

Shakespeare Tercentenary: 1616-1916

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Massinger

HE DIVINED LIFE, HE DID NOT MERELY COPY IT

Shakespeare Did Not Simply Report His Own Emotions; He Had the Power of Visualizing All from a Hint, and Vitalizing It

Written for The New York Times by Sir Sidney Lee

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth
to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's
pen

Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy
nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That, if it would but apprehend some joy,
It comprehends some bringer of that joy.

THE creative imagination is the main implement in Shakespeare's workshop. The potential quality of his imagination may be measured as efficiency as anywhere by his dramatic interpretation of merely fanciful entities. Puck and Ariel owe nothing of their triumph to their identity with the concrete aspects of life, yet Shakespeare's dramatic intuition enables him to give palpable creatures of admitted unreality as vivid a significance and individuality as men and women of recognizable physical lineaments. The dramatic spirit of life is as strong in Puck as in Bottom, in Ariel as in Prospero. The poet's imagination endows with the convincing semblance of life airy conceptions which were never touched by the same vitality before or since. Well might Alexandre Dumas, the prince of romancers, declare that "after God, Shakespeare has created most." The Frenchman pays a just tribute to the creative force of Shakespeare's imagination.

It goes without saying that the dramatist did far more than "turn to shapes" "the forms of things unknown." Observation of the life passing before his eyes provided his imagination with the largest part of the material which might serve a dramatic purpose. The activities and experiences of the men and women with whom he enjoyed personal intercourse chiefly fed the crucible of his imagination. It was mainly the humanity breathing around him which kindled his dramatic fire. The confessed aim of drama was, in his own terminology, to mirror nature. There is no possibility of misunderstanding Hamlet's definition of "the purpose of playing." The "end" of drama, the Prince of Denmark insists, "both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature." It is an inevitable corollary that a playwright and actor should combine to "show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."

The hastiest analysis of Shakespeare's imaginative power detects alike in it and in the fiction which clothes it a visualizing or a mirroring property of magical sensitiveness. I have already compared Shakespeare's mind to a highly sensitized photographic plate, which need only be exposed, for however brief a period, to anything in life in order to receive upon its surface the firm outline of a picture which could be developed and reproduced at will. If Shakespeare's eye lighted in an alehouse on a burly, good-humored toper, the conception of a Falstaff found instantaneous admission to his brain. The character had revealed itself to him in most of its involutions as soon as his eye caught sight of the external form and his ear caught the sound of the voice. No syllable which is set by the dramatist on Falstaff's lips fails to enforce the illusion of a vivid reflection or reproduction of reality. For the careful student scores of Shakespeare's characters are as graphically delineated as Falstaff, and of all of them will the same diagnosis hold.

No formidable difficulty is presented by the fact that only a proportion of Shakespeare's great dramatic personae bear English names or claim English parentage. Juliet, Othello, Iago, Ethelred, Caliban, Cleopatra, Iachimo show obvious traces of alien kinship. It may be that the dramatist's main concern was with the essential features of humanity at large. None the less was he alive to the distinguishing marks of race.

No travel outside England diversified Shakespeare's career. But Elizabethan London offered his imaginative faculty opportunities of visualizing and mirroring most of the broad variations of racial temperament. Types of well-nigh all mankind were gathered within the city's walls. Apart from the diplomatic circle, where all the civilized States of Europe were actively represented, the ranks of English art, medicine, commerce, and highly skilled labor were in constant process of reinforcement and replenishment by alien immigrants. Although the London populace of the day cherished a healthy contempt for men or women of alien origin, they were governed by an immense curiosity, which kept their interest alert and made them in common practice tolerant of the stranger in their midst. Scarcely a race on the world's surface did not contribute to the sum of London's guests. Even explorers of hitherto undiscovered countries brought back with them specimens of the aboriginal native. Many Red Indians, Eskimos, African negroes, and Moors came from time to time within the view of the homekeeping Elizabethan Londoner. Shakespeare had opportunities of meeting with Caliban and Othello face to face on English soil.

Yet Shakespeare's observation of the persons and things of his environment failed to furnish his imagination with all its nourishment. There were, besides, the fancies floating in the mind, "the forms of things unknown," which found expression in Ariel or Puck, in "Macbeth's" witches or in "Hamlet's" ghost. Even so, the stores of suggestion of which Shakespeare's imagination took toll were far from exhausted. The reading of books reinforced

the observation of life and the investiture with "a local habitation and a name" of "airy nothings."

Shakespeare joined to the power of realizing or materializing his fancy the intellectual faculty of thoroughly assimilating, not only what he observed, but what he read. His imagination absorbed the fruits of reading as readily as the fruits of living observation. The reader's assimilative capacity immensely widened the dramatist's vision and strengthened the fibres of his intellect. Shakespeare's capacity of assimilating literature was indeed as spacious and as potent as his capacity of assimilating life. The estimate which is formed of the hero, Posthumus, in the play of "Cymbeline," is capable of a literal application to the dramatist himself:

All the learnings that his time
Could make him the receiver of, he took
As we do air, fast as 'twas ministered,
And in 's Spring became a harvest.
(Cymbeline, I, 1, 43-46.)

Proofs of Shakespeare's "learnings" lie on the surface of all his work, whether one examines the matter or the manner. Save in the case of his earliest comedy, "Love's Labour's Lost," he never invented a plot. In the series of his English history plays, there is no kingly hero, and scarcely a subsidiary historical character, whose portrait was not previously drawn by an earlier dramatist. Shakespeare was constantly

criticism cannot ignore the suggestion which his dramatic work owed to the literary composition of others. He walked in numberless paths to which his reading guided him.

"The truest poetry," said Touchstone, "is the most feigning." The saying may seem a hard one, yet a little reflection attests its validity. In dramatic poetry, at any rate, the writer produces an illusion of fidelity to life and truth by virtue of his capacity to feign, by dint of his ability to conjure up as in a mirror the convincing semblance of reality. Touchstone's aphorism is interpreted harmoniously with all that is known of the operation of Shakespeare's imaginative faculty, whereby he hewed his drama partly out of the "airy nothings" of his fancy, and to a large degree out of his observation of literature as well as life.

A school of criticism has lately arisen which claims that well nigh every sentiment and sensation which Shakespeare dramatically feigned is a piece of the poet's private emotion; and that his work finally resolves itself into a massive series of autobiographic revelations or transcripts of personal experience. The "real Shakespeare" of the modern impressionist critic is the prey in his own being of the passions which he dramatically delineates. He is the private owner of the dramatic world. According to this strange verdict, a private experience of gargantuan dimensions and variety supercedes, in the analysis of Shakespeare's achievement, the imaginative or the "feigning" faculty which is nourished on mere play of fancy or on observation of literature and of the life outside one's self.

Such a diagnosis of Shakespeare's genius is of comparatively recent date. The seed appears to have been sown some seventy years ago by Emerson, when he wrote of Shakespeare: "We have [in his plays] his recorded convictions on those questions



Sir Henry Irving as Hamlet.

Collection of William Winter

"The end of drama, the Prince of Denmark insists, 'both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature.'"

bringing his imagination and his dramatic faculty to bear on both the literary and the dramatic product of other pens.

In truth Shakespeare rarely experiments with themes of which earlier playwrights or novelists or historians had not already made trial. No question of plagiarism arises, nor is it adequate to assert, in Dr. Johnson's phrase, that the dramatist "touched nothing which he did not adorn." He metamorphoses well nigh all that he draws from his literary study into something that may justly be reckoned to be without precise precedent. He borrows long speeches from the standard English rendering of Plutarch as from Holinshed's chronicles, but by subtle retrenchments and expansions of phrase he imparts to the whole a novel significance. All the outlines of the stories of "Romeo and Juliet" and "Twelfth Night" come undisguised from popular pieces of Italian fiction which enjoyed a worldwide vogue. But Shakespeare broadens the interest by introducing new subsidiary characters from the range of his living observation; while the old characters and situations glow in his pages with a dramatic fire and veracity which are all his own. Never is he a slavish disciple of any authority. Although the great efforts of "Othello," "King Lear," "Measure for Measure," "The Winter's Tale," were immediately based on pre-existing literature, the catastrophe in each case is completely refashioned so that the plots and characters acquire under Shakespeare's hand a wholly fresh potency. None the less, when every allowance has been made for the magical workings of Shakespeare's imaginative faculty, enlightened



The Immortal Light of Genius.

Painted by Thomas Nast for Sir Henry Irving. Courtesy of Cyril West.

which knock for answer at every heart. . . . What trait of his private mind has he hidden in his dramas?" No one would question Emerson's fine enthusiasm, nor should he be blamed for the extravagance of his disciples. Yet it is hardly possible to absolve him altogether of a misapprehension of the primary values of dramatic art. Robert Browning, a psychologist and dramatist of no mean order, adequately confutes Emerson's main allegation when, in his poem "At the Mermaid," he made Shakespeare dramatically taunt his critics with the interrogation:

Which of you did I enable
Once to slip inside my breast,
There to catalogue and label
What I like least, what love best?
The dramatist's imaginative faculty so



"If Shakespeare's eye lighted in an alehouse on a burly, good-humored toper"—
The result: Falstaff and Doll Tearsheet.
Doll. Ah, you sweet little rogue, you! Alas, poor ape, how thou sweetest; come, let me wipe thy face.
Collection of Emil F. Beguebing. Painted by Henry Fuseli.

works as to produce a convincing illusion, which is indistinguishable from truth—the illusion that his characters are disclosing to us all the secrets of their minds and hearts. Of necessity their emotions and sentiments are irreconcilable one with another. Their protean shapes are obviously "more inconstant than the wind." However wide the interval which separates Shakespeare from ordinary men, it may safely be denied that a mortal being could combine in any literal sense within the

dramatic poetry knows little. In lyric poetry the poet claims to speak in his own person, and his claim may be often admitted without demur. But there is justification for Browning's plea that the affluence and ceaseless activity of Shakespeare's dramatic faculty brought his lyric effort of the Sonnets in a large degree under the control of drama. The Sonnets give to "reader an illusion of personal confession, but many poet-critics besides Browning have detected in these poems of meditative

the murderer in both plays are depicted with rarest and firmest pencil, and betray the loftiest inspiration of dramatic genius. Yet who would venture to suggest that Shakespeare knew and learned from private experience of murder, or from any personal murderous propensity, the smallest hint for his intimate portrayal of the sentiment governing men and women in the actual perpetration of a murderous crime? His power of vitalizing murderous moods might well throw light on his treatment of other emotions of drama, might well suggest that the dramatic sentiment lay outside the scope of his personal activities or experiences.

Shakespeare's biography credits him with the normal share of human passion, anxiety, and responsibility. But no great emotional crisis arrested the even tenor of his way, which made for a normal sort of happiness and prosperity. The quality and amount of his work offer the surest confirmation of his habitual placidity and self-possession. It could not well be otherwise. No prolonged series of triumphs in dramatic art is possible for one who is repeatedly enslaved by colossal agitation of feeling, by overwhelming ebullitions of passion.

In tragic drama, at any rate, the poet relies for his success on the pliancy of his imaginative faculty, on the capacity to imagine passion rather than to feel it. He is the spectator of the passionate tumult, and not an actor in it. He is a student of emotion whose presentation he tempers with rhythm and measure. He reproduces passion not as it is, but so as to create the irresistible illusion of truth. The flashes of imaginative realism which seem to give his words all the vigor of nature attest his power of modulating language and of fitting it exactly to thought and feeling.

Shakespeare was reminding the dramatist no less than the actor of the primary principles of his art in the famous adjuration: "In the very tempest, and, as I might say, whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness." "Temperance" and "smoothness" are fundamental conditions of lasting dramatic effect. No court of appeal is likely to reverse the judgment on the point which was pronounced a few years ago by M. René Doumic of the French Academy. M. Doumic wrote: "L'artiste n'est pas celui qui a ressentit davantage, mais celui qui est le mieux donné, pour imaginer des états de sensibilité et pour en réaliser l'expression." ("The artist is not the man who has felt the most, but he who is the best endowed to imagine states of feeling, and to give reality to the expression of them.")

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