make atonements and compromises between you," and he sows "Got's plessing" wherever he enters, and when he is to dine with Page, "will not be absence at the grace." He is altogether one of Shakespeare's best minor figures, and plays more than a minor part in making *The Merry Wives*, not one of the finest or most important, but one of the most entertaining products of Shakespeare's genius.

*The Merry Wives*, as we know it, may probably have been written in 1598. By that year or the year after, Shakespeare had finished *Henry I*, the last that was completely his of the historical plays for which Englishmen will always owe him a special debt of gratitude. There is nothing quite like them in the world. The *Persa* of schylus deals with an event much more tremendous than any handled in Shakespeare's Histories, and one in which the poet had himself been an actor. But the *Persa* stands alone. For the rest, the Greek dramatists went to legend, as the French went to poetry or the history of remote times or countries, for their subjects. Shakespeare is the only great dramatist who has placed on the stage a large part of the authentic history of his country. Of course, here, as elsewhere, he took what he found. As, for his comedies and tragedies, he went to old story-books and gave himself so little trouble about reshaping them for the drama that superfluties, incongruities and irrelevancies often encumber or confuse his action, so in his Histories he takes the chroniclers, often almost word for word, adding touches, characters, or whole scenes, of genius, but not departing from the main story, or even from the chroniclers' way of looking at history. For him, as for them, English history is a record of the feudal and dynastic quarrels of the kings.

A modern historian may tell us that while John is himself a transient, embarrassed and insignificant phantom, his signing of Magna Charta is an event of great importance, if only as the symbol of the ultimate victory, won long after, of the conception of legal and more or less responsible kingship over the royal claim to an irresponsible despotism. But Shakespeare cares nothing for that. Such views of history had hardly arisen in his day; and for him, making a play for the stage, as for the chroniclers telling a story to be read, the cruel uncle, the treacherous intriguer, the slave and the defier of the Pope, provided much more effective material than could be provided by any constitutional struggle. So the Black Death had immense importance in our social history, and the dependence of the Lancastrian kings on Parliament great political importance, while the quarrels of Richard II with his uncles, the quarrels of Henry IV with the Percies, and even the glorious wars of Henry V, had very little. But Shakespeare's business was with the stage and with men's hearts and imaginations. He knew that kings and nobles are individuals and can walk the boards, while social and political changes, and even the peoples as peoples, are abstractions or generalisations which cannot. He was as well aware as a modern newspaper proprietor that very few people will pay attention to a lecture on constitutional changes, however important, or to a scientific report on the effect exercised on industry and wages and social conditions by disease, when there is a chance of listening to a tale of war, crime, or violent death.

Yet the great Duke of Marlborough said that all the English history he knew came out of Shakespeare's plays. And people who are not soldiers, and who live to-day instead of two hundred years ago, might still be found to say that for them the best English historian is

Shakespeare. A recorder of the most important facts, a student describing and estimating the changes which each century brought with it, their causes and their consequences, he neither was nor could have been. But he gives, as no one else, not even Wordsworth, has given us, a part of history which is more essential than any facts or tangibilities of any kind. The *imponderabilia* of which we used to hear in the Great War, the heart and spirit of a cause or a country, this has been given for England by no one as Shakespeare gave it. In his plays we see England incarnate in men and women. There is hardly a play which, even though professedly a play of Romans or Greeks or Italians, does not give us at least one or two of those men of birth and breeding who exhibit the qualities which Englishmen regard as peculiarly belonging to the English gentleman. In no European country have men of their order had the chance of playing a part anything like so great as they have played in England; and, so far as they have played it well, it has not been by being scholars or thinkers or saints, not by any sort of subtlety of mind or other-worldliness of spirit, but by such courage and simplicity, honesty, goodness and sense as we see less in Hamlet and Lear than in Horatio and Kent. And as with the officers of war or peace, so with the rank and file. Has any other author, even Dickens, better given us the spirit of the common Englishman, Burke's "sort of native plainness and directness of understanding" which, and not any special skill or intelligence, has made him the best of soldiers and the best of workmen, turning his misfortunes into a joke and concealing his shrewdness under a mask of stupidity? Is not this the man, whom we see a hundred times in Shakespeare's fools and servants, the "good fellow" who is, and has made, the history of England?

But, if England is there, for those who will look, in all the plays, of course in the ten Histories she is openly present for all eyes to see. And here, of course, she takes a more political shape. She is still made up of Englishmen: the Bastard and Hotspur, Henry V and Falstaff and John Bates, they and the others, are there to show what varied, and yet native, stuff she is made of. But here she is also herself, the embodiment and personification of them all. It is she, as Shakespeare knew her and as we know her still, who is

This happy breed of men, this little world,  
This precious stone set in the silver sea  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands:

it is she who, with John, will be mistress in her own house and will have "no Italian priest" to "tithe and toll in her dominions"; it is she who cries with the brave Bastard, the most English figure in the Histories, "come the three corners of the world in arms, and we shall shock them"; with the heroic Henry

if it be a sin to covet honour  
I am the most offending soul alive,

and not less, or more, truthfully, with John Bates: "I would give all my fame for a pot of ale and safety."

So everywhere in the Histories we get this spirit, all instinct with honour and pride and courage, and yet always of a humour to be quite aware of the facts that flout pride; always able to see all things, including itself, as they really are, and to laugh at them. That is England: the pride and the good nature which have

joined to make us what we are in the world. Shakespeare pictures it in the Histories; and makes it too. His voice is, and has long been, a compelling voice for us. "We must be free or die, who speak the tongue That Shakespeare spoke." Most certainly he has his place among the makers of England and even among the builders of the British Empire. It is a place, no doubt, of which he never thought or dreamt; and one can imagine him, after the fashion of Scott in similar circumstances, laughing away such talk as mere nonsense when spoken of a player who acted and wrote to get his living and amuse idle people. Yet it is true. It is not only Elizabeth and Cromwell, Drake and Marlborough, Chatham and Pitt, Nelson and Wellington who nursed the greatness of England till she has become the heart of a world of allied nations. Among the builders of England are also those others who are makers in a different, a very old, sense of the word, the makers whose words are deeds, the poets who are always shaping the lives of men born centuries after they themselves were dead. And among these, if the most instant and conscious were Milton and Wordsworth, the most persistent and universal has been the almost unconscious Shakespeare. For in this matter, as in others, the more open nature and wider sympathies of Shakespeare have opened doors to him that were closed to the sterner and narrower natures of our two poets of deliberate and self-dedicated patriotism.

The earliest of the Histories are the three parts of *Henry VI*, of which only one or two words need be said here, for the reason that no one supposes Shakespeare wrote very much of them. It was not he who invented the use of history for the stage; here, as elsewhere, he took what he found to his hand, accepting and using a kind of play already very popular in those

days; and here, as elsewhere, he gradually converted what came to him from hack dramatists and the crude tastes of raw playgoers into a product of genius and a possession for all time. In this field he had the genius of Marlowe to work with him; and it is generally believed that many things in *Henry VI*, especially such tell-tale lines as "the gaudy, bloody, and remorseful day," betray Marlowe's hand. And *Richard III*, which follows *Henry 17*, has some of Marlowe's great qualities and is still largely in his manner. But with *King John* we get away, and, when we come to *Henry IV*, Shakespeare is entirely himself and what no other man has ever been able to be. Even in *Henry VI* the Cade scenes can be by only one hand. "I will make it felony to drink small beer"; "Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school"; the asides with which Dick the Butcher greets Cade's boasts, "My wife descended of the Lacies," "She was, indeed, a pedlar's daughter and sold many laces"; the miserable pun about salad which is almost Cade's last word; all this, and the satire of the absurdity and fickleness of the mob is, one feels certain, Shakespeare pure and unadulterated. But there is little else that one would care to give him, though much of it may come from his prentice hand. All through his career, except in *Othello*, the greatest of all dramatists showed himself singularly indifferent to the quality which, above all others, drama demands. Least of all did he care for unity in his historical plays, which are scarcely plays at all, but disconnected fragments of history, taken from the Chronicles and arranged in scenes. In the greatest of them, the two parts of *Henry IV*, the business of the king and the business of Falstaff only occasionally touch each other and become like two separate plays. Here, as always, Shakespeare cares more

about making his men and women come alive than about giving their actions and fortunes the formal unity of a work of art. As a craftsman he was probably both unconscious and unconscientious; and very likely he never even knew that the order and unity of art, far from suppressing or obscuring life, give it significance and strength. Anyhow, here in these early Histories of *Henry VI* there is no unity at all and as yet not even much human truth. The whole is overcrowded and confused, ugly and treacherous, monotonous with treason and blood. The saintly weakness of the king affords some beautiful relief; Margaret's lament over her son is true tragic emotion, almost anticipating Macduff; and there is some more or less impressive stage rhetoric. But as a whole (which they are not) the three plays are dull and tiresome, and we are glad to be rid of them.

*Richard III* comes next, another very early play, perhaps written in or before 1594, the period of *Love's Labour's Lost*, the *Errors*, and the *Two Gentlemen*. Even here we see, or think we see, what was so plain in *Henry VI*. Shakespeare is not yet his own master; is not giving his own full heart to his work; not doing what he likes, but just giving the theatre whatever it happened to want; now an adaptation of Plautus, now a "conceited" comedy, now a fantastical romance, now an arrangement of a chronicle for the stage. The fact that he could meet such varied demands shows that extraordinary readiness of his versatility which made Greene bitterly call him "an absolute Johannes Factotum"; only a talent no doubt, but one which, in him, is almost as conspicuous as his genius. How he contrasts in this, as in so many other ways, with the tribe of dramatists, even the great ones, who have generally had only one manner, and, in a sense, only one subject or only one sort of subject!

In *RJchard III* Shakespeare is still an apprentice, and it is Marlowe to whom he has bound himself. As in Marlowe's dramas, so in *Richard III*, everything, as Sir Israel Gollancz has well pointed out, is concentrated on one tremendous and violent character. The boisterousness of comedy which he had shown in the *Errors* and was soon showing in the *Shrew* is here the boisterousness of tragedy or melodrama; a boisterousness, indeed, so largely physical, as at times almost to transform tragedy into comedy or farce. Richard's wooing of Anne, and his wooing of his niece Elizabeth through her mother, are not the only incidents in the play which are entirely impossible and even absurd. The whole piece is extravagant even to incredibility.

Yet it has merit, and has always been popular on the stage. As a spectacle it is always alive. There is always business being done and business of great variety: war and love, intrigue and cruelty and murder, courting, speechifying, dying. Margaret is effective on the stage, if not in the closet, as a sort of personified Fury or Nemesis, and such things as Clarence's dream (an early example of Shakespeare's almost infinite opulence of language), and the ghosts on Bosworth field, if unequal as literature, are equal in their power of exciting an audience. The deaths of Clarence and Hastings and Buckingham, though they have some sameness, yet manage to move, at least in the theatre, and somehow do not destroy the pathos of the deaths of the boy princes.

But Richard himself is the play. He gives it a greater unity than most of the Histories possess, for he is generally on the stage, and, when he is not, the action keeps him in our minds. He is a monster. But he is a live monster, and Shakespeare has enjoyed giving him human touches. His humour, for instance, sometimes

almost anticipates Iago, a greater and more alive, but less explicable figure.

What though I killed her husband and her father?  
 The readiest way to make the wench amend  
 Is to become her husband and her father;

and the cynical ironical

I'll be at charges for a looking glass,

with which the wooing of Anne ends, are quite in the vein of Iago. The whole shows a flow of energy, a *vis violently* which the earlier plays had no room for, which will presently get finer work to do in Shylock and in Romeo. Yet no variety of business, and no sweep of energy in word and action, can blind us to the central weakness of the play. Richard is everything, and he is not merely incredible; he is monotonous. Already on the first page he is what he remains to the last. He is not shown to us as a character responding to fate and circumstances, resisting and yielding, shaped by as well as shaping the action of the play. His villainies are not, what they are in true drama, the successive fruits of the marriage of character and circumstance. They are born before their time, unnaturally and full-grown, out of the head of the monster who is their single parent. The great figures, Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, grow; Richard merely is.

Probably the next to be written of the Histories was *Richard II*, a subject which Elizabeth disliked so much and with so much reason (a play on Richard's deposition was procured to be performed by Essex and his conspirators the day before their rising) that the actual abdication scene in Shakespeare's play was struck out

of the Quartos printed in 1597. The play is again Marlowesque, but with a difference; Marlowe's *Edward II* being here the model or parallel. Like Marlowe it is exciting rather than convincing, more lyric than dramatic. The king is again everything, as in *Richard III*, but the everything is as unlike that of *Richard III* as it could well be. There we have cunning and violence hurrying furiously from crime to crime; here the picture is of weakness and folly passing on their primrose path from pleasure, vanity, fine phrases and incompetence to failure, desertion and death. Richard III acts, Richard II only suffers. Of action he is incapable, for action requires will, and he has nothing but desire. From the first he exhibits the fickle irresolution always to be observed in men of mere desire and sentiment. Principles of action, good or bad, he has none; he tosses irresolute on a sea of fancies, with neither god nor devil at his helm. The very first scene shows the stuff of which he is made. He will have Mowbray and Bolingbroke accept a reconciliation, but when they will not he submits, and all the satisfaction his kingship gets is the self-flattering words with which he tries to grace his defeat:

We were not born to sue but to command.

And so all through the play. Everywhere he changes from moment to moment. In the third act he has hardly finished posturing with the comforting assurance that the very earth will turn her stones into soldiers at the call of a king, making lovely speeches to convince himself that

Not all the water in the rough, rude sea  
Can wash the balm from an anointed king,

when, at a stroke of bad news, he is at once sure that all is lost. But that passes at a reminder of his kingship:

Is not the king's name twenty thousand names?

and then that, again, changes into

The worst is death, and death will have his day.

And even, after that, there is still one more recovery, immediately followed by

Beshrew thee, cousin, which didst lead me forth  
Of that sweet way I was in to despair.

There is the essence of the play: the "sweet way" to "despair." All that such men as Richard ask for is for their minds a succession of dreams, for their bodies a continuous luxury of sensations; and their love of passiveness is such that it makes a luxury even of shame and death.

And yet there are people, and such people as Mr. Masefield and Mr. Yeats, who will have it that this poor creature was a kind of favourite child of Shakespeare, of whom imagination was hardly a greater part than strength and common sense! When they make such assertions as that Richard was "greater in the divine Hierarchies" than Henry V, who is "the one commonplace man" in the Histories, the answer is plain. For their own choice they are free; but they must not father it upon Shakespeare. It is here as it is elsewhere. If Shakespeare had meant us to find Shylock a sympathetic figure, or Falstaff a man of truth and courage, we should assuredly have done so. But, from the beginning till

to-day, there has never been an unsophisticated reader or spectator who did not get the impression that Shylock was a cruel miser and Falstaff a liar and a coward; nor has there ever been one who did not instinctively worship Henry, and pity, and a little despise, Richard II. One might as well be asked to believe that Shakespeare liked Iago better than the less intellectual Othello, or meant us to prefer Macbeth, who can make speeches even more wonderful than Richard's and can do things too, which Richard cannot, to the plain virtues of Banquo and Macduff. The truth is that such aberrations of criticism come from incapacity to endure the humiliation of seeing with all men's eyes, or telling a truth which has been told before.

For the rest *Richard II* is remarkable for its beauty. For the first time in the Histories, perhaps for the first time of all, Shakespeare's poetic powers are seen in full freedom. The date of the play may be 1593; if so, it is probably earlier, or partly earlier, than *Romeo and Juliet*. However that may be, and these dates of writings and revisings are probably past exact recovery, *Richard II* contains lines as lovely as Shakespeare ever wrote, and some of his best known. Besides Gaunt's great speech, there is his

O, but they say the tongues of dying men  
Enforce attention, like deep harmony;

and Richard's—

For God's sake let us sit upon the ground  
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;

and his

Music do I hear?

Ha, ha! keep time: how sour sweet music is  
When time is broke and no proportion kept!  
So is it in the music of men's lives.

That note in which all life, joy and sadness, weakness and strength, hears itself as a harmony, sees itself as a picture, will never again be absent from Shakespeare's work.

The next play, written perhaps in 1595, is *King John*. It is not a drama: none of the Histories are. They are too loosely compact for that. But it is an advance on what goes before in that its principal figure is neither a monster nor an effeminate but a man. The History is full of the usual crudities of war and treachery, cruder here perhaps than in any play. Nothing that John or Philip or Austria or Lewis does as a royal personage is convincing or even interesting. But John as an uncle suggesting the murder of his nephew has a subtlety which looks on to Macbeth. The romantic note of his poetic speeches, the very tone of his voice in that fine scene, are Macbeth's. How many readers, coming upon a quotation of

If the midnight bell  
Did with his iron tongue and brazen mouth,  
Sound on into the drowsy race of night

would not fancy it was Lady Macbeth and not Hubert, to whom such words were addressed? But, except in this scene and in the defiance of the Pope, the king

In what I have said of *Richard II*, and indeed of all the historical plays, I have freely drawn upon a study of "Shakespeare's Histories," printed in my book, *The Continuity of Letters*, where there is a fuller discussion both of these plays and of Shakespeare's views of history and politics.

here, unlike the two Richards, is of little real importance, though the action all turns round him and he is generally on the stage. The play, such as it is, is made of the pathos of Arthur, the poetry of Constance, and the lively truth and humour of the Bastard. All three, like the patriotism and Protestantism which are so large a part of the play, are to be found in the Marlowesque piece out of which Shakespeare made it. But, though Shakespeare never made bricks without straw, he could make a little straw go a very long way. And his Arthur, who has been transformed into a child, his Constance, who has been given such passion and eloquence as only he had to give, his Bastard, who at his touch has become one of the most living figures who have ever walked the stage, are not what he found, but what he made. Above all, that is true of the Bastard, in whom, for the first time, Shakespeare puts the typical Englishman upon the stage. The voice of England is heard in the John of Gaunt of *Rjcbardlll*, but there it is the voice of a dying man who sees England in ruins and has no strength to help her. Here the voice is of one very much alive, with foes to face and very capable of facing them. In *Richard II* there is no foreign enemy threatening her soil, nor any "Italian priest" presuming to "tithe and toll" her. Here we have the need, the moment, and the man:

Come the three corners of the world in arms,  
And we shall shock them.

The Bastard's is no deathbed eloquence. He fills every minute with life and laughter. He is the true-born natural Englishman, as full of humour and common sense as of loyalty and patriotism. He comes laughing on to the stage in the first scene, a "rude man," a "good blunt

fellow," a "madcap," and in his voice and the "large composition of the man" we already hear a note which will sound louder presently when it is divided into two halves, each greater than the original whole, as Henry V and Falstaff. He at once shows himself a man who cares more for being himself than for lands and rents; "I am I, howe'er I was begot"; a man fit to sail with Drake or Raleigh; one with a "mounting spirit," "the very spirit of Plantagenet," and yet quite as much a man of plain and remorseless fact;

Madam, I was not old Sir Robert's son:  
Sir Robert might have eat his part in me  
Upon Good Friday and ne'er broke his fast.  
Sir Robert could do well: marry, to confess,  
Could he get me?

a pricker of all bubbles of unreality even about himself;

And why rail I on this Commodity?  
But for because he hath not woo'd me yet:

an honest man; not the sort of man to whom John could confide his guilty secret; a man who will not mince words at the sight of crime:

It is a damned and a bloody work . . .  
Beyond the infinite and boundless reach  
Of mercy, if thou didst this deed of death,  
Art thou damn'd, Hubert:

a man shrewd enough, unlike the lords, to see that Hubert is telling the truth; tender enough to break down, in his horror, into a moment's weakness, as if to give the

touch of human weakness needed to complete his sense and courage:

I am amazed, methinks, and lose my way  
Among the thorns and dangers of this world.

But that is only for a moment. There is work to do, a kingdom to be saved; and the man who can save it has little time for doubt or sorrow. And so he saves it from foreign foes and domestic; and the curtain falls with the lesson of that loyalty and unity for which the Wars of the Roses had made Tudor England call so loudly:

This England never did, nor never shall  
Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror,  
But when it first did help to wound itself.

In *King John* Shakespeare has done what nobody else could do with history. In the great plays which follow he not only surpasses others; he surpasses himself. The dates of the two parts of *Henry IV* and of *Henry V* can be fixed with something like certainty to the years 1597-1599. It is difficult to weigh comedy and tragedy, or even two very different creations of either, against each other. But some of us, at any rate, feel that Falstaff, the great creation of these plays, has had a more royal exuberance of genius go to his making than anything of any kind that Shakespeare has yet done. No more English figure was ever created; and yet none more universal. He is one of the great creations which embrace the whole world, possess it, picture it, stand forth as its personification. Just as Don Quixote is for ever the personification of that inner secret of every man in which he is or desires to be knight-errant, saint or poet, so Falstaff is the visible embodiment of that

other part of us all in which the flesh speaks too loud for the spirit to be heard, seriousness is dissolved in humour, and the ten commandments become so many jests; which, if it owes God a death, is "loath to pay him before his day"; which sees no more in honour than the property of "him that died o' Wednesday." The triumph of Falstaff, or rather of Shakespeare, is that he makes us delight in this contemptible self of which we are all conscious and all ashamed. How does he do it? What is his secret? Externally Falstaff is nothing but a gross old scoundrel, coward, liar, drunkard and worse, a mere cumberer of the earth and polluter of the air. And yet we love him and learn his sayings by heart oftener than any other prose of Shakespeare's. Why? For the same reason that we love Pepys: that he can tell us everything about himself. And for a reason that does not apply to Pepys. He can tell it with an inexhaustible brilliance of wit and humour. If he were silent and helpless of tongue he would be nothing but a disgusting old drunkard. But he is supremely gifted with speech, with the abundance of it and the magic of it. There is nothing that he dare not say, and nothing he cannot make not only pleasant and plausible but positively delightful by his extraordinary command of unforgettable fancies and phrases. He disarms our judgment in delight: the double delight of knowledge and of humour. No truthful man tells the whole truth about himself as this liar tells it. And no man of humour is so willing to make the final sacrifice to the spirit of humour; none turns his humour so constantly against himself. We have at once a kindly feeling for him when he compares himself to "an old lady's loose gown"; or declares that he has lost his voice with "halloing and singing of anthems"; or moralises with the Biblical eloquence of drunkenness: "Dost thou hear, Hal? thou

knowest in the state of innocency Adam fell: and what should poor Jack Falstaff do in the days of villainy? Thou seest I have more flesh than another man and therefore more frailty." And when he plays the king's part and makes the king sing his praises, we love him outright for a man who can see his own true picture and laugh at it: "a goodly portly man, i' faith, and a corpulent: of a cheerful look, a pleasing eye, a most noble carriage: and, as I think, his age some fifty or, by 'r lady, inclining to three score: and now I remember me his name is Falstaff; if that man should be lewdly given he deceiveth me: for, Harry, I see virtue in his looks."

What words he finds, this ugly old sinner, to make his way to our hearts with! Does the prose of Shakespeare ever move with a more entire felicity both of phrase and of rhythm than in these speeches of his? The earlier Histories are mainly verse. But in *Henry IV* about half of the whole is prose: the prose of life as well as the prose of language. With Falstaff and his company Shakespeare filled out the peace and war pageantry of history with the reality of the life of ordinary men and women which is always going on by its side. The royal and personal History becomes the humane and universal Comedy; and it is on the rude, realist, unofficial, unceremonious side of the drama that he lavishes his genius most freely. The realism of genius, so different from the realism of industry with which we are too familiar, at once seizes the first place and puts the old semi-official chronicling History, which never did or could become true drama, into the background. In *Henry IV* this new realism fills the side scenes which are far more interesting than the centre of the stage. In *Henry V* partly reaches the centre, mounting the throne itself. But never again in the Histories, or even in the dramas which are to

follow, does it reach the height at which we see it in Falstaff. Nothing will ever equal him. And how infinitely greater he is than anything of his order that Shakespeare has done before! We have had the Fools and Juliet's Nurse and Jack Cade and some others. But how they all, even the wonderful Nurse, disappear into insignificance before the abundance and humanity, the art and genius, of Falstaff! For in truth he is artist as well as epicurean, and, like Dr. Johnson, whom he resembles in more ways than one, takes evident pleasure in the surprises and felicities of his own talk. He always talks like a man playing on an instrument of which he knows he is a master. When Lancaster promises to "speak better" of him than he deserves, the conscious artist replies: "I would you had but the wit; 'twere better than your dukedom." And, like all artists, he is impatient of people who do not understand his art. "This same young sober-blooded boy doth not love me: nor a man cannot make him laugh: but that's no marvel, he drinks no wine." Nor is Lancaster alone in his deafness. Artists create art-lovers, and Falstaff is not only witty in himself but "the cause that wit is in other men"; but, like other artists, he must have material to work upon. As some people are colour blind or tone deaf, so some, both in Falstaff's day and in ours, are not to be captivated by Falstaff's tongue. There is the Chief Justice. Falstaff gives him of his very best in two incomparable scenes. It is to him that he proves his youth by the offer: "he that will caper with me for a thousand marks, let him lend me the money, and have at him"; it is before him that he so victoriously turns the tables upon Mrs. Quickly's accusations: "my lord, this is a poor mad soul: and she says up and down the town that her eldest son is like you." Yet even such a pearl as this is cast in vain before the old judge, who

sees nothing in what Falstaff says to him but a "throng of words," as if he had been listening to the verbosity of some tedious lawyer. And this world is so made that, as we know, all Falstaff's victories end in the great defeat; defeat even at the hands of the man who had all the faculties for enjoying that intellectual music; to whom he rides post haste from Gloucestershire, devising "matter enough out of this Shallow to keep Prince Harry in continual laughter," and confident of all that "a jest with a sad brow will do with a fellow that never had the ache in his shoulders." But times had changed. If the Prince had no ache in his shoulders he had now the weight of a kingdom on them, and that proved fatal to Falstaff. In enjoying the life of the senses and talking about it, using the intellect to bathe it in a glittering sunshine of wit, Falstaff was perfectly at home, in touch with reality as no man before or since. In the conduct of life, a whole that includes so much more than the senses and makes its demands upon will and conscience as well as upon intellect, he was never in touch with reality at all. And that is just what Henry V was; with all sorts of reality, and not only with Falstaffs.

Shakespeare has surrounded Falstaff with foils without whom we should not know him as we do. His boon companions in London show his degradation. We feel that he has in him stuff for better company than Bardolph and Pistol and Doll Tearsheet. Their very emptiness—there is, for instance, really nothing in Bardolph but a nose which provides matter for one of Shakespeare's most wearisome jokes—gives us a measure for the inexhaustible fullness, both body and mind, of Falstaff. Still, we forgive Bardolph even his nose when we hear him say: "Would I were with him wheresome'er he is, either in heaven or hell." He comes alive in that one

speech, and we thank him for telling us that such a man as Falstaff could not degrade himself past the affection of those who lived with him. And Mrs. Quickly, too; we thank her for showing, more perhaps than anybody else, the irresistibility of Falstaff: "Glasses, glasses, is the only drinking;. . . Let it be ten pound, if thou canst"; and for giving us the immortal death scene; twenty prose lines of such miraculous certainty of touch that some people would pick them out as giving completer proof than any passage of equal length of that mingling in one of the tragedy and comedy of humanity which is, of all Shakespeare's gifts, that in which he has the fewest rivals. Then there are Shallow and Silence and the country folk, foils of a different sort; the stupidity of rural self-importance replacing the stupidity of city degradation. One feels that there is affection here in Shakespeare's picture of his country neighbours. If he ever robbed Sir Thomas Lucy's deer-park, which is more than doubtful, and if he ever thought of using Shallow as his revenge for what the robbing cost him, which is still a stage further into the world of doubtfulness, there is in his satire no more contempt than kindness, and certainly no bitterness. No one could have painted the portrait of Shallow—so much smaller than Falstaff's, but perhaps even more absolutely convincing—without some Uking for the sitter. He is a fool and a braggart, it is true, but, "Lord, lord, how subject we old men are to this vice of lying." And they must be indulged, Shakespeare seems to say, for "death, as the Psalmist saith, is certain to all." And yet indulged, too, in refusing to look in the direction of death's certainty and nearness: "How a good yoke of bullocks at Stamford Fair?"

It is from enjoying his ease, and his easy superiority, among these ruralities that Falstaff hurries in triumph

to his doom. "Boot, boot, Master Shallow"; "choose what office thou wilt in the land," is followed at once by: "I know thee not, old man"; "how ill white hairs become a fool and jester"; and Falstaff has met for the last time the greatest of his foils.

About Henry V most of Shakespeare's readers have been in two minds. They find it hard to reconcile the hero with the haunter of taverns; the model of soldiers, sons and brothers with the apparently faithless friend. They are conscious of a lump in the throat when they read: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends," and "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers," and, if they are Wordsworthians, they inevitably say:

This is the happy warrior: this is he  
That every man in arms should wish to be.

And then they are uncomfortably pulled up by the rejection of Falstaff, and by things which seem worse still, the horrible threats of the second speech before Harfleur which remains about the ugliest Shakespeare ever put into any mouth, and the incident of the killing of the prisoners. As to these, we can only say that in Henry's day and Shakespeare's, and long after, such threats and their execution were a normal part of war, and that it is plain that Henry's own disposition was just and even gentle since, at his very next appearance, he rises as far above his time as Wellington rose above Blucher four hundred years later, by forbidding any abuse or insult of the country people and requiring that they should be paid for all they supply. "When lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner." As to the business of the prisoners, there is a still surer explanation. Fluellen is the soul of honour, and he says it was the punishment of treachery.

But it is the one which remains which is the heaviest count in the indictment of Henry. The French prisoners and the people of Harfleur are shadows to us, and we cannot care very greatly about their fate. But Falstaff is no shadow in any sense. We owe him too much pleasure to be patient when we see him dismissed. Indeed some of us who have a special turn for intellectual pleasure are so carried captive by his wit that we will not even see him for what he is and will not allow that he was either liar or coward. Against such blindness, even when it is Mr. A. C. Bradley's, it is really not necessary to argue. It is true that there are passages in which Falstaff appears to be treated as a soldier of importance. But these are, like the similar inconsistencies in so many other plays, almost certainly unassimilated survivals from Shakespeare's authorities. How often he left in his text things which were inconsistent with the story or characters as he had shaped them! The Sir John Falstaff of the plays was originally Sir John Oldcastle; and that name survives in the prefix "Old" to one of Falstaff's speeches, and still again in I. ii. 47, where the Prince addresses Falstaff as "my old lord of the castle." Protestant opinion, or perhaps the Queen herself, compelled Shakespeare to take out the name of the famous Lollard, on which he substituted that of Sir John Fastolfe or Falstaff, a name already degraded in *Henry VI*. So in *Henry IV* the occasional praises of Falstaff may be due to the fact that both the Oldcastle and the Falstaff of history were men of honour and importance. Such tributes are quite inconsistent with the whole character of the Falstaff of the play, whose very name Fluellen has forgotten when he praises Henry for getting rid of his disreputable friend. And, of course, there is a more obvious and certain refutation of these theories. It is that of which I have

already spoken. What every audience and every reader have, for three centuries, taken Falstaff to be is what Shakespeare meant him to be. And where would be the humour of "a plague of all cowards" if the speaker were a brave man? Where would be the fun of the "plain tale" that put his preposterous boastings down if, as we are told, he never meant to be believed? Where that of "Lord, lord, how subject we old men are to this vice of lying" if the speaker were as truthful as the Duke of Wellington?

No, these are the aberrations of the intellectual. And Mr. Bradley himself has, in a fine phrase, really explained them. The truth is that in Falstaff Shakespeare has overreached himself. Falstaff grew and grew, under his creative hand, till he became capable of that "inexplicable touch of infinity" which we are to see again in such different forms in Hamlet, Lear, Cleopatra, and others, but which we do not see in Henry V for all his great qualities. Of those who have that we can never quite accept the rejection. And so it is in vain that Shakespeare has done so much to prepare us for this final scene between Henry and Falstaff. He has kept them more and more apart; they only meet once before this in the Second Part, and on that one occasion Falstaff is seen in the lowest degradation. All through the play he and his tavern world are drawn nearer to the disgusting, further from the triumphant and amusing, while the Prince is always revealing more of his truer self. It is notable that his first act as king is to honour the Chief Justice who had punished his follies, while the first words of Falstaff on hearing of the accession are, "Let us take any man's horses: the laws of England are at my commandment: woe to my lord chief justice." Between such a Henry and such a Falstaff there could be no further friendship. And, if there could, could it have

survived Falstaff's indecent jollities—"God save thee, my sweet boy" and the rest—breaking in upon the most solemn and ceremonious moment in a king's life?

So we may prove to ourselves, and quite unanswerably, that the rejection was necessary and right, and confirm our assurance by noting that Falstaff was not forgotten but "very well provided for" by his young master. And yet, till Falstaff is actually dead and we are in France and at war, Henry is less himself than the greatest of the foils which are to set off the "infinity" of Falstaff. The result is that we are in danger of doing him some injustice, especially in this democratic and non-moral age. The two facts which helped him with the Victorians, that he preached a sermon and ascended a throne, are now all against him. But we must not let modern pacifism, equalitarianism, or dislike of the orthodox religious language which he uses more often than any other of Shakespeare's characters, prevent our seeing him as Shakespeare meant us to see him. Certainly Shakespeare would have understood and liked what Johnson said in the theatre at Versailles when Mrs. Thrale asked him if he would have them act *The Englishman in Pans* there: "No, no; we will try to act *Harry the Fijth*" And certainly it would never have occurred to him, as it does to many modern critics, to see anything disagreeable in Henry's awareness of the social gulf which lay between him and the company at the Boar's Head. To-day we may be inclined to think his language, even to his friend Poins, rather insolent and snobbish. But to judge the Prince fairly we must borrow Elizabethan and Shakespearean ears. A shrewd observer of human nature once observed to me that perhaps the explanation of the ease with which Shakespeare caught and used the language and manners of the great is that there was in his day no notion of social

equality. In our day, when a duke and an actor meet, both are a little uncomfortable and unnatural. Both are aware that they are not social equals, but the duke pretends to be unaware of it for fear of being thought condescending and the actor for fear of being thought a snob. Consequently they never get into real touch with each other. When Shakespeare met his patrons neither dreamt of an equality which was then not merely non-existent but absurd and inconceivable. The result was ease and understanding. The confessed and accepted barrier proved no barrier at all. However this may be, it is certain that for Shakespeare and all the men of his day it would not only be pardonable, it would be desirable, that a prince should not demean himself too freely to ordinary men. No one ever understood better than Shakespeare the real equality of men, or, as *Lear* shows, the unreality of the distinctions which separate a king from a beggar, and none of his characters practise that equality better than Henry V, as we see him talking to the common soldiers, laughing at his own plain features, desiring that poor creature, small beer. But no one entered more fully into the then at least as real inequality of men, accepted, used, valued, praised it. This very play, *Henry V*, gives us, in its first Act, one of his many panegyrics of order and obedience, of the divine hierarchy of human functions. In fact, it is his most monarchical play, and Henry the most royal, masterful, and victorious of his kings. And all this is in him, thinly disguised, from the first. People think the king too violent and sudden a departure from the prince, and the dismitter of Falstaff too unlike the friend. There is a change, but it is rather of years and situation than of character. The boy has become a man, the prince a king. But the boy had the man in him, as we may see if we will look at the text and listen to Shakespeare. It is not

true that he ever was a mere boon companion of Falstaff and his company, their equal and their like. Against this misconception Shakespeare has taken pains to warn us. He twice over opens the eyes of the King to its falseness. He makes the Prince explain himself in the very first Act of the First Part in the well-known speech:

I know you all, and will a while uphold  
The unyoked humour of your idleness.

The speech has been attacked as showing the meanness of Henry's character. But why? Suppose a young man of our own day, one whose spirits were fuller grown than his wisdom, thrown by circumstances or by choice, by the love of pleasure and adventure or the scorn of cloistered virtue, into the society of a pack of amusing but worthless boon companions. It is not his wisdom that put him there. But being there, with whatever excuse, why may he not say, if he is clear-eyed and strong-willed enough to say it: "I know my friends are shaking their heads over me. They see me playing the fool and think I am not capable of playing anything else. But they will one day find out their mistake. I don't mean all my days to be holidays spent among fools, however pleasant the holidays and however amusing the fools. And when I put on my working clothes and show the wisecracks what I really am and can do, they will give me all the more credit for their surprise." What is the harm of that?

That is, in substance, what the Prince says. And Johnson, who understood human nature so much better than most of Shakespeare's critics, makes the right comment on it. "The speech," he says, "is very artfully introduced to keep the Prince from appearing vile in

the opinion of the audience; it prepares them for his future reformation; and, what is yet more valuable, exhibits a natural picture of a great mind offering excuses to itself, and palliating those follies which it can neither justify nor forsake." Moreover, the speech is very far from standing alone. Again and again Shakespeare is seen marking the separation of the Prince from Falstaff and the rest. The very first words he utters to Falstaff are words of reproach and disgust, and his tone throughout the scene is one of mingled affection, amusement and contempt, in which the contempt is certainly not the least conspicuous of the three. And, however much Falstaff may get the last word in wit, and he does not quite always do that, the Prince maintains throughout an ascendancy over Falstaff which is not merely one of birth and rank but one of mind and will and character. In the very first business of the robbery the Prince is outside and above the rest. He is an amateur and a patron, who at first scornfully refuses to have anything to do with it, is only persuaded to it by Poins as a practical joke on Falstaff, only robs his friends the thieves, and pays the original victims back their money.

A later incidental but significant marking off of the Prince from the others is to be seen in his having to ask who Doll Tearsheet is. The truth is that from first to last he is not only a prince among adventurers but a man among animals. Of these animals one has one human gift, that of speech, to a degree which has never been surpassed. But that is all. The prince is a man of many sides and many gifts and very human in them all. Whether he is leading an army or robbing on the highway, doing brave deeds or playing practical jokes, saying wise words or witty, we always feel the man to be more than either the king, the madcap, or the soldier. It is a plain man, not a genius like Falstaff. But it is a

whole man of varied parts. It was not without warrant that he once said of himself: "I am now of all humours that have showed themselves humours since the old days of goodman Adam to the pupil age of this twelve o'clock at midnight." Of some, indeed, that are not common either on the battlefield, in the council chamber, or in the tavern. For instance, he is by far the most religious of Shakespeare's heroes. It is he who, when talking disguised among the soldiers, makes one of the very few definitely orthodox and theological speeches in Shakespeare; and his ascribing all the glory of victory to God is apparently as sincere as it is simple and direct. But there is much more than simplicity in him. It is into his lips that Shakespeare puts the great saying: "There is some soul of goodness in things evil." And it is superior brains more than higher rank which tells Poins: "Thou are a blessed fellow to think as everyman thinks: never a man's thought in the world keeps the roadway better than thine." And perhaps there is something of a higher order still in those other words to Poins: "Thus we play the fools with the time; and the spirits of the wise sit in the clouds and mock us." Still, a semi-mystical saying of that sort is only there to warn us that there may be more in Henry than comes upon the stage. What we see on the stage, the visible and dominant quality of his nature, whether he is wooing or fighting, praying or judging or joking, is a victorious directness and plainness of capacity and common sense.

He too has his foil in the First Part of *Henry IV*. Shakespeare has altered history to make Hotspur of the same age as the Prince. And he has developed him into a hero of romance, the romantic idealism of whose chivalry sets off the selfish realism of Falstaff, while its unpractical extravagance sets off the conquering common

sense of Henry. Hotspur is the heroic figure born to failure as the Prince is the same figure born to victory. The one is married to reality, the other to unreality. Hotspur's speeches are splendid things, the swan songs of that dying chivalry which was to live again in Scott's poems and novels.

O gentlemen, the time of life is short;  
To spend that shortness basely were too long

is exactly the

One crowded hour of glorious life  
Is worth an age without a name

which, wherever it was first printed, came, as only pedantry doubts, from the heart and brain of Scott. But there is another side to these beautiful knight-errants. And Shakespeare visits it, as Scott did not always, with its natural doom of failure. Hotspur is, from the first, one of those "rash inconsiderate fiery voluntaries" who are fatal to their friends and to themselves. He begins by insulting the King's messenger about what knight-errantry calls a point of honour and other people a point of vanity. His whole tone and manner is one of boyish bravado; though a lovable boy he is a fool. So when he meets his confederates he takes pleasure in insulting them. He forgets the map which is the business of their meeting, and spends his time scoffing at Glendower's supernatural pretensions and at his turn for "mincing poetry": not a very practical way of conducting negotiations with an important ally. But he hates prophets and poets and bores, and Glendower is a little of all three, and he will "tell the truth and

shame the devil" rather than say a few civil words to a long-winded and tedious fool. As soon as he has gained his point he throws it away: evidently he only quarrelled for the sake of quarrelling. But we should not like him as we do if that were all. He is no mere fool, no mere dithyrambist ranting to the moon. Shakespeare has taken care to show us that he is a real hero, and more, a real man. We see him chaffing his wife and refusing to tell her his secrets. We see him playing the silly young aristocrat, pouring scorn upon respectable shop-keeping citizens and bidding his wife swear the good round oaths which, to a silly boy's ears, sound well in the mouth of an earl's daughter. But it is his wife who is right and he who is wrong when they talk policy. Indeed, he is always wrong. Even the two things which he does so magnificently he always does to his own destruction. He talks when he should be silent and fights when he should retreat. Everything about him has the hurry, prematureness and extravagance which can only end as they do. He who cannot learn to live must die; and so he rushes, deceived and gloriously unheeding, on his fate, wishing his enemy were stronger and finding him only too strong. He dies with a burst of fine phrases; and, though we love him, we find a kind of poetic justice in the fact that it is over his body that Falstaff utters his "the better part of valour is discretion," and that the last we see of him is as the hero of Falstaff's preposterous fiction, the creature of a braggart's lie, fighting his "long hour by Shrewsbury clock," and, as usual, for someone else's glory and advantage! Here, as everywhere else, his grasp is of shadows, while the reality of glory goes to Henry, and the reality of safety and pleasure to Falstaff.

With *Henry V* Shakespeare's handling of English history ends; and ends with a stroke of that dramatic

irony which the Greek tragedians used so frequently and with such grave effect, and Shakespeare so much less often, and with that laugh of his in it of which they knew nothing. "Shall not thou and I, between Saint Denis and Saint George, compound a boy, half French, half English, that shall go to Constantinople and take the Turk by the beard?" They did compound that half-French, half-English boy; and he was Henry VI. Shakespeare will not touch English history again except so far as his hand is to be found in Henry VIII. Long ago, Tennyson, whose fine critical gift, to be seen in all his recorded conversations, has received much less recognition than it deserves, suggested to Spedding that a good part of Henry VIII was written by Fletcher. And this has been commonly accepted. The play belongs already to the new age of the masque rather than to the drama of the Elizabethans; it lives only by Katharine and Wolsey, and is full of dramatic inconsistencies or contradictions which are unlike the casual licence as to matters of fact which Shakespeare habitually allowed himself. Wolsey is and is not the villain of the piece: the writer seems never to have made up his mind which it is to be. Katharine is the most Shakespearean figure in the play, and Johnson strangely thought her death scene, which includes the story of the death of Wolsey, the most pathetic scene in Shakespeare. But even she ends her great conference with the cardinals with an utterly lame and unconvincing acceptance of them as her counsellors. And later on dramatic action is pushed aside to make way for rhetoric and pageantry in compliment to Elizabeth and James I, which point to patchwork put together at different times, if not by different hands.

So Shakespeare leaves the history of England at a point within thirty years of his own birth. He lived

under a strong queen, and his last play deals with the strongest, as his last but one deals with the most victorious, of our kings. As was still natural to a subject of Elizabeth, monarchy is his theme throughout from John to Henry VIII. In all his plays everything depends on the king. He may be a murderous tyrant, a fantastical and fickle dreamer, a sickly saint, an inhuman monster; he is still the king and there is no way of disputing his power except by putting someone else in his place. Shakespeare lived and wrote under James I, but he died too soon to have any premonition of the political revolution which the blind obstinacy of the Stewarts had brought about within thirty years after his death. He had, and could have, no conception of any government of England except a personal monarchy. All the plays, even those which deal with the worst or weakest kings, treat kingship as a thing unique and divine, the ordinance of God. But though he lived in times when not merely monarchy but the individual monarch, here and in other countries, was spoken of as almost divine, yet in his Histories he spares neither the institution nor the kings. His story of monarchical England is, mainly, as we have seen, one of incompetence and crime, of folly no less than cruelty. Yet Englishmen, and perhaps most of all men of valour and patriotism, have found in it not merely delight but inspiration. That is the eternal miracle of art, nowhere more visible than in these plays. The touch of art gives significance, order, greatness, beauty, to confusion and pettiness, ugliness and crime; and when we leave *Richard II* or *Richard III*, *Antony* or *Macbeth*, it is with a new sense of the greatness of the issues of human life. We have seen men not totally unlike ourselves, of the same kind though not of the same quality, going to irremediable ruin, and the way of their going, and its

beauty. The beauty does not blind us to the ruin any more than Raphael's portrait of Julius II blinds us to the ugliness of the man. Rather, like all beauty, it stimulates the power of sight, and in the ruin we see the almost infinite issues that lie for good and evil in the power of wills of the same kind as our own; partly in their power, and partly in something outside them which we cannot explain. But the miracle is that at the end, by the strange working of art, it is not the ugliness or the weakness or the ruin that is the final impression left on our minds and imaginations: it is the greatness of the stuff in which we have seen them, the wonder and beauty of the body and soul of a man.

## CHAPTER V

### THE LATER PLAYS

**B**EFORE and immediately after the completion of the Histories Shakespeare wrote some of his most delightful Comedies. By 1600 he had entered upon his great tragic period. But there is an interval between the Histories and the Tragedies. In the last two years of the sixteenth century, with the Histories behind him—all of them, or all but *Henry V*, which may possibly belong to 1598 or 1599—he gives us several of the most joyous of his creations. I have discussed *The Merry Wives*, the best farcical comedy he ever wrote, and *As You Like It*, which I took with its companion woodland play, *Midsummer Night's Dream*. With them, or immediately after them, come the two perfect comedies, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Twelfth Night*. *Much Ado* is, indeed, more than a comedy. It is perhaps the most perfect example of the blending in one of tragedy and comedy. We have the serious and tragic love of Hero and Claudio working in and out of the humours of the loves of Beatrice and Benedick, with the crimes of Don John and his men set against the absurdities of Dogberry and Verges. The result is one of the most purely delightful things in the world. Perhaps it would be still more delightful if Shakespeare could have cared more, or had not cared even less than usual, for the probabilities of his story. But that never bothered him, and consequently our hearts and minds are not as much engaged as they might be; for we cannot believe that Claudio could possibly be so weak as to fall at once into a rather

obvious trap at the invitation of Don John who is his open enemy. So again, everybody—Claudio, Antonio, Pedro, Benedick, Beatrice, Dogberry, even Borachio—mishears or misunderstands; and if they did not the plot would fail. The results of these improbabilities are partly and temporarily tragic. But all is well that ends well, and the happy conclusion is reached after fewer casualties on the way than in the very similar conclusion of *Winter's Tale*.

This chapter of accidents is the comic counterpart of the tragic ironies familiar to us in the stories of Thomas Hardy, which are often, when heaped one upon another, almost equally improbable. The stroke which makes Leonato the man to whom Dogberry goes to reveal the secret of the treachery which is to ruin Hero, and makes him refuse to hear it, is exactly after Hardy's fashion: only Hardy would not have laughed over it, still less made all come right in the end.

But the only great thing in the serious part of *Much Ado* is Claudio's "Silence is the perfectest herald of joy: I were but little happy if I could say how much"; that, and his praise of music which he shares with so many of Shakespeare's lovers. It is not tragedy or romance which is the genius of *Much Ado*; they are only the foil to the comedy, and especially to the loves and humours of Benedick and Beatrice. Those names—the Blesser and the Blest—are of Shakespeare's giving, and perhaps seem over beautiful for such humorous personages. But the two are one picture of happiness, and their wit and humour and humanity have blessed thousands of hearers and readers from Shakespeare's day to ours. They sometimes a little recall the Rosalind and Biron of *Love's Labour's Lost*. But Shakespeare has travelled far since those prentice days. How much more grace and charm and amusingness there is in these passages of

verbal arms than in those! How much less merely verbal these are, escaping from the dictionary to the spectacle of life! How the deadness of quibbles has been replaced by a living humour which plays at ease over the field of human nature, always with a laugh, of course, but neither an unthoughtful one nor an unloving. There is all the difference in the world between that cold crackling of cleverality, which is too often the atmosphere of *Love's Labour*, and the rich warmth which comes when heart and brain join together to feed the fire.

I suggested just now a possible and partial explanation of that curious fact which is one of the Shakespeare miracles: his extraordinary power of catching the note and manner of that highest society of which he can only have had occasional glimpses. We see this in his serious figures of nobles and great ladies who, unlike those of the novelists, are never melodramatic, "high-falutin," or self-conscious of their aristocracy. But the high manners of seriousness are a comparatively easy matter. It is the high manners of comedy which try the writers of novels and plays. But Shakespeare, who knew all about the law without ever having been a lawyer, and all about the sea without ever having set foot on a ship, can give us a great lady's chaff to perfection without, one may be sure, having had more than the rarest and hastiest chances of studying it. Beatrice sometimes uses plain words which we avoid, and is, once or twice, ruder to Benedick than we think pretty. But listen to her laughing at Don Pedro and at herself:

BEATRICE. I may sit in a corner and cry heigh ho!  
for a husband.

DON PEDRO. Lady Beatrice, I will get you one.

BEATRICE. I would rather have one of your father's  
getting: hath your grace ne'er a brother like you?

Your father got excellent husbands, if a maid could come by them.

DON PEDRO. Will you have me, lady?

BEATRICE. No, my lord, unless I might have another for working days: your grace is too costly to wear every day. But, I beseech your grace, pardon me: I was born to speak all mirth and no matter.

DON PEDRO. Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you: for, out of question, you were born in a merry hour.

BEATRICE. No, sure, my lord, my mother cried; but then there was a star danced and under that was I born.

Who can doubt that this is the true poetry and perfection, as art makes them, of a rougher raw material which was the talk of those great ladies of that day, who joined the highest breeding to the finest intelligence?

And if Beatrice and Benedick are perfect at one end of the social order are Dogberry and Verges less so at the other. They are as stupid as the others are clever; but there is again perfect art in their making and joy and good humour in their being. With Bottom and his men they are Shakespeare's most nearly full-length and most living portrait of ignorance using words which it does not understand, and setting its hands to business which it can only bungle. But again, like Bottom, what "good fellows" they are, not more ridiculous than honest, not less good-hearted than self-important and absurd. At the common people meddling with high matters out of their reach no one enjoyed a laugh more than Shakespeare; of their dangerous helplessness in the hands of any clever talker, a Jack Cade, an Antony, a Sicinius, no one gave plainer or more contemptuous warnings; in their essential soundness of nature no one ever believed more or oftener confessed his belief.

*Twelfth Night* is another delightful creation with nearly as much fun in it and much more poetry. Its romance is all poetry and pleasure; it never gets so near tragedy as the business of Hero in *Much Ado*. The only sadness in it is the beautiful sadness of love; there are no villains like Don John and his crew. The only flaw in the mingled romance and comedy of its story is the tiresome and unconvincing business of the confusion between Sebastian and Viola; much more tiresome here than, for instance, in *The Comedy of Errors* because the play is so much truer and finer. Of course, one has again to remember that both parts were played by boys, which reduced the absurdity. But it must have remained an absurdity, and have added to the fairy-tale improbability of the action which is, apart from it, much less conspicuous in this than in most of the Shakespearean romances. Only, for probability of the action as a whole the middle Shakespeare cared little, the Shakespeare of the earliest and latest plays nothing at all. Perhaps another defect may be remarked. Olivia, the middle-aged and melancholy, has not charm enough to fill her part. We find it difficult to follow the Duke's infatuation. We almost grudge her receiving even a substitute for the lovely Cesario of her delusion.

One of the happy things to be noted in this enchanting play is that in it is to be found all Shakespeare's best praise, except the famous passage in the *Merchant of Venice*, of the one art outside his own which he understood and loved. Of painting and sculpture he knew nothing. Whenever he speaks of them he falls into the silly old ignorance which supposes that their business is to produce a deceiving copy of nature. But of music he knows much and has felt all. I myself have heard one of the greatest of living musicians say something to the effect that of the three of our poets who speak oftenest

of music, Browning is always meaningless or wrong, Milton always, Shakespeare nearly always, beautifully and passionately right. Anyhow, whatever his actual knowledge of the art and science of music may have amounted to, there can be no doubt about his feeling. One gets the impression that the words which he puts into the mouth of Cnesar, and several other of his characters, express some feeling of his own. The man that "hears no music" is for him a disagreeable man, even a man not to be trusted. It is pleasant to see that Shakespeare, the contemporary of William Byrd, delighted in the art of voice and instrument, in which his countrymen were then achieving such triumphs. And there is no play in which we see that more clearly than in *Twelfth Night*, which begins and ends with music.

Its music is chiefly centred in one character, that of Feste, the Fool, of whom Mr. A. C. Bradley, in a very subtle and beautiful study, has said that, putting aside Lear's fool, "who stands in a place apart—a sacred place," we love Feste above all the fools of Shakespeare's plays. He is sad and lonely, and little loved by the other persons of the play. His deepest sayings pass unnoticed, yet he has within him "a sunshine of the breast" (and, we may add, a poetry and beauty of word and thought) which "spreads its radiance over the whole scene in which he moves." He is the most musical of all the domestic fools; his songs are a joy to himself and us; and, incidentally, he is the only fool who keeps a clean tongue in his head. A scrupulous and bowdlerising School Editor found but three lines to cut out of this lovely play, and not one of the three came from the mouth of Feste.

There are a few other points that may be noticed. What an art there is in beginnings! And no greater master of it than Shakespeare. Could this play begin more significantly than with "If music be the food of

love, play on"? It is of music and love that it is made, at least the serious part of it. And the other half, the foolery which is the foil to the romance, how the note of that also is struck in Sir Toby's first words: "What a plague means my niece to take the death of her brother thus? I am sure care's an enemy to life." On the whole, perhaps, no play is fuller than this of Shakespeare himself, that double being, the greatest of all romantics and, at the same time, of all realists too. None exhibits more the madness of the Baconians, whose great man, so utterly unlike Shakespeare, has almost as little of realism in him as he has of romance. What he cared about in men and things was the material they provided for argument or philosophy, not their smack and savour and suggestion in which the poet and the realist find life and truth. The contrast between them is well illustrated in a note of Johnson's on this play. He points out that, while Shakespeare took the story of Diana and Acton as illustrating the torture of love which has seen forbidden sights, Bacon supposes it to "warn us against enquiring into the secrets of princes." And it is this Privy Councillor who, we are asked to believe, created Juliet and Rosalind. One cannot but wish that Johnson had lived to deal with the Baconians as they deserve and as none but he could deal!

*Twelfth Night* alone would be enough to put these seekers after whimsies in their right place. It is signed all over with the only signature that ever gave us either such things as "O mistress mine," or such as "Is it a world to hide virtues in?" or "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale?" No play is more Shakespearean or more English. It combines in one, poetry and prose, tragedy and comedy, joy and grief, cakes and ale and tricks and laughter with bereavement and disappointment, solitude and sorrow.

Shakespeare has left us nothing gayer, and nothing lovelier.

We now enter, with the turn of the century, into Shakespeare's greatest period. In the first ten years of the seventeenth century, probably between 1601 and 1608, he wrote the great tragedies which place him, alone in all the modern world, beside the poets of the *Agamemnon* and the *CELDipus*. Directly we take up *Julius Casar* we feel that we are in a new world. The spirit of comedy has indeed something to say in the opening conversation, but it is silenced at once when we are told of those who waited

To see great Pompey pass the streets of Rome,  
and who shouted so

That Tiber trembled underneath her banks.

And it is silenced, we may almost say, for ever, so far as this period is concerned. When we hear its voice at all, as in *Troths* and *Measure for Measure* and *Hamlet*, it is bitter and cynical. It will not recover its true Shakespearean home, the pure joy of the innocent incongruities of life, till these great days are over and we are listening to Autolycus in the company of Florizel and Perdita. The easy world of spring and laughter, in which we know all the while that things will come right in the end, is gone. The fairy tales of *Midsummer Nights* and *Twelfth Nights*, of *Arden* and *Belmont*, will not serve for Shakespeare's new mood. All does not now come "right in the end," and will not for some years to come. We are back in the remorseless facts of history, as remorseless, and more deeply considered, here in *Julius Casar*, in *Antony*, and in *Coriolanus*, than in the English

stories of John and the two Richards. We face tragic failure as utterly as in *Romeo and Juliet*, and much more inwardly. The issues are larger; the contest is fought out in a more spiritual world. *Julius Casar* is perhaps the least of the great tragedies. But we have not gone far in it before we know ourselves to be face to face with awful issues: the fate of a great empire, and, what is more, that of a great soul.

No man of imagination ever fails to respond to the greatness of Rome. From Virgil to Dante, from Petrarch to Racine, the thought of Rome is felt by the poet to be a call on his highest powers of utterance. All feel the fascination of that tremendous name. Virgil was himself a Roman, and no man ever had a deeper sense of the mysterious Power which decides the fate of nations. It was natural that such a man should be stirred to his depths whenever he spoke of Rome. Dante and Petrarch could still think of Rome as the centre of both the spiritual and temporal government of the world. That was all gone for Shakespeare, and half of it for Racine. But Rome is in no unreal sense the protagonist in what is perhaps the greatest of Racine's tragedies, and you may count by the score in it the lines which give all their weight to that fateful and tremendous word. And so with Shakespeare. In all the three Roman plays we are never allowed to forget that behind and above and greater than all the human actors is Rome herself. It is Rome which Coriolanus serves and destroys and saves; Rome, not Octavia, who is Cleopatra's rival; Rome, not the young Csesar, by whom Antony is shamed and conquered; Rome, which is embodied in Caesar, which fills the imagination, eats out the conscience and destroys the life, of Brutus. Here, as in *Berenice*, the word Rome dominates line after line. It occurs, for instance, six times in the brief soliloquy which Brutus utters as he

reads the letters of the conspirators. Even more lines begin and end with Cassar, who is Rome in bodily shape: too much Rome, indeed, to be quite an individual human being. And note another Roman influence in the play. The greatest of all aristocracies inevitably inspired in Shakespeare his most aristocratic mood. Here, as in *Coriolanus* the mob is exhibited as contemptible and, when in bad hands, odious. Here, more than in *Coriolanus* the aristocrats are great men, very conscious of their greatness. Is it an accident that here only, so far as I remember, the characters continually speak of themselves, not as "I" or "me" but by their names?

If it be no more,  
Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife;

Cxsar shall forth;

Come Antony and young Octavius, come  
Revenge yourselves alone on Cassius;

Think not, thou noble Roman,  
That ever Brutus will go bound to Rome.

Yet it is noteworthy that even in his most aristocratic moment Shakespeare is never an aristocrat of style of the Miltonic order. He will not deny himself (or was it his audience?) even in this play that scene of vulgar and stupid brawling before the battle, nor will he refrain, even in the midst of Antony's noble speech, from an ugly and semi-jocose metaphor about the blood of Caesar rushing out of doors to see if Brutus knocked 1 The lesson of art's self-restraint Shakespeare never learned or cared to learn, even in his greatest moments.

The moments of the speeches in the Forum are, in one sense, his greatest. For there is no oratory like them in all dramatic literature, ppt even in the (*Edipths* or *Antigone* not even in Racine. Anyone who has ever been at a public meeting feels at once that they would have been entirely irresistible. Their ease and naturalness; the apparent submission of the speaker to his audience; their poignant emotion, their surpassing beauty of language; their appeal, with the coffin and the will, to the eye as well as to the ear; their double call on stupidity and pity; all would have swept along with them any listeners of any age or country.

Is it because he is a rhetorician that Antony is a rather inconsistent and not very convincing character? Mr. Granville Barker, in his interesting study of the play, calls him the common man made perfect in his commonness, the sportsman turned statesman, the opportunist and demagogue who yet means what he says. But, for my part, I cannot share Mr. Barker's belief that he means what he says when he embraces the conspirators, and I believe he is much more artist than mourner when he is making his funeral orations. His real feelings about the conspirators are made clear when they are gone and he asks Caesar's pardon for being "meek and gentle with these butchers." On the other hand, if his heart had really been "in the coffin there with Csesar" could his first comment on the people's grief have been, "Mischief, thou art afoot." Probably, like many rhetoricians before and since, he has no heart at all, but is occasionally the victim, even to tears, of his own eloquence.

Of course the great part in the play is that of Brutus. Caesar gives his name to it, but dies at the beginning of the third act. It is a triumph of the stage craft, in which, according to Mr. Barker, this play is pre-eminent, that

his death causes no anti-climax. Not only do the other actors at once absorb our interest: Caesar himself, his corpse, his name, his ghost, have a full share in the action to the very end. Antony is what we have seen. Cassius has more energy than Brutus and is often right when Brutus is wrong. But we never care much about him because we never really know him. We never even think we know him as we think we know Antony while we listen to his speeches. All we see in Cassius is the conspirator and the soldier, and we are not much interested in either. But from the moment that Brutus utters the six great monosyllables, "It must be by his death," which open a speech almost as eloquent as Antony's and exposed to no suspicion of insincerity, he interests and attracts us more than all the rest together; and he never loses his hold till he dies with twenty more monosyllables, strange and moving words for Dante's arch-traitor to use:

My heart doth joy that yet in all my life  
I found no man but he was true to me.

He represents a type that had some special interest for Shakespeare. We shall presently see him enlarged in the most famous of all Shakespeare's creations. Here as there we see the introspective heart and mind which defeat themselves. The intellect is clear, the conscience pure; yet in each case their workings produce murder, and issue in failure and death. There are marked differences between them. Hamlet is gayer, quicker, wittier, altogether more alive and human, than the arrogantly intellectual Brutus. But they are of the same family. Death is in both their voices from the first. We know they will fail and die. Over their dead bodies, as always with Shakespeare, more ordinary men will say

the words of reconciliation and peace and take up the burden they have proved unable to bear.

*Julius Cæsar* was written in 1601. Various considerations make this date more certain than the date of almost any other play. But I, for my part, feel quite certain that those who connect it with the conspiracy of Essex against Elizabeth, which took place in that year, are merely chasing the will-o'-the-wisp of topical allusion. Nothing is less likely than that Shakespeare should make any allusion to an affair so offensive to the Queen. The text of the play, which is found only in the Folio, is so free from blemishes that it has been thought more likely than any to have been printed from the poet's own manuscript.

In both these matters of date and text it differs from the play which follows it. The text of *Hamlet*, as we read it, is generally a mixture of the Second Quarto of 1604 and the Folio of 1623, the Quarto having been, as is now generally believed, printed directly from Shakespeare's manuscript, and the Folio from a playhouse transcript of it after many excisions and some additions had been made. And as there was an old *Hamlet* before Shakespeare, and as he seems here as elsewhere to have revised his own work, nobody can say that *Hamlet* was written in any particular year. But various arguments point to a date about 1601 as a central date for *Hamlet*, and we take it, therefore, as following *Julius Cæsar*.

In it we come to the most famous of all Shakespeare's plays, indeed to the most famous play in all the world. It is also, probably, the play which gives us most of the mind and temper of Shakespeare, at least on their graver side. It owes little or nothing to anyone but him. When *Julius Cæsar* is read or played, we are interested before our eyes or ears catch a word. Caesar is one of

the two or three most famous names of history. Hamlet is nothing but what he has been made by Shakespeare. Saxo Grammaticus had given him a name and Kyd may have sounded it on English boards. But if Shakespeare had not echoed it we may be quite certain that, except to the learned and the curious, the word Hamlet would have carried with it no suggestion at all. Now everybody who reads at all has read *Hamlet*. Many have read it, or seen it acted, twenty, fifty, or even a hundred times. Books to be counted by the thousand have been written about it. It is obvious that its numerous problems cannot be discussed here. Most of them, no doubt, exist mainly in the study; and here, as always, we have to remember that Shakespeare wrote for the stage, where people have neither time nor inclination to puzzle themselves over obscurities or inconsistencies. Many questions, too, which mere reading cannot answer, such as Hamlet's attitude to Ophelia, had then their answers in the tone and manner of the actor. But we cannot recover those answers now; the actor of to-day has not got Shakespeare to direct him, but only Shakespeare's text to interpret as best he can. And, as Plato said long ago, the worst of a book is that it cannot answer the questions it raises.

To discuss the questions raised by *Hamlet* would inevitably be to echo, no doubt with partial disagreements, the interpretations of those who have devoted years to its study. Here there would be space neither for the echo nor for the disagreement. It is better to refer those who wish to pursue these questions to such works as Mr. Bradley's monumental study in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Meanwhile, putting all these problems aside, it may not be amiss to note certain things of which one has a lively consciousness in rising from a fiftieth reading of *Hamlet*. And the first is its extraordinary

power of holding one's interest even after so many readings. There is no play that is read with such breathless eagerness, and the eagerness is not staled by old acquaintance. There is prodigious variety, but the variety never distracts and fatigues the attention as it does in *Antony and Cleopatra* and other plays. Here the attention, in spite of the loose Elizabethan structure, is held as firmly as in any French or Greek play, even the *CELDIPITS* itself. And what a variety it is that has been compelled into unity. Contrast the play with its predecessor. That has a murder and a battle, with a ghost and some fine speeches. This begins with a far more impressive ghost, and includes in its action love and madness, conspiracy and suicide and poisoning and murder, pirates and wrecking, as well as another play, written within the main play, which becomes the turning point of the action; a whole world, in fact, of love and politics and war, religion and philosophy, the court and the theatre; a drama of the family, a drama of love, a drama of the State. No play ever had so much "business" in it; something is always happening; the spectator's eyes are kept as fully occupied as his ears. That has, no doubt, been one of the secrets of its prodigious popularity on the stage. The deepest thinker in the audience is not more impressed by its profundity and beauty than the boy or girl who has never seen a play before is carried away by its liveliness and excitement.

And its unity is really as remarkable as its variety. In spite of all its hurry and bustle, in spite of the many characters who are important and interesting for their own sakes, all turns on Hamlet from beginning to end. What is Hamlet? What will he do? What will happen to him? These are the questions which are never for a moment out of our minds. He is on the stage before our eyes during the greater part of the play, and when

he is not he is present to everything but our eyes: for it is he of whom the others are always thinking and making us think.

And yet this Hamlet is what one would expect would be the most irritating thing possible on the stage: an uncertainty, a mystery, about whose real nature and intentions dispute has gone on for centuries. Is he mad? Does he really love Ophelia? Does he believe his mother guilty? Why does he continually resolve to act on the ghost's directions and yet never do anything? On these questions ingenious men, and sometimes wise men, have written books, a few of which are well worth reading. To some of the questions answers of something like certainty can be given; others remain unanswerable. But the strange thing is that the difficulties scarcely occur to the quick reader or spectator. And they never at any time seriously interfere with the interest, beauty, and power of the tragedy. Indeed, in one way, they heighten the total impression. For in art, as in life, mystery has a power and beauty of its own.

Yet this all-compelling story has many defects or inconsistencies apart from the uncertainty about the character of its chief actor. Take, for instance, the character of Fortinbras. The play ends, as all Shakespeare's tragedies end, on the note of peace, and with a leaving of the disordered world in the hands of plain and simple men who have played no great part in the story. This was partly, no doubt, for technical reasons; there was no curtain then, and dead bodies had to be got off the stage somehow and by somebody. But it is more than that. There is always, at the end, as Mr. Barker has said, "a turning to the living future"; and, I should add, more still, a desire for peace and calm and hope at the last. So Octavius speaks the last word of *Julius Casar*, Malcolm of *Macbeth*, Albany of *Lear*. And

here, after everybody else is dead, the kingdom and its future are left to Fortinbras. But if we look back at the first scene of the first act we shall find it very surprising that the "young Fortinbras" there described should be contentedly accepted as the ruler of Denmark.

Then how strange it is that the ghost comes from Purgatory to talk to Hamlet, and yet when Hamlet speaks of what happens after death he seems to have no thought of Purgatory at all! How strange that, where all the action takes place in Denmark and all the characters are Danes, they should continually speak of Denmark as if they were outside it, and use the word Dane apparently as a term of reproach: as when the Queen says: "O, this is counter, you false Danish dogs!" and when Hamlet at the end addresses the King as "thou incestuous murderous damned Dane." How strange that Hamlet in the first act should hardly know by sight his apparently old and intimate friend, Horatio; that he is "at school" in Act I and aged thirty in Act V; that in the grave scene Horatio should apparently know little of Laertes, the brother of Ophelia and the son of the Court chamberlain! There are instances everywhere of Shakespeare's entire indifference to consistency, but none anywhere odder than these, which are only specimens of many to be found in *Hamlet*. It is also curious, though not an inconsistency, that he should have put the great saying—perhaps his greatest—about kingship, "There's such divinity doth hedge a king" into the mouth of Claudius, almost the worst of all his bad kings.

Yet these technical faults, as I have said, are little noticed either in the theatre or the closet, and they hardly detract at all from our delight and wonder at the poetry, greatness and truth of this extraordinary drama. In it, as

in all the greatest creations of art, it is hard to say whether it is its naturalness or its poetry, its rendering of truth as all see it, or its revealing of things in that truth which few see, its immanence, we may say, or its transcendence, which is its supreme quality. In fact, the two are inextricably mixed. We are at home in it; we are in the world we live in every day. But we are also all the while in a world strangely greater, strangely more wonderful and more beautiful, than that of our experience.

We now turn back from these great places to a lower world, lower in art and lower in humanity.

For *Troilus and Cressida*, as for so many of the plays, it is not possible now to give an exact date. But probably it was in existence, more or less as we read it to-day, by 1602 or 1603. As a whole it must be admitted to be an ugly, inconsistent and unpleasant performance. But it is Shakespeare's; and it is not merely his name but his genius that makes us read it and will go on doing so. He never wrote anything of a more tedious flatness than the whole of the supposedly comic business of Ajax, Achilles and Thersites, which neither amuses nor pleases, but often disgusts and often bores. He seldom split an action into two halves more completely disconnected than the Trojan and Greek halves here. Yet it remains true that he never wrote lines of more uniquely magical power than some that are to be found in this strange drama, which has been not unfairly described as history without truth, comedy without laughter, and tragedy without pathos. The art of plot or story is never more completely lacking than it is here; the power of giving unforgettable utterance to some passionate cry of the human heart, to some large wisdom of the human mind, is seldom more visible. Shakespeare never shot a more flashing searchlight into the secret places in which men and women pass, half-unconsciously, their moments

of greatest experience than when he wrote that line which Browning was so fond of echoing:

Things won are done: joy's soul lies in the doing.

The whole play, in fact, is one of unresolved contradictions. The plot, if there can be said to be one, is entirely absurd. It is pulled about in every direction by classicism and medievalism, Chaucer and Homer, the attempt to combine a tale of love with a number of borrowings from Homer such as the wrath of Achilles, the wisdom of Nestor and Ulysses, the farewell of Hector and Andromache. And its writer is apparently quite indifferent to the consideration that there could be neither fitness nor even space for such things in a play where the main action was to be that, unknown to Homer, of Troilus and Cressida, and where such incongruities, leading to nothing, were to be introduced as those of Hector, like a mediaeval knight, challenging to mortal combat any Greek who pretends to have a fairer wife than Andromache; and Achilles receiving letters from Hecuba taxing him with the oath he had sworn to his "fair love," her daughter. The play ends, because the *Iliad* does, with the death of Hector, with which it has nothing to do; and there is no real meeting between Diomedes and Troilus, which all the later part of the action demands. Cressida, again the central character, is made more utterly incredible than she was made by Chaucer, whose easy-going charity softens the odiousness both of her and of Pandarus. Shakespeare is merciless with both. With Pandarus that does not matter. He is what he is from first to last. But that the Cressida who says such things as

I love you now: but not, till now, so much  
But I might master it:

and

Who shall be true to us  
When we are so unsecret to ourselves:

and

to be wise and love  
Exceeds man's might: that dwells with gods above,

should at once, within a few hours of her protestations, become as false as hell, is utterly intolerable and incredible. It is true that these sayings and others of hers do not exactly suggest a chaste Penelope. But neither do they suggest, or allow, the horror of her later vileness, which is so immediate and undisguised that Ulysses, on her arrival in the Greek camp, at once perceives that there is nothing at all for which she is not ready. She and Troilus at first echo Juliet and Romeo closely enough; and then Troilus becomes Othello, with all the reason that Othello never had. But Juliet could never under any circumstances have become the Cressida of the fifth act. And, whatever our anti-Romantics of to-day may say, it is Juliet and not Cressida who makes on us the impression not merely of poetry but of life and truth. Some things said by Cressida are such as none but Shakespeare's women have ever said. But she herself is a failure. *Nemo repentefuit turpissimus*. Neither men nor women change their whole nature in an hour. It is not without delay and hesitation that Brutus and Macbeth become murderers, that Antony allows Cleopatra to make him forget that he is a Roman. They prepare us for what is to come. But no one who reads the speeches of Cressida in the third and fourth acts can dream of the possibility of her becoming what she instantly becomes in the fifth. If Shakespeare meant her to have always been a heartless whore at bottom he has

wholly failed to make us see his meaning; and it is not easy to believe that his boy actors could have found a way to say such things as she says and yet, in saying them, to suggest, what neither Troilus nor the reader can see, that she is an empty-hearted flirt all the while.

But the story of Troilus and Cressida is scarcely more than half the play. Outside it there is the story of the "wrath" of Achilles and of the very un-Homeric way in which the Greek generals dealt with it. This gives occasion for Nestor and Ulysses to utter some of Shakespeare's ripest wisdom about life and politics. If the Troilus and Cressida scenes, which are probably early, give us such things as I have quoted, the Ulysses scenes, which are in Shakespeare's later manner, give us the great speech about "degree" with all Shakespeare's strong, and very hierarchical, political sense in it; and such fines as those which tell us that without "degree":

Strength should be lord of imbecility,  
And the rude son should strike his father dead.

So the "oblivion" speech to Achilles in the third act is as full of wisdom as of eloquence, and contains the much-quoted "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin!" How many people remember what the "one touch" is? No play illustrates it more than this of Cressida. But perhaps it is specially characteristic of Shakespeare himself, of his hatred of ingratitude and treachery, his sensitiveness to their ugly frequency, that it is in them, in forgetfulness and falseness, that he here sees the likeness of men to one another. That is the mood, at any rate, of this disagreeable play, and its fitly cynical moral.

Something of the same mood and of the same unexplained incongruity is to be found in *Measure for*

*Measure*, another play which probably dates, in the main, from these years. Sir Arthur Quiller Couch has well said, in the *Cambridge Edition*, that the plays of the years 1601-1608, whether tragedies or comedies, are all haunted by the thought of sensual vice. They brood over it and return to it in a manner which seems divided, as he says, between "repulsion and fascination." His notion, however, that it is specially "lechery in women" which occupies them is simply wrong. In this play, for instance, it is men, not women, who are in question. The key to it all, some people have thought, lies in some fact in Shakespeare's life occurring at this time. But that way leads nowhere: if we follow ignorance we are apt to find ourselves embracing madness. We know nothing; and even if we knew the whole story of some possible "dark lady," we should be no nearer explaining why an experience so common should, in Shakespeare, produce results so extraordinary as *Lear* and *Antony*. The important point to notice is that, whatever the mood was or implies, it produced tragedies of supreme greatness, and comedies which are failures. Neither *Troilus* nor *Measure for Measure* nor *All's Well* have any happiness in them; and there is no true comedy without a preponderance of joy. And perhaps they have a worse fault. They none of them convince. We have seen that Cressida does not, nor Achilles, nor Hector. Do Isabella and Angelo and the Duke? Angelo does: he is Claudius with Hamlet's brains and Hamlet with Claudius' vileness. But the Duke, with his rather purposeless Haroun-al-Raschid business? On the whole he fails, though it is rather absurd of Sir Arthur Couch to condemn him for the "lies" he tells Claudio about his having "confessed" Angelo; as it is equally absurd, and indeed horrible, to say, as he says, that Isabella, to save her soul, "turns into a bare procuress." For what the Duke says to Claudio

is no more a lie than any other part of his "disguise" as a friar, or than anything said by the hundred other characters who go disguised in Shakespeare. And, as to Isabella, whether we at best quite understand her or not, we certainly shall never begin to do so if we forget that bringing "contracted" persons together in any way was, for that age, a virtue and not a vice; and is, for this or any other age, a very different thing from what is done by the kind of creature who is shamelessly brought into the discussion by Sir Arthur. Then and long after, as readers of *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Pride and Prejudice* will remember, any sort of marriage, with any sort of villain, was thought a matter for virtuous friends to rejoice over; and, though Mariana is not in such a dire need of the priest as Olivia and Lydia, yet she is betrothed and deserted. And, as to her knowing little of Angelo, how many girls, then and much later, knew anything of their husbands till they had become wives? Besides, there is another thing which Sir Arthur forgets in his condemnation of Isabella's severity to her brother. She is a nun, or at least a novice about to be professed, and therefore has inevitably a special horror of unchastity. Besides, what girl would not have despised her brother for being willing to buy his life at the cost of his sister's shame? It is not true that she ever speaks lightly of his sin; her first words to Angelo call it "a vice that most I do abhor." All she does is to plead that it is common, to ask of the judge whether he, in like circumstances, might not have done the same, and to plead for mercy in the name of "Him that might the vantage best have took"; certainly not the language of one who thought lightly of the fault. No, Isabella may be, indeed is, at times rather conventionally, or conventually, dry and self-righteous; she can say when alone such things as "more than our brother is our

chastity," which is much worse than anything she says to him. But, for all that, it is still not so much any failure in her which makes the failure of the play, even to-day when her central action has become incredible and disagreeable. It is that the whole play is full of uncertainties and incongruities and leaves no unity of impression at all. We may not understand *Hamlet* or *Lear* but we have no doubt about the impression they leave upon us. In these "bitter comedies" we are left uncomfortably doubtful about what the play is meant to be. This is called *Measure for Measure*, but the measure which Angelo meted is very far from being measured to him again. Indeed, when we read the final scene, we are tempted to say that its moral is that the only unforgivable sin is that of slandering a duke! Those deeply human speeches of Angelo's guilty conscience deserved some ending that could be taken more seriously than this fairy-tale business of universal marriage and living happily ever afterwards. It is strange and intolerable that neither Isabella nor Claudio say one word when he returns to life at the end. Nor does she reply when the Duke takes her for his bride. One partial explanation seems certain. The inconsistencies of the text in various points, the many not unimportant characters who scarcely speak, indicate that what we have before us is not all that Shakespeare wrote. It may well be that Mr. Dover Wilson is right in arguing that Shakespeare's play was first cut down for the Court performance of 1604, and then, later on, again expanded for the theatre, each time by an inferior hand. The evidence for this is not perhaps so strong as Mr. Wilson thinks. But certainly something is wrong with the text, and we are glad of any theory which rids Shakespeare of the responsibility for such things as Lucio and the two gentlemen in the second scene and leaves us Angelo

and Isabella, and Pompey's "look into Master Froth here, sir; a man of fourscore pound a year: whose father died at Hallowmas; was't not at Hallowmas, Master Froth?" and above all, and of course (for Mr. Wilson strangely refuses to be certain), the Page's miracle of music and romance:

Take, O, take those lips away.

Another play which, with much that is earlier, belongs in its final shape to this period is *Al's Well That Ends Well*. It is, one might almost think, a hotch-potch of all periods, so many plays are recalled in it. Lafeu talks of Pandarus, "that dare leave two together"; the Countess is as full of saws as Polonius; the Clown, with his "flowery way to the great fire" is very near the Porter in *Macbeth*, and the trap set to catch Parolles reminds us at once of Malvolio and of Falstaff. But, though the whole is nearer to comedy than its two companions, the main action shows it to belong to their period. If it is comedy it is still "bitter comedy," not so disagreeable as *Troilus* and *Measure for Measure*, but still to be ranked rather among "Plays Unpleasant" than among "Plays Pleasant." The whole plot turns again on the same odious stratagem, and we feel that the right comment on that is Johnson's: "the story of Bertram and Diana (he should have said Helena) had been told before of Mariana and Angelo, and, to confess the truth, scarcely merited to be heard a second time." Indeed it is worse here than there, for Mariana does not arrange the ugly business for herself as Helena does. And it is not only the plot which belongs to this period. The play is again preoccupied with the subject which we found haunting Shakespeare in the other two. We are startled, in the very first scene, to find that the topic which the modest

Helena chooses for discussion with such a piece of underbred riff-raff as Parolles is that of the keeping and losing of virginity! After that nothing that follows can surprise us.

And yet *All's Well* is a much pleasanter play than either of the other two. It contains nothing so great as Ulysses and Achilles, or Troilus and Cressida, or Isabella and Angelo. It makes little or no attempt at the heights and depths which parts of those plays reveal. But its chief figure is not two incompatibles like Cressida, nor a block of beautiful marble like Isabella; it is a living, moving, very human and lovable woman. Coleridge is not the worst of judges in Shakespearean matters, and he thought Helena Shakespeare's "loveliest creation." That is going a long way, and we may not wish to go so far. But that she gets hold of our hearts from the first, as Isabella never quite does, I think there can be no doubt. Isabella has something too much of the statuesque and unyielding virtue of a nun; that is, of a person who is outside human life. Helena shows us her humanity at once by her "O, were that all! I think not on my father." She has no pose about her, and at once confesses that the tears for which she is praised are not so all-virtuous as the praisers think. She gives us her heart directly. We know her, and knowing, love her, from the moment of that first speech with its innocent confessions:

'twas pretty, though a plague,  
To see him every hour.

Her words give us, for all time, the secret of the situation of which Tennyson was too fond.

It were all one  
That I should love a bright particular star  
And think to wed it: he is so above me.

None of Tennyson's many Elaines can do it after that fashion. And, except the end of *Othello*, there is in all Shakespeare no passage between man and wife more signally marked with the genius of truth than the "Something; and scarce so much" with which she asks the only thing she ever asked of that poor creature her husband.

She is the play; she, and a few minor characters like the dear old Countess and Lafeu; who, however, is, for our modern ears, a little too aristocratically insolent in his treatment of Parolles, utterly worthless though that creature be. They live together by one immortal phrase of contemptuous kindness: "Though you are a fool and a knave you shall eat." And indeed Parolles is scarce more fool or knave than the "master" with whom Lafeu insists on annoying his ears. Bertram is one of the poorest creatures in all Shakespeare's world; a snob about his marriage, a liar to the King, a traitor to Diana, a heartless husband, an indifferent son, a patron stupid enough to be taken in by such a creature as Parolles who has knave written all over him in the largest letters. The plot is perhaps even more absurd than that of *Measure for Measure*, the miraculous cure, the shadowy war, the affair of Diana, the business of the rings, the unnecessary intrusion of Lafeu's daughter: one never believes in, or cares about, any of them. If we do not care for Helena, the play is nothing at all. But that "if" is a large one.

Wordsworth said once that, of all books, two were "pre-eminently dear" to him. One was *The Faery Queen* and the other "The gentle lady married to the Moor." And on another occasion he spoke of *Othello* as "the most pathetic of human compositions." Certainly, if the business of tragedy be to arouse pity, no tragedy, one would say, in any language has ever done

it as it is done here. Of Aristotle's other half of the work of tragedy, of fear, some other plays, notably the Oresteian Trilogy and Shakespeare's own *Lear*, have much more. "The rulers of the darkness of this world' the mysterious forces about us which we all feel and fear and cannot understand, are far more present in those tremendous dramas. In *Othello* the agent of doom is not God or Fate, but just a very bad man: a man too like a devil, perhaps, to be quite human, but yet a mere man, with nothing universal or mysterious about him. While the action of *Lear* or the *Eumenides* seems too large for a stage, too large indeed for this earth at all, taking us somehow out into the great spaces of the universe, that of *Othello* is almost wholly private and individual. We hear of Venice and Cyprus. But we care nothing about them; they are not felt as Rome is felt in *Julius Ccesar* and *Coriolanus*. Still less do we feel in *Othello*, what is felt in every scene of *Haw let* and *Lear*, the infinity of the mind and soul of man. The action is single as nowhere else in Shakespeare. It is the happiness, followed by the unhappiness, of the marriage of Othello and Desdemona; such a happiness as is never elsewhere exceeded, such an unhappiness as is never elsewhere approached. Certainly, as a work of art, it is the most perfect thing Shakespeare has left us. The only criticism that Aristotle could have made upon it is that it is perhaps too painful for art: the agony of sympathy with Othello and Desdemona is perhaps greater than any art can transcend and make endurable. But this is only a doubt, not an assertion. We are all conscious of the extraordinary power and beauty of the drama, and perhaps, for most of us, as evidently for Wordsworth, the transcending of the agony is so complete as to make the reading of *Othello* not pain but a rare and high sort of happiness.

In any case, its technical perfection is interesting as showing that the illimitable Shakespeare could limit himself when he chose. Here, as Johnson long ago pointed out, we have, but for the change from Venice to Cyprus, "a drama of the most exact and scrupulous regularity." The play is compact in a strict and absolute unity. There is only one action, and it is always going on. There are hardly any of those ornamental additions, side-actions, amusements and other irrelevancies of which most of Shakespeare's plays are full. We could cut out one or two passages, like the first fifty lines of the third scene, without loss to the action. But such excrescences are very few and very short. No play of Shakespeare's has so little variety. Iago has his cynical humour, and there is a clown. But they are both entirely subordinate to the main action which goes relentlessly on, with scarcely a moment's remission, from the first words to the last. And no one who has ever felt the power of design and composition, of the unity given by form, in all the arts, will fail to be conscious of the great gain that comes to *Othello* from this concentration. When we return to it from such a play as *Antony* we feel that the most lawless of dramatists has given the most signal of all demonstrations of the virtue of law. *Antony* may perhaps possess as many moments of poetic genius, but, as a drama, as a work of art, it is not in the same world as *Othello*.

Still there is a matter in which this compact play defies the supposed laws of unity as scarcely any other does. There are editions of Shakespeare in which the editors laboriously put themselves to the pains of calculating the duration of the action in each play. Never was greater waste of time. There is no duration of the action in Shakespeare. On his stage time and place have no existence. "An hour may be a century," as Johnson said,

"in that calenture of the brain that can make this stage a field." For "time," as he adds, "is, of all modes of existence, most obsequious to the imagination." It is never more obsequious than in *Othello*. In one sense the action covers two or three days. In another, many weeks or months. We have no sooner been told, in the third scene of Act II, that it is the first night of Othello and Desdemona's marriage than we hear, in the next act, that Iago has "a hundred times" asked Emilia to steal Desdemona's handkerchief. So, again, it is plainly the first night in Cyprus when Iago makes Cassio drunk and gets Othello to dismiss him; and it is the next morning that Emilia and Cassio appeal to Desdemona. Yet immediately afterwards Iago suggests to Othello that there has long been an intimacy between Cassio and Desdemona and speaks of himself as having lain with Cassio "lately," as if they had been at least weeks in Cyprus. And the whole of the rest of the action is unintelligible if they have only just arrived. There would in that case be no meaning at all in Othello's terrible words:

yet Iago knows  
That she with Cassio hath the act of shame  
A thousand times committed.

Nor is it plausible that Othello should be recalled from Cyprus a day or two after his arrival. The whole question is unimportant, except as illustrating both the genius and art of Shakespeare and the methodical dullness of some of his commentators. His art, even here, is what a Greek or a Frenchman would call loose; but his genius triumphs over its defects. He wrote for the theatre, and in the theatre no one asks these questions. No spectator knows or cares whether Shakespeare

meant the action to last two days or two months, and he did not know or care himself.

There is little or no dispute about the text or date of *Othello*. It was written about 1604; after *Julius Casar* and *Hamlet* and before *Lear* and *Macbeth*. It has far less intellectual interest than the first two; perhaps less than *Macbeth*. Its greatness lies in three things: its art, its poetry, its pathos. Probably we never suffer in any drama as we suffer for *Othello* and *Desdemona* here. Perhaps we pity him even more than her. If so, it is because she suffers only in her body and her life; he in his mind and soul. Anyhow, between them they are the play, and their story keeps our emotions at an ever intenser strain of passion till "I took by the throat the circumcised dog And smote him—thus." There are in Shakespeare many finer characters than *Othello*, many more interesting minds, many more powerful natures. But there is not in any play so great a gentleman. That, indeed, is his ruin, which comes precisely of his simplicity, straightness and unsuspecting truth. It is arguable, indeed, that he is too easily deceived, and the scene in which Iago pretends before him to be talking to Cassio about *Desdemona* has that artificial improbability to which dramatists in general, and Shakespeare in particular, have always been too indulgent. These absurdities which take place before our eyes are not like inconsistencies of fact or time or place; they are and must be noticed by the spectator. But not even in *Othello* is probability ever the law of Shakespeare's art. And it may fairly be said that he has taken pains from the first to emphasise the plain, soldierly honesty which made *Othello* peculiarly liable to be abused by such a devil as Iago. Iago is the puzzle of the play. He is its single actor; all the rest are his more or less passive victims. He seems, more than any other man in Shakespeare, to be entirely without

heart or conscience; a liar and villain by nature and choice. The very first words he speaks, in the first two scenes, are lies, cynical, brazen, pleasurable. All through he plays his horrible part, not only with ease and naturalness, but with pleasure. After his night of treachery and crime, he cries:

By the mass, 'tis morning:  
Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.

Everything he says and does seems, as he says or does it, to be easy and almost obvious. Yet he is an enigma. Why he acts as he does is never explained. The only explanation he gives is one for which such a man, even if he had seriously believed it, would have cared little. Coleridge found the key to him in what he calls " motiveless malignity." But what is that? Merely malignity of which we cannot find the motive. Mr. Bradley, following Hazlitt and Swinburne and indeed Coleridge himself, finds the key, partly in a sense of superiority irritated by the stupid Othello's putting him aside in favour of the stupid Cassio, and partly in a love of mental and bodily activity, a kind of sporting pleasure in a very dangerous game; perhaps also partly in a bully's pleasure in exercising his power over his victims. This may be as near as we can get. Iago, at the end, refuses to give any explanation, and Shakespeare himself either could not or would not give any.

One cannot leave *Othello* without noting how full it is of those magical words of which no one but Shakespeare has ever had the secret:

If it were now to die  
'Twere now to be most happy;

When I love thee not  
Chaos is come again;

Ah, balmy breath that dost almost persuade  
Justice to break her sword;

Are there no stones in heaven  
But what serve for the thunder?

I am not sorry neither: I'd have thee live,  
For, in my sense, 'tis happiness to die.

These are only a few of them. They make it plain that no turning to severer art robbed Shakespeare of the freedom and magic in which no poet has ever equalled him.

With the tragedy that follows *Othello* we reach the topmost height of Shakespeare's genius. *Othello* is a greater work of art; *Hamlet* is certainly more interesting on the stage; *Macbeth* contains more and lovelier passages of pure poetry. But nothing that Shakespeare wrote leaves on us such an impression of transcendent and unapproachable power as *Lear*. The author of *Lear* is even more immeasurably apart from and above other men, even other poets, than the author of the other great tragedies. Here what we see at stake is no fate of a man or a city or a nation. In *Lear* the whole world, gods and men alike, stands at the bar and is judged. *Hamlet* and *Othello* and *Macbeth* are visibly the architects of their fate. It is true that in the shaping of their ends other forces, mysterious forces, are not unfelt as playing a part. But the human actor is predominant, and we see the law of cause and consequence leading him from his deeds to his doom. So we do, of course, in

part with Lear and even a little with Cordelia. With Gloucester we even have that connection openly, rather cruelly, stated by Edgar over the dying Edmund. But the dominant impression left by *King Lear* is that of the weakness of men, their helplessness in the hands of powers outside them, their insignificance in the universe which contains and overwhelms them. The "unknown Powers" make no such visible appearance here as they do with the witches in *Macbeth*. But if we see them less we feel them more. Not all the blindness, pride and obstinacy of Lear, Gloucester and Cordelia can explain the ruin in which they are involved. The explanation, if there be one, lies somewhere out of our sight, with "Nature," "the gods," "the stars," or whatever other name be given to the irresistible Unknown which is felt behind every scene in this tragedy as nowhere else in Shakespeare.

Yet, superhuman as *Lear* is, there is no play in which Shakespeare exhibits more of his knowledge of humanity, of that almost miraculous certainty of his about what men will say or do in given circumstances. Truth of imagination fills us, first, with the surprise of the unexpected, and then with surprise that we had not expected what is so plainly true and natural. When Lear says:

Does any here know me? Why this is not Lear;

or

0 heavens

If you do love old men;

still more when he says:

I am a man

More sinn'd against than sinning;

and most of all, perhaps, when he utters those words which are the first that Cordelia has heard from him since the day that he cast her off:

You do me wrong to take me out o' the grave.  
Thou art a soul in bliss;

he says what none of us would have dreamt of putting into his mouth; what we all, directly we hear the words, feel to be the very thing he would have said. Stroke after stroke of this extraordinary veracity and certainty fills us with a passion of wonder and delight again and again all through the tragedy. Yet few of the plays have cruder improbabilities. Nothing can palliate the absurdity of Edmund's deception of Gloucester. Why Edgar writes to Edmund who is with him in the same house, why Gloucester does not know his son's writing, why he accepts so clumsy a forgery as genuine, why he never insists on seeing Edgar and why Edgar never insists on seeing him, are all questions impossible to answer, yet certain to be asked, even by casual spectators in the theatre. Is it conceivable that Shakespeare never saw they would be asked? Is it conceivable that he saw it and did not care? We cannot say. Perhaps he would have answered in the spirit of Mr. Puff: "O, if people are to be delicate about absurdities on the stage how is any plot to be put together so as to get itself finished in three or four hours?" But such an answer will hardly do where the matter is tragedy of the tremendous seriousness of *Lea*r. In comedy probability is a gain but hardly a necessity. We scarcely believe in its characters outside their own enchanting world in which, besides, some topsy-turveydom is of the essence. But in tragedy the illusion is more powerful, so powerful that critics spend pages or chapters in discussing the early life of Hamlet

or Iago as if they were historical characters, or had ever had any life, late or early, other than what is shown in the play. So inconsistencies and improbabilities are far graver drawbacks when they occur in tragedy. And such a scene as the first in *Lear* cannot really be explained or excused by any special pleading, however ingenious. Nothing can make the folly of Lear credible or the obstinate disagreeableness of Cordelia tolerable. For disagreeableness it is, however painful it may be so to use such a word of a being so loved, indeed one may say so sacred to us, as the last scenes of the tragedy have made Cordelia. Even Mr. Bradley, who begins by saying of the first scene: "we do not think either of justifying or of blaming her," has to go back upon his words a few pages later and confess that "truth is not the only good in the world, nor is the obligation to tell truth the only obligation"; adding that "even if truth were the one and only obligation, to tell much less than truth is not to tell it," and admitting that "there surely never was a more unhappy speech" than that which ends with the icy truth of:

Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all.

Desdemona, as he well says elsewhere, "could have refused to compete with her sisters and yet have made her father feel that she loved him well." So we do blame Cordelia, or Shakespeare; we must. We cannot escape it if we ask ourselves what we should think of her were that first scene all we see of her. We see and hear very little: she only speaks about a hundred lines in all. Even when she returns to her father she is still the same silent Cordelia: the moving speeches are his, not hers.



chief effect of Lear's sufferings is to sweeten his nature, they also may be seen to reveal its realities. The Lear whom we have before us in the first scene is the creature of convention, not the man but the king, and what he says and does is less the expression of his own nature than the result of years spent in "the insolence of office." He will be as wilful and absurd as he chooses, and all must call his wilfulness wisdom and love. In the following scenes we get the beginning of his awakening in those vividly truthful refusals to see the plain results of his own folly; "I have perceived a most faint neglect of late"; "No: no: they would not." And then, as his eyes are forced open, we have the magnificent and terrific anger which is only possible to a powerful nature. It begins by being private, solely concerned with his own wrongs and his daughters' crimes. But it already shows its generous side in tolerating from a servant, the faithful fool who had loved and been loved by Cordelia, the bitterest and rudest reminders of his folly and wrong. Then, as actual bodily suffering is added to the miseries of wronged kindness and discovered folly and lost power, as he comes face to face with reality as it is, seldom indeed for kings, but often for much more than half the ordinary people of the world, his sorrow and anger pass beyond himself. He learns to pierce below the differences of rank and wealth; to denounce, what he had perhaps himself exhibited, "the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely;" to feel, as he had never before known that he could feel, for the poor and the homeless and the miserable; to have "his sight so purged by scalding tears that it sees at last how power and place, and all things in the world, are vanity, except love." There are morals everywhere in Shakespeare, but, unlike most Englishmen, he was never very willing to force them upon us. Yet they are certainly not there

without his knowledge and intention, and he must have meant us to mark them. It is with his picture of life as with life itself. We get some glimpse of the whole of life and live in it: and that much more, probably, in his book than in our unhelped experience. Yet, if we have any mind or spirit at all, we are continually judging and assigning values both as we read and as we live. In both the lessons are many, and hardly one without its balancing correction and apparent contradiction. Yet, in proportion as we become more truly alive, we see them always more plainly and have less difficulty in distinguishing and applying them. And we cannot here be wrong in thinking that among the hundred experiences Shakespeare had in writing *Lear*, and meant us to have in reading it, is a conviction that even sufferings so great as to make us doubt whether the pillared firmament be not rottenness and the devil the king of the world will often, even in our eyes, show themselves, as they do here, to have been the only way of arriving at the one ultimately true secret of life.

On Shakespeare's other study of "the marble-hearted fiend" there is no need to linger. It is certainly the dullest of his mature works and is not, nor ever will be, much read. Yet no play contains passages more indisputably and uniquely his. Mr. Saintsbury has called it "the most Shakespearean of all plays not greatest." What he means by that no one who has ever really heard Shakespeare's voice will have any difficulty in perceiving:

Who dares, who dares,  
In purity of manhood stand upright  
And say, *This man's a flatterer?* If one be,  
So are they all: for every guise of fortune  
Is smooth'd by that below: the learned pate  
Ducks to the golden fool. All is oblique :

There's nothing level in our cursed natures  
But direct villainy. Therefore, be abhorr'd  
All feasts, societies, and throngs of men!  
His semblable, yea, himself, Timon disdains.  
Destruction fang mankind!

Of this fierce energy of feeling, thought, imagination, mind and senses, soul and body, all joined in one stream of fire, only one man has ever had the possession. Lear in the storm is scarcely more tremendous than Timon digging for roots. Yet to the one we go back again and again and again; to the other seldom or never. Why?

There are some who would take the blame off Shakespeare by attributing much of *Timon* to an inferior hand. That may be. But perhaps it is not only safer but pleasanter to believe, with Sir Edmund Chambers, that the play is all Shakespeare, but that he got tired of its disagreeableness and laid it aside without finishing it. We can only conjecture its date. But internal evidence would connect it with the other tragedy of ingratitude. The mood in which *Lear* was written continued, perhaps, and even deepened into a harsher bitterness which passed beyond the limits of art. "*Lear* strains those limits to the furthest: the miracle is that even on the heath they are not burst or broken. In *Timon* they are. The sensitive reader feels here, with Sir Edmund, "a want of balance and of measure, a touch almost of hysteria"; the dangers, in fact, to which *Lear* goes often so very near yet always escapes.

And there is more than that. We can endure the fury of Lear's indignation because of the greatness of its cause. And Lear, as we have seen, soon escapes into a world beyond himself. At the height of his sufferings, too, he is either alone with the storm, or with such human

company as softens our hearts and his by love given and received. Timon, on the other hand, has not only no Cordelia: he has no real friends of any sort. Except for Flavius, whose part is small, he sees no one but the objects of his hatred, and we are hardened as well as disgusted by the dull Billingsgate of abuse he exchanges with them. He has only one part of Lear in him: we have no concluding scenes with Cordelia and Kent to cast back a light of tenderness on all that has gone before. Then Lear is a king who has fallen from kingship to beggary by the hands of his own daughters. Timon is only a spendthrift who has thrown away his fortune on worthless parasites. It is impossible that we should care much about the penalty he pays for his folly. Hints come to us, indeed, at the end that he had done some service to the State. But we see nothing of his goodness. We see only the old spectacle of the quick parting between a fool and his money: one which never has greatly moved spectators and never will. Does the detestable Apemantus say much more than we ourselves feel, when he calls Timon's behaviour in his misfortunes

a nature but affected,  
A poor unmanly melancholy, sprung  
From change of fortune?

We know well that Lear would never have cared to go back to his old pomps and vanities. But do we feel sure that Apemantus is wrong when he says to Timon:

Thou'dst courtier be again  
Wert thou not beggar ?

Such a figure cannot be the central figure of a great tragedy. And *Timon of Athens*, for whatever reason, is

the very opposite of a great tragedy. It is a dull failure which contains some speeches of passionate genius.

*Macbeth*, which dates from 1605 or 1606, is by far the shortest of the tragedies. It is not much more than half as long as *Hamlet*. Campbell called it "the greatest treasure of our dramatic literature." I do not know whether anyone would to-day repeat that judgment which I confess I do not understand. In nearly all the qualities which make up the greatness of a great tragedy it seems to me to come distinctly behind its three great rivals. It neither interests the mind, nor moves the heart, nor fills the imagination, as do *Hamlet* and *Othello* and *Lear*. I believe its great popularity is due to three things. First, and most important of all, there is the interest always taken in murder. Shakespeare's plays are full of murders. But the murder of Duncan is by far the most vividly and "romantically" imagined of them all. In the other great three murder occurs, but is not, even in *Hamlet*, of the first importance. And such a murder as that of Caesar, done in broad daylight, for a public motive, with little or no hesitation or play of conscience in it, with no woman among the murderers, makes no impression at all compared with this of Duncan. Observe what passages of haunting irony precede it, keying up the reader to his topmost mood of expectant horror. The very first words uttered by Macbeth are: "so foul and fair a day I have not seen"; words which have an ominous note in them, and seem to convey a hint of the soldier and poet who has a mind and a conscience and yet will do the foulest deed a man can do. So the first words said by Duncan to Macbeth attribute to himself the very sin of which, as the audience know, Macbeth is already planning to be pre-eminently guilty.

O worthiest cousin!  
The sin of my ingratitude even now  
Was heavy on me.

And when Duncan arrives at the place where ingratitude is to take the form of murder his first words are:

This castle hath a pleasant seat.

Again, after these ironies, we are shown the secret thoughts and fears of this murderer as of no other in Shakespeare. And all that can heighten the effect is pressed upon us: the night, the bell, the sense of a world asleep outside, the murderer's struggles with his conscience, his fear of the sound of his own footsteps, the visionary dagger, the owl, the "Amen" which the murderer cannot echo, the misery of remorse and dread which accompany and immediately follow the deed, all alike heightened by Macbeth's unique gift and habit of poetic speech, which culminate in the wonderful lines which contrast his own lot with his victim's:

No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine;

Had I but died an hour before this chance,  
I had liv'd a blessed time;

and then, a little later,

Duncan is in his grave;  
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

There is no murder in which the horror and the mystery, internal and external, of murder are so gathered together

and translated into poetry, as they are here, in this tragedy, by Shakespeare. And such poetry! There is only one other murder in all literature which is done to the accompaniment of poetry of this order. The terror and beauty of *Macbeth* take us back to the visions and lamentations and prophecies uttered by Cassandra as she waits before the palace in which Clytasmnestra is murdering Agamemnon.

That, then, is the first explanation of the popularity of *Macbeth*. It is a tale of murder as thrilling as that of the vulgarest detective story, and it is at the same time poetry of the most extraordinary quality. And this poetry, which is the second explanation, is not confined to the scenes of murder. It goes all through the play. There is no one in all Shakespeare who so continually, almost invariably, speaks the very greatest poetry as *Macbeth*. He seldom speaks anything else. His natural mood, this man of ambition and murder, is that of high imagination issuing in speech full of colour and music. When he is planning the second murder he does it with a meditative eloquence:

Ere the bat hath flown  
His cloister'd flight: ere to black Hecate's summons,  
The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums  
Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done  
A deed of dreadful note.

Even when he is talking to the ignorant clowns who are to do this deed, he still talks poetry, for it is his nature:

Now spurs the lated traveller apace  
To gain the timely inn.

Indeed it is the same whenever he speaks; whether it is

to himself or his wife, to the ghost or the witches or the murderers, to Leyton or the Doctor, he at once escapes, as poetry does, from the mere present and its business, to the wider world of all time and all existence of which, to men of imagination, the present is felt to be only a transient fraction soon to be resolved into its whole. A third explanation is the presence, the visible presence, of the supernatural in *Macbeth*. Even now, and probably still more in Shakespeare's day, ghosts and witches are popular attractions. There are none in *Lear* and *Othello*; and, though *Hamlet* has the most famous of ghosts, it has no witches to provide a puzzle for the reader or spectator as they "keep the word of promise to our ear, And break it to our hope." The tragedy of *Macbeth*, then, is the greatest murder in Shakespeare, done in the most supernatural atmosphere, and by Shakespeare's greatest poet. What further explanation can we need of its popularity; unless, indeed, we add its shortness, remembering how many readers are afraid of anything long? No play is more familiar, and there is little that need be said about it. But one may just note two things. We see in it Shakespeare the man of business. James I, the Sixth of Scotland, is King of England. So the practically-minded Shakespeare transforms Banquo, the ancestor of the Stewarts, from the criminal that he was in the old story to the honest victim he is in the new. So he introduces compliments to James about the union of England and Scotland and about the royal power of curing "the king's evil." These are things which any hack could have done but which he did not disdain to do. The other thing I would note is a different matter: one of his finest subtleties, and one which, so far as I know, has never received the attention it deserves; I mean the contrast between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the man

and the woman, poetry and prose. Like Brutus and Hamlet, Macbeth is a man of reflection and imagination. Unlike them he is also a man of action and selfish ambition. And that is strong in him from the beginning. Some critics, laying stress on the witches, have asserted that it was they who put the thought of the murder into his mind. But that is not so. Lady Macbeth, in the seventh scene, expressly says that he "broke the enterprise" to her; and it is clear that that could only have been before he met the witches, for she says that when he spoke of it, "neither time nor place did then adhere," as in her view they did when she was speaking. Yet, though he is not at all afraid to think of crimes, he is afraid to commit them. Is not the distinction between him and his wife that his mental fertility, of which she has nothing, enables him to see all sides of a question and to imagine all the results of an action? In that great seventh scene he sees both the guilt and the danger of killing Duncan as well as the advantage if the deed were only done. She has neither scruples nor fears. She sees nothing but the crown. He, full of "the deep damnation of his taking off," and the instinctive conviction that something, natural or supernatural, will "blow the horrid deed in every eye," can find "no spur to prick the sides" of his intent, except ambition which, as it seems to his brooding fears, only vaults to fall. She with the simpler, directer nature of a woman, brushes his fears aside, and is sure the risk is well worth running for such a prize. When he says:

If we should fail

she replies

We fail!

But screw your courage to the sticking-place  
And we'll not fail.

So far the contrast has not escaped notice. But it goes much further than a mere opposition of resolution and irresolution. Could Lady Macbeth have stayed to picture a world asleep if she had had the dagger in her hand? Could Macbeth have done the deed if Duncan had resembled *his* father? Would he, whose eyes looked so much further, ever have devised the absurd plan, accepted by her one-sided confidence, of "smearing" the grooms with the blood and accusing them of the murder, after committing which, apparently, they were to be supposed to lie down to sleep by the side of their victim? But it is after the murder that the difference between a narrow nature and a rich one is still more remarkably seen. For the murder of Banquo and Macduff's family Macbeth needs no stimulus from his wife. Perhaps, indeed, she is in no condition to give it. For—and this is the subtlest part of the distinction—his horror of crime had all been exhausted by what his imagination had made him endure beforehand. He sees ghosts indeed, and visits witches, but they only make him crueller. Henceforth he shrinks at nothing, and remains to the end full of all his faculties of courage and energy, now as quick to act, as he had always been, and indeed still remains, quick to dream and to talk. In him conscience had spoken before his crimes: we hear little of it after. She, on the other hand, who, having no imagination, had foreseen nothing, now suffers everything, disappears from the action and dies conscience-stricken, of a "mind diseased." So, when she dies, he seems to think less of her than of the common human fate: "all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death." But she, in death as in life, has no such wide-ranging thoughts. Her thought here as always is of herself alone: "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." Is there anywhere, in Shake-

spere's many contrasting studies of men and women, one subtler than this of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?

*Antony and Cleopatra* follows *Macbeth*. For metrical and other reasons not to be discussed here there is general agreement in dating it at 1607 or 1608. In it the freedom and prodigality of Shakespeare's genius reach their utmost limit. "*Feliciter audax*" as Coleridge said, "is the motto for its style comparatively with that of Shakespeare's other works, even as it is the general motto of all his works compared with those of other poets." It is the longest of his plays except *Hamlet* and by far the most loosely designed of all that are wholly his. The list of its *dramatis persona* contains thirty-four persons over and above the nameless soldiers and others who take part in the action. There is no play in the world which so often compels the reader to turn back to the list of characters in order to find out who the speaker is. There is none in which the changes of scene are so frequent and confusing. We are not only constantly moving backwards and forwards between Alexandria and Rome, but we find ourselves also at Messina, at Misenum, on Pompey's galley at sea, on a plain in Syria, at Athens, and at Actium. Johnson thought that the "quick succession of one personage to another" and the "frequent changes of the scene" aroused interest and pleasure. Perhaps the explanation of this strange opinion is that it comes not from the man of letters but from the melancholy invalid who could not bear to be left alone, and would have liked to spend his life "driving briskly in a postchaise with a pretty woman," which, however pleasant, is a very different kind of pleasure from that of art. When he praises the continual changes of *Antony and Cleopatra* he praises what is in truth its capital defect. In drama, as in all the arts, unity is of the essence, and a play in which we do not know

where we are or who is speaking is, so far, a bad play. The true business of *Antony and Cleopatra* is the struggle of which the note is given in the very first scene; between Rome and Cleopatra, between "All for Love" and private and public interest and duty. Its great defect is that there are in it many personages who have little or nothing to do with this struggle, and several whole scenes in which it is scarcely felt or remembered at all. Shakespeare took his plot from North's Plutarch: and he has compressed and strengthened Plutarch's ill-arranged story. But then Plutarch is a biographer, and much more is necessarily demanded of a dramatist. The wayward freedom often assumed, not to their advantage, by biographers is not for him. He has but a short time to do his work, and to get it done he is wise to turn neither to the right hand nor to the left, but to keep his eyes and ears fixed only on Hamlet's "necessary question of the play." Dryden has little of Shakespeare's genius and none of that magic of his which is nowhere more lavishly and triumphantly displayed than in *Antony and Cleopatra*. But can anyone who has kept "on this side idolatry" about Shakespeare read Dryden's *All for Love* without perceiving that ten characters are better than thirty-four, one place of action better than a dozen, and one story better than two or three; in a word, that drama in the shape of drama holds one better than drama in the shape of chronicle? Or would, that is, if the two poets were equal. But here genius has thrown its sword into the scale. It will not let us try the balance without it. And perhaps we do not want to. But, if we do insist upon thinking the magic away and contrasting art with art, I fancy we shall see that when genius chooses to achieve the impossible, the result is, for ordinary men, a warning rather than an encouragement to imitation.

But these problems of art, whatever interest they may have for men of letters, are not the things which fill and almost overwhelm our minds when we lay down the book of *Antony and Cleopatra*. We can then think only of the flaunting, swelling splendour of the two great figures of the play. One side of human nature is here let utterly loose to go its own way; it is, in the old Homeric similes, a torrent bursting all its banks, a stallion escaped from the stalls and leaping all obstacles in its rush to the mares. Coleridge well said of *Antony and Cleopatra* that its counterpart is *Romeo and Juliet*. There we have "the love of affection and instinct"; here that of "passion and appetite." Indeed we may say that this is, of all plays in the world, the one in which "the expense of spirit in a waste of shame" is shown most nakedly as almost a glorious and entirely a splendid business. That—and not only its poetry and power—is partly what endears it to certain people to-day, who have violently reacted against the "moralities"; as it is what made Victorians rather tend to pass it by on the other side. To any criticism which attempts to be central both these attitudes are mistaken. Art deals with all that is human: and passion is a thing very human indeed. When anything human is given to us in such extraordinary energy of life and beauty as is the love of *Antony and Cleopatra*, we accept it and enter into it, as we enter into the murders of Medea or Macbeth, and know that we have received a new and heightened experience of life. The tale in itself, and by itself, would never have done. That would have been mere ugliness: a fact too often forgotten by writers of to-day, who seem unaware that mere facts, untransfigured and unvivified by art, are at best nothing, and, if vile or ugly, are merely ugliness and vileness, matter of disgust and offence. To suppose that you can take morality out of

art is just as absurd, no more and no less, as to suppose you can make art subject to morality. In most of Shakespeare's tragedies the ethical atmosphere is omnipresent, though seldom forced upon us. None has so little of it as *Antony and Cleopatra*. Yet even here, if we look below the splendid surface, do we not see, not only that all this seeming-glorious rush of life finds its only end in defeat and suicide, but that it must be so and ought to be so? Of the fates of Lear and Hamlet and Othello we feel that they are part of a mystery which we accept but cannot understand. Till the last moment we wish them to triumph over their enemies; and after the last we can only acquiesce. The doom of Antony and Cleopatra we see from the first to be inevitable; and, through all their glory which is always filling us with wonder and delight, we know that in the struggle between them and Rome it is Rome which must be, and ought to be, victorious; and we are no more grieved than surprised at its being so.

Yet, if the victorious cause pleases the gods, and, in this case, Cato too, that cannot be the last word with which we part from Shakespeare's marvellous creation. We are not blind to Cleopatra's faults. We cannot wish the world to be ruled by such a creature as she. Of what we mean by worth she has nothing. She is a vain, selfish, treacherous woman. Whether she betrayed Antony by intrigue at Alexandria, as she had betrayed him by cowardice at Actium, Shakespeare—it is one of the blots on the play—has left even more obscure than he found it in Plutarch. It is enough to say that it would surprise no one to learn that she did. She cares nothing for the fate of her kingdom or her children. She loves Antony, there is no doubt of that. But her love is of a sort which can sail away from him at Actium, and it is not of the sort which could die for or with him at Alexandria.

A false report of her death kills him: the sight of his was not enough to kill her. When she dies it is not for loss of him but for fear of Rome and an insulting mob. Yet after all and in spite of all she is magic and fascination, irresistible and victorious, not only to Antony, but to us all. Hers is that power to which we yield without asking it to justify itself, knowing indeed that it has no justification outside itself. We know it to be disastrous and ruinous, but we follow still, not even blindly, almost gladly. In the face of Cleopatra Antony may see

Toute une mer immense ou fuyaient des galeres.

But he wishes to see nothing else. Antony dies for her, and so do her servants. And he and they feel themselves happy in dying by the side of this wonderful being who has words and ways such as no other woman has ever had. They have drunk a poison which kills them. But it is the sweetest cup they ever drank and they die happy. And in the mingled feelings with which we look on at these deaths there is certainly not any surprise.

*Of Pericles*, which metrical and other arguments prove to have been written about this time, there is little need to say much. For one thing it is of very doubtful authorship. By almost universal admission a great part of it, including perhaps the whole of the first two acts, is not from Shakespeare's hand. On the other hand, there are few things more indisputably Shakespearean than the soliloquy of Pericles at the beginning of the third act; no one fresh from *Lear* can doubt that. And the unique touch is felt in many other places of the later acts: as when Pericles meets the reborn Marina with

This is the rarest dream that e'er dull sleep  
Did mock sad fools withal:

or his cry at the recovery of Thaisa:

This, this: no more, you gods! your present kindness

Makes my past miseries sport.

Such things have never come but from one hand. And, in spite of much that is hideous and one undramatic speech of Marina's, I agree with Sir Edmund Chambers as against many critics in finding it not at all impossible that Shakespeare wrote those painful scenes of purity imprisoned in a brothel. Nor do I feel at all sure that Shakespeare never touched the first acts. The scene between Pericles and the fishermen is immeasurably inferior to such scenes as Hamlet and the gravedigger or Cleopatra and the peasant with the figs. But the humour of the fishermen seems to me a poor example of the same kind. Like so many clowns and servants in other plays the fishermen give that side of life which nobles never see, the side whose inclusion contributes so much towards that wholeness of impression which is one of the triumphs of Shakespeare's drama.

On the other hand, the dullness and incoherence of the first two acts which contribute little or nothing to the subsequent action; the fact, noted long ago by Steevens, that the names of the characters in this play are not found in any other, whereas the usual practice of Shakespeare—who has five Antonios, four Helenas, and four Balthasars—is to use the same names again and again; the extreme violence, utterly outdoing even *Antony and Cleopatra* of the changes of scene, action and characters, and the wild absurdity, not as elsewhere of some incidents, but of almost the whole story, which even includes that cold Euripidean intrusion of the *deus ex machina*, combine to make it impossible to believe that

we have here a finished work by Shakespeare. The external evidence is as conflicting as the internal. The play was strangely popular, quartos of it were published in Shakespeare's lifetime with his name on them, and several seventeenth-century writers allude to his authorship of it. But the editors of the First Folio did not include it, nor was it included in the Second.

The reasonable conclusion obviously is that he wrote some parts of it but not all. Whatever is his in it belongs plainly to the end of the tragic period in his work and, as some conjecture, in his life. It is full of crime and violence, like *Lear*; and occupied largely with sexual vice, like *Lear*, *Timon*, *Othello* and the three "bitter comedies." Murder is everywhere in it; there is incest at the beginning and a brothel at the end. Yet it also points on to the happier period to which we are coming. It has many parallels in character and incident with *A. Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Here, as there, all comes right in the end, externally by way of the fantastic and miraculous, internally by the coming of a new spirit, which is serene and confident in its ultimate assurance of happiness, goodness and peace. Altogether, except *Titus Andronicus* it is the strangest of all the plays that have passed under the name of Shakespeare, and neither is, nor deserves to be, much read or ever acted.

The end of the tragic period comes with *Coriolanus*, the least interesting of the tragedies. It has been truly said to be a play without mystery of fate or powers unseen; without atmosphere, either natural or supernatural; without any great inward conflict. Johnson, whose hasty notes at the end of the plays exhibit as often his limitations as his gifts, strangely calls it "one of the most amusing of our author's performances." Most modern readers find it, on the whole, rather

tedious. The scene between Menenius and the soldiers at the camp of Coriolanus is indeed comedy of the best, and its soldiers are not more humorously human than the servants in the house of Aufidius. Nowhere more clearly than in this play do we see that Shakespeare's feeling about a mob was one not only of intellectual and moral contempt but of physical disgust. The fickleness of the Roman and even of the Volscian plebeians is mercilessly drawn. The mob is at once ridiculous and dangerous: a "beast with many heads." But that is not all. There are at least five references to the "stinking breaths" and other odorous unpleasantnesses of the "mutable rank-scented many." Yet the individual man of the people is here, as always in Shakespeare, in the main a good fellow: honest, humorous and likeable. So far as Shakespeare throws himself at all into the political issue—which is not, perhaps, very far—he would appear to state the case for aristocracy—especially in Coriolanus's speeches in the first scene of the third act—with more sympathy than he ever gives to the case put for the other side. But of course he was dramatically compelled, as Mr. Bradley has pointed out, to make the picture of the mob a black one if the resolve of Coriolanus to burn Rome was not to be absolutely intolerable. And there is no appearance of sympathy with the intolerable pride and insolence—exactly the Greek *vflpis*—of Coriolanus, which produces his own ruin and that of Rome as well. The truth is that Shakespeare is always primarily an Englishman. And nothing was ever less English than that cruel insolence. There has never been in this country any separate noble caste such as up to the War existed in many parts of Europe. The patricians and plebeians of England were always exchanging places and mingling rank and blood. There was no definite line between

them as there was at Rome, and as we see in this play. Coriolanus is therefore the least English of Shakespeare's Romans. His only really English characteristic is his love of home, wife and child; and we can scarcely claim that as our exclusive property. If we want really English qualities in this play it is not to the hero that we must look but to the jolly, clumsy, slow-witted but quick-humoured and good-hearted, soldiers and servants.

As a whole, then, the tragedy is rather dull. The details of fighting in Shakespeare are always at once tedious and incredible, and there are too many scenes of them here. Nor has the main action much in it to interest. What is it? A struggle between the static arrogance of Coriolanus, never once moved at heart, except for a moment by his mother and his wife, and the continuous, if not exactly static, folly of the Roman plebeians. How can such a struggle move us who come to it fresh from Othello and Iago, Lear and his daughters, Hamlet and his own soul? In *Coriolanus* there is not one person in whose fate we are greatly interested. Shakespeare has been too content to rewrite Plutarch who was not a dramatist. What he has given us is only chronicle or history; to make a drama of tragic quality he would have had to invent other characters and another action. And perhaps, by 1609, he was too weary of tragedy, indeed, if he were anyone but himself, we should say too exhausted, to try to do that. Whatever the reason he has not done it, and the play, for all its fine touches, has little human interest till we reach the two final acts. And most of what we get there is concentrated into the scene with his wife and mother. The one to whom Shakespeare has given the greater part is not the one on whom he has spent the rarer quality of his genius. Volumnia, except for one or two lines, is not beyond the range of smaller dramatists than

Shakespeare. Virgilia could not have come from any hand but his. "My gracious silence," Coriolanus calls her. She speaks far fewer words even than Cordelia, and unlike Cordelia she does not speak one that we regret. One of the finest pieces of recent Shakespearean criticism is Mr. Middleton Murry's study of her, called "A Neglected Heroine of Shakespeare," and printed in his *Countries of the Mind*. It is admitted that the original text of Shakespeare's plays, including the Folio which is the sole authority for *Corioanus*, are sometimes careless in their distribution of the speeches among the different characters. So it has been generally agreed here that one speech in Act III. Scene i., which the Folio gives to Menenius, must belong to Coriolanus. Following this precedent of rearrangement, Mr. Murry gives to Virgilia the "And live you yet?" of II. i. 198, which the Folio gives to Cominius and the editors to Coriolanus; takes away from her in IV. n. 14, the uncharacteristically peremptory "You shall stay too," and the brutal "What then? he'll make an end of thy posterity" of line 26, assigning them to Volumnia, and giving to Virgilia line 27, "Good man, the wounds that he does bear for Rome." It would not be easy to find a happier or more entirely convincing rearrangement of any text, ancient or modern. It leaves Virgilia complete in her hundred words, a harmony broken by no jarring note: one of the smallest, and one of the loveliest, creations of Shakespeare. But she cannot save the play, which is Coriolanus or nothing. And Coriolanus is the least sympathetic of Shakespeare's "heroes."

Yet he is far from being a mere Timon. The splendour of his wrath is more moving than Timon's, because, unlike Timon's, it comes from a man who has both done and suffered the greatest things. In *Coriolanus* we see, not at its highest, indeed, but for the last time, the most

wonderful, perhaps, of Shakespeare's gifts. All the great tragedies exhibit some human experience stretched and heightened to a degree of intensity which we have never before imagined, far less felt, and yet remaining human still. We have never seen such agony as Othello's, such rage as Lear's, such a civil war of the soul as Hamlet's. To all our previous experience they would seem superhuman, beyond the reach of the nature of man. But, when once we have seen them as Shakespeare shows them to us, these tremendous experiences become not merely human, not merely convincing: they become our own. We ourselves doubt with Hamlet, rage with Lear, suffer with Othello. That miracle is far less fully performed in *Coriolanus*. But it is there, or at least the first half of it. The hero of this last of the tragedies is that superhuman figure, the "magnanimous man" of Aristotle: great and very conscious of his greatness. His victories and his pride are each beyond the measure of common men; as much beyond it as the agonies and angers of Lear and Othello, as the passion of Antony. Pride is the least sympathetic of ruling passions. Yet even in his pride Coriolanus can convince us of some kinship with ourselves. We too, in his place, after doing his deeds, can fancy ourselves dying with his last insult on our lips:

If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there  
That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I  
Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioli:  
Alone I did it.

But that is only a humanity of which we have grown to be at least half ashamed. By itself it would hardly give us enough of that fellow-feeling with the hero or the sufferer which is necessary for tragic emotion.

Indeed it is the defect of this tragedy that it affords too few opportunities for that complete kind of sympathy. When they come it is seldom the proud Coriolanus who provides them. We may indeed find one in that proud saying: "There is a world elsewhere"; but, if so, it is not because we care for what was in his mind when he said it. Rather it is because those five words, like so many of the greatest words of literature, have acquired a meaning far beyond their original sense. But if we are to think of Coriolanus as a recognisable child of Shakespeare, more than we but of our kin, it will rather be when his pride half loses itself in other things; when he yields to his mother; when he cries to his wife:

O, a kiss

Long as my exile, sweet as my revenge.

The remaining three plays of the traditional Shakespearean canon exhibit an altered mood, a kindlier and happier view of man's life and character. It is true, as Mr. Lytton Strachey has pointed out, that there are no worse characters anywhere than Iachimo and others, and that these plays are full of hideous crimes. But when he makes this a ground for questioning the "serenity" of Shakespeare's final outlook, the answer is simple. These last plays end on a new note. The crimes do not triumph as they do in the tragedies. They fail. And the criminals are forgiven. The final word is no longer mere acquiescence in fate; it is forgiveness, reconciliation, recovery, peace. And the curtain falls now on life, not on death. In the tragedies those for whom we have most cared—Othello, Desdemona, Brutus, Hamlet and Ophelia, Lear and Cordelia—all die at or before the end of the play. Now they all live. If they have died or seemed to die, they are miraculously

restored to life. The sins of the stupid—a Cymbeline, a Leontes—are not now irretrievable or repented in vain. The end is atonement: the lost are found, the estranged are reconciled, the quarrelling fathers and daughters, husbands and wives, whose quarrels have made the play, end it by becoming one family again.

There is also another change. The plots of the great tragedies are not, as we have seen, by any means invariably probable in detail. But on the whole there is in them an air of great, indeed of tremendous, reality. We are, in them, at grips with life as it is, not only in its whole power but in its whole truth. In these last plays, on the other hand, we return to the old world of the comedies, now become seriously instead of comically incredible, a world not only of the wildest improbabilities but of actual unrealities, dreams and visions, appearances of spirits, good and evil, and even of gods. The plots are founded, at least in part, on old fairy tales: they can easily be turned back into fairy tales again.

The first of them, and the least interesting, is *Cymbeline*. It is a mixture of history with fairy tale, and of both with an Italian Renaissance story of poison and crime and an adulterer concealed in a bedroom. The wars of Rome and Britain, "Little Snow-White" flying from her stepmother to a cave, and the Boccaccio business of the duped husband and innocent wife, are mingled incongruously together. The play is partly written in the old mood of bitterness. Scarcely anything in the "bitter comedies," or in *Lear* or *Othello*, is filled fuller of disgust and loathing of women and women's vice than the speech of Postumus when he accepts the tale of Imogen's falseness. And if Iago is much more interesting he is scarcely more devilish than Iachimo. Yet the new mood is there from the first. Imogen is already in the

early scenes what Cordelia only becomes at the end, and Postumus interests us at once as the King of France is never given the chance of doing. And all ends, as I have said, in the fairy tale atmosphere of kindly savages, a princess in a cave, the loveliest of all burial scenes, new birth and reconciliation, victory, peace, forgiveness, and love. All this is unreal enough, of course, in one sense. But there is no play in which Shakespeare shows more of his own kind of truth. It would appear that, in this business of truth, what seemed to him to matter was not the convincingness of his story as a whole but the truth of each separate action, the vitality and humanity of each separate person. Here, for instance, the whole plot is such as the greatest dramatists of other countries would at once have rejected for absurdity. Why does Postumus do anything so cruel and absurd as to send Iachimo with his introduction to England? Why does Pisanio give Imogen the fatal box which he had from the wicked Queen whose character he knew? How can Imogen walk to Milford? Why does Cloten go there alone on the bare word of his rival's old friend and servant? Why does Cymbeline receive the story of his wife's crimes and death with scarcely any appearance of surprise or indignation? These questions might be multiplied tenfold. But, so far as we can see, Shakespeare is quite indifferent to them. Except in his very greatest plays—and of them only one is an absolute exception—what he cares about is the truth and poetry of the parts, not the coherence of the parts in a single design. As the work of a dramatist *Cymbeline* is nothing. As the work of a master of the secrets of the human heart, almost every word said by Imogen, except her quick acceptance of Iachimo's apology, is a miracle of truth. Note, for instance, not merely the greater scenes, but the extra-

ordinarily vivid veracity of her hurrying parentheses when planning her escape to Milford Haven, with such touches as:

And by the way  
Tell me how Wales was made so happy as  
To inherit such a haven.

So again, there is the talk of her unknown and unknowing brothers both to their supposed father and to her: a delightful piece of speaking nature. And the poetry to be found in this undramatic drama is as remarkable as the truth. It is no mere matter of a glorious lyric like "Hark! hark! the lark!" or a lovely one like "Fear no more the heat o' the sun." There are single lines here which would almost by themselves have sufficed to place Shakespeare among the greatest poets of the world. Who but he has ever put such sayings into the mouths of men and women as Imogen's

a touch more rare  
Subdues all pangs, all fears:

or the embrace of Postumus:

Hang there like fruit, my soul,  
Till the tree die.

We now come to *A Winter's Tale*, of which the date, 1610-1611, is for various reasons more certain than that of almost any of Shakespeare's plays. The story is taken from *Pandosto*, a novel by Robert Greene, who is now perhaps as often remembered for his attack on the young Shakespeare, "the absolute Johannes Factotum," as for any of his own writings, though they include some lovely lyrics. But Shakespeare has altered and improved

the novel almost out of recognition. There is no Paulina, for instance, and, what is more important, no Autolycus, in *Pandosto*. And it is obvious that there could not be any such scene as that of the sheep-shearing, with its lovers and flowers, tricks and humours, all crashing into nothing in a moment, though only for a moment, at the cold touch of hard-hearted reality. For of such loveliness as that there has never been in all the world more than one creator.

A. *Winter's Tale* is again a preposterous story of causeless jealousy, cruel murders and savage exiles, balanced by beauty and goodness and ending in resurrections, reconciliations and peace. But the charm and beauty are here much freer and more lavish than in *Cymbeline*. There is no scene there which could lay any claim, as the sheep-shearing scene here can, to be considered for the praise of the loveliest that Shakespeare ever wrote. Imogen is a beautiful creature, but in her prettiest scene she is masquerading as a ooy, and Shakespeare has played that trick too often before not to have a little wearied us of it. Perdita is always her own lovely and perfectly natural self; nothing either lovelier or truer exists even in Shakespeare's pages. Then there is Autolycus, one of his richest, most vividly though narrowly human, creations. His wit recalls the domestic fools, but he has nothing domestic about him, caring nothing for anyone, cared for by none. While the fools show always a sense of dependence on their masters, he depends on no one. He has neither the fear of being whipped shown by them all, nor the love and loyalty shown by the best of them. Indeed, he has neither emotions nor conscience nor morality of any kind. He is a mere Bohemian, a man all made up of the senses and the intelligence: clever, witty, unscrupulous, perhaps a poet, certainly a lover of poetry. He could

not be confined to a great man's house. He must live in the open air, wherever he likes and with whom he likes and seldom in the same place. The lines he comes m singing mark him as the child of nature and of that sort of "free life" which has never heard of morals:

When daffodils begin to peer,  
With heigh! the doxy over the dale.

What a song it is! But it has nothing to do with the Ten Commandments: least of all with the seventh or the eighth. "My revenue is the silly cheat"; and, as for "the life to come, I sleep out the thought of it"; which is what Macbeth wanted to do and never really could. Then comes the scene with the Clown; and, where all is authentic truth, there is in Autolycus nothing truer than his abuse of himself as he really was for having robbed himself as he pretended to be. "Having flown over many professions he settled only in rogue: some call him Autolycus." He makes one slip, indeed, in saying his kinsman lived only three-quarters of a mile away. But perhaps, with such a fool as he had to deal with, he enjoyed taking unnecessary risks. His next entry is again with poetry:

Lawn as white as driven snow,  
Cypress black as e'er was crow.

The poet has become pedlar and sings his wares. But neither poet nor pedlar sinks the rogue who does his business, in his old way, by a warning against roguery: "And, indeed, sir, there are cozeners abroad; therefore it behoves men to be wary." He is so jolly about

his business that we delightedly watch him fooling and robbing his victims at his ease, while they listen and admire. "Why should I carry lies abroad?" For his own pleasure, no doubt; for indeed he hardly needs them in the way of business. "What a fool honesty is," as he justly says! We believe him when he tells us that but for that interfering old gentleman he would have had every purse from every pocket. But he can turn the interruption itself to profit as we can see in the next scene, for fortune is with him: "If I had a mind to be honest, I see fortune would not suffer me." So he lives on knavery to the very last. And when he can no longer lie for himself we find his victims ready to lie for him: "I'll swear to the prince thou art a tall fellow of thy hands and that thou wilt not be drunk: but I know thou art no tall fellow of thy hands and that thou wilt be drunk," and we feel that the respectful servant-like answer, which is his last word in the play, is simply a paving of the way to new rascalities. There are many better men in Shakespeare than Autolycus but few more amusing and none more alive.

There is no need to relate the praises of Perdita or Hermione or Paulina. How much more they and their story interest us than ever the story of *Cymbeline* does! There is much repetition. All turns again on a falsely jealous husband. But here there is no lachimo. Leontes is fool and knave by nature and without cause: he needs no tempter. The end is again a resolute bestowal of universal happiness. Shakespeare has often shown the way to Scott, and never more than in these last plays, which are rather like novels, and always give the last words to the fairy godmother as Scott did in all his novels but one. Here, too, is the quiet beginning, with a conversation between secondary characters, which both Shakespeare and Scott used so often and so

effectively. What a masterly scene it is! How easily and naturally it does that difficult business of exposition, telling us all we want to know before the real action begins! And what a pleasant piece of humour it ends with; an exactly English touch! Another thing may be noted, which once more has genuine English quality about it. There are many repetitions everywhere in Shakespeare—and nowhere more than in *Cymbeline*—of the very dubious aristocratic faith that nobly-born children, brought up obscurely and in ignorance of their birth, will yet be sure to show marks of their quality by natural courage, generosity and the like. Probably Shakespeare took this doctrine quite half-seriously; his was an aristocratic age. But he has his moments for laughing at it, and never a pleasanter one than in the last act here, with the Clown boasting that he was "a gentleman born" before his father, because the royal personage spoke to him first, called him "brother," and drew from him "the first gentleman-like tears" he ever shed. The long and short of it all is that, if we cast the cares of probability aside, there are few richer plays than this, with its fullness of adventure, poetry, nature, humour, and love.

And now for the last of all, *The Tempest*, which came first, for some reason, in the Folio. It was certainly played at Court in 1613 and perhaps in 1611, so that it follows close upon its predecessors. Shakespeare was not an old man when he wrote it; indeed, he never lived to be old. But he may have been a tired man after his prodigious labours. Anyhow, for the remaining three or four years of his life he seems to have written little, living more at his ease, and mainly at Stratford, where as we know he died in 1616, aged fifty-two. Do we see any signs of a good-bye to the stage in *The Tempest*? There is, in my opinion, as I have several times said, no

critical road more treacherous than that which attempts to cross the gulf between imaginative work and biography or history. To find France or Spain, Mary Queen of Scots or Henry of Navarre, in the dramas is to find what no one seems to have found at the time, and what is not at all likely to be there. Nor are they wise who look behind the tragedies to find dark ladies or other private unhappinesses of the poet's life. But I confess that it seems to me less unlikely—I will not put it higher—that in creating Prospero Shakespeare had some at least occasional thoughts of himself. What is Prospero? He is a magician who has lived in a dream and attended by spirits, but now breaks his staff and utters two solemn farewells to the world of visions which he is forsaking for the ordinary life of men. Could Shakespeare, even if the least self-conscious of all poets, have escaped thinking of himself as he wrote Prospero's

Our revels now are ended; these our actors  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air?

And if the wonderful lines which follow only repeat with greater magnificence a thought which the poet had often expressed before, could he write them at that time without some interior and personal application? He was retiring from his life's work and accepting the fact that his best years were past. Could he fail to be thinking, at least a little, of himself, of the unreality and swift passing of life, not as a general truth but as a personal experience, as he put on his paper such words as:

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.

Other signs of a last work have been discovered in *The Tempest*. There is, of course, the air of a final serenity, goodness and peace, which it carries even further than *Cymbeline* and *Winter's Tale*. All sins are forgiven; all lost lives restored. The delicious lyrics breathe beauty in every line. The last word of all, in the Epilogue, is of the prayer which frees all faults, covering them with mercy. It is true that the line is light and the application half humorous. And it is true that the verses are not remarkable and have often been given to some inferior hand. But they are not inferior to many undoubted lines of Shakespeare; and, if they are very inferior to Shelley's "Ariel to Miranda," which plainly owes much to them in metre and in manner too, it is to be remembered that an Epilogue is not a love-poem or a lyric, but only a quiet and pleasant dismissal of a playhouse audience. Other critics have seen farewell, and perhaps apology, in the observance here of the unity of time. That is probably fanciful. But it is at least curious that in his last play the free and lawless Shakespeare should have kept strictly to the unity of time and not travelled far away from that of place. Whatever the reason for the new severity it can hardly be a mere accident, for the dramatist himself calls attention several times to the "three hours"<sup>15</sup> which are all the action needs.

Certainly if this be a repentance there are no others. The story is as "romantic" as ever. It is made up of crime and miracle and love at first sight. And Shakespeare has kept to the end his liking for what seem to

us very dull jests like those which pass between Stephano and Trinculo. The "exposition" of the previous story given by Prospero to Ariel is so artless that the only possible defence for it is that of Mr. Puff. There seems no reason at all why Gonzalo should discourse on what he would do if he were king of the island, except that Shakespeare has lately been reading Florio's Montaigne and been struck by a passage in it which he wished to quote. And if Ferdinand and Miranda are among the most convincing as well as among the most charming of Shakespeare's young lovers, not so much can be said for Prospero who plays so much more important a part in the action. Shakespeare has put into his mouth some of the finest speeches in all the plays. He evidently means him to be a "good" character. Yet he is extremely, very disagreeably, cruel to Caliban, and even to Ferdinand and Ariel. Is this just Shakespeare's carelessness? Or is it possible that he meant to hint at a deterioration of character caused by the use of magic?

Still, "of these trifles enough," as Johnson says at the end of his long note on spirits and the black art to be found in the old Variorum Edition of this play. No defects of detail can alter the fact that *The Tempest* is a miracle of poetry and romance, and therefore just the play to be the last word of the man who put more of these qualities into drama than any other dramatist who ever lived. It is far from being the greatest of his plays. There is in it scarcely anything either of his humour or of his supreme tragic intensity. But, apart from them, it has all the things which have made his theatre so popular all over the world. It is at once a police story, a love story, and a story of royal rivalry and intrigue; and it is a spectacle of loveliness and ugliness, shipwreck and murder, magicians and fairies, all seen on an island set somewhere in unknown seas, whose only native is the

sort of monster that crowds pay their shillings to see. And all this variety of rather crude business is recoined in the gold of Shakespeare's poetry, which is also Shakespeare's truth, and so made into a thing in which we can believe as well as take delight, which is followed not only by eye and ear but by heart and mind and imagination, at first with a sort of ecstasy of pleasure, at last with the quietness of rest and content. We English rest in it, too, as being what seems to us very English, full of poetry and love, romance and freedom and the sea. There is nowhere any more English figure than the Boatswain with whom it begins; and it ends with Prospero's

Be free and fare thou well,

or, if you like, with the "set me free" which are the last three words of the Epilogue. No unfit words, either of them, for the freest of poets to use as his farewell to the freest of peoples.









