

II

AS A MAN THINKS

ABOUT the facts of Shakespeare's life his writings tell us little, about what he thought his writings tell us much. At least that is the belief of this writer.

In seeking and stating some of Shakespeare's personal and particular ways of looking at the world, the writer has not even a diminishing hope that he shall escape the contradictions into which nearly all writers about Shakespeare are sooner or later betrayed. A Scotsman who was asked if he had convinced his adversary in an argument replied, "Na, but I got in a fine glow."

This writer has glowed so often during the long years over the Shakespearean pages that rather more for his own satisfaction than for the enlightenment of the world, contemporaneous or posterity, he commits to paper a few of his impressions, well aware that the views are assailable, though he hopes and believes not arbitrary—views long in the forming, and hereinafter stated only in fragments.

It has long seemed to the writer a wanton waste of time to "read things into Shakespeare." It requires all one's acumen to read a few things out of Shakespeare.

Unlike Croce and Stoll, the writer is not afraid of being too subtle in his attempt to interpret a little of Shakespeare's "mind and art" (to use Doctor Dowden's phrase). He is convinced that neither he nor anybody else can be more subtle than Shakespeare. His only misgiving is lest his

subtlety may not be cut from the same bolt as Shakespeare's subtlety.¹

He is in entire agreement with Doctor Stoll about the folly of regarding the Shakespearean characters as actual, self-existent creatures. Of all misleading critical attitudes that is the worst. In the nineteenth century it led to a wilderness of foolish, sentimental writing, sometimes by closet students, sometimes by actors and actresses.

The players were excusable. After an actress has played the rôle of Rosalind many times it must seem to her, if she has a competent brain and imagination, that Rosalind is an actual young woman, with some strikingly modern traits (whatever is true to the life is and must be always "modern"). To the late Ellen Terry, whose supreme stage triumph was in *Merchant of Venice*, Portia must often have seemed more real than the people in the boxes and orchestra stalls.

This is a harmless illusion for one's self. It becomes mischievous only when one makes the illusion the starting point for critical commentary.

Probably the completest products of character creation in the English language are Falstaff, Hamlet, and Cleopatra, three people who seem to exist more by right of their own being than through the deliberate process of a fictionist's creation.² But even they are not real people. They are

¹Croce says: "He was less subtle but more profound, less involved, but more complex and more great than they [the critics]." *Ariosto, Shakespeare and Corneille*, p. 334. Also Stoll, *passim*, in monographs and *Shakespeare Studies*, protests against subtleties of nineteenth century critics.

²Schücking, *Character Problems*, pp. 119-144, would not agree to this inclusion of Cleopatra, for he finds an incurable lesion between the representations of her in the first three and the last two acts: "attempts to prove that the Cleopatra of the last two acts bears the same physiognomy as that of the first part of the play must . . . be regarded, for the most part, as failures." Unhappily, dramatic criticism is not a science; the critic is often reduced to

results of Shakespeare's shaping imagination playing over or brooding upon some raw material which he found in books or old plays or in his observations of the human comedy in London and the countryside.

The present writer cannot go with Doctor Stoll in dismissing as absurd the idea that Shakespeare's creatures sometimes got away from him. Many lesser writers, varying from Thackeray downward, have testified that their fictitious characters did things quite unexpectedly to the authors themselves. Thackeray leaned back in his chair and marveled at what had happened when his pen wrote that Becky "admired" her husband when he made the physical assault on Lord Stein, even at the moment when Rawdon's appearance and attack were bringing all Becky's house in ruin down about her ears.

The present writer confesses that in 1917 he found corroboration of his own ideas on this little mystery of character creation in Professor E. H. Wright's essay on "*Reality and*

an expression of his own reactions. This writer cannot agree with Professor Schücking's impressive analysis of the failure of the poet to unify Cleopatra, to keep faith with Plutarch and the poet's own purpose. Schücking declares that the Cleopatra of the early acts is unqueenly, of the later acts queenly. But in the later acts she is no more the formal queen who "gives audiences" and "exercises the functions of her high office" than in the early acts. She is still, as she herself says, "No more, but e'en a woman, and commanded by such poor passion as the maid that milks and does the meanest chares." When Antony is dead she realizes, even as Schücking says, that she tried her tricks and perversities on Antony once too often. She had it given out that she had committed suicide. Hearing this, Antony does what Cleopatra pretended she had done. Now it is all over. The color has gone out of life. The world is empty. With one more flash of her incurable egotism she dies as a *Roman* would die. Schücking sums it up: "Donning her regal garments and placing her crown upon her head, she chooses rather to die with her majesty unsullied." In "this woman who now is inwardly as well as outwardly a queen" Schücking finds no resemblance to "the harlot of the first part." But is not this demanding that Cleopatra's conduct be logical? Her only logic is illogicality. Her essence is "infinite variety." Shakespeare has created not two different women in the two halves of the play, but one woman of multiple personalities.

Inconsistency in Shakespeare's Characters,"¹ and that in the years that have lapsed he has not ceased to be grateful to Professor Wright for that essay. He takes his stand with Wright and Herford in that view that, while the characters are the products of the pen, not of the breath of God, the characters probably did some things quite unanticipated by Shakespeare when he began to create them. In this little controversy this writer is against Doctor Stoll who pronounces such commentary "an unscholarly, untenable point of view."²

Surely Professor Stoll himself has experienced the self-surprise of finding something going down on his page quite unexpectedly. So brilliant a writer as he cannot always keep to the prescribed syllabus. Only wooden writers do that.

Woodrow Wilson, both before and after he became President of the United States, used to laugh and say: "I catch myself in animated conversation or in the warmth of public speaking saying 'I have often thought thus and so,' when I really have never thought it before"—meaning not that he intentionally said what was untrue, but that in the first impact of the thought, the impression seemed so true, so "inevitable" (to use Wordsworth's expression) that it produced the effect of having always been a part of his thought. If these surprises occur in conversation, expository public speech, in the creations of novelists, even in the writing of literary commentary, why doubt that Shakespeare himself was sometimes surprised by a character saying something which he had not beforehand planned?

When Goneril in the supreme crisis of her life gasps "An interlude!"³ her laconic exclamation says more than torrents

¹*Shaksperian Studies*, by Members of the Department of English and Comparative Literature, Columbia University Press, 1916.

²*Ibid.*, p. 120 and footnote.

³*King Lear*, Act V, sc. 3, line 89.

of speech, and it is not fanciful to suppose that that effective stroke was an inspiration of the moment rather than a pre-calculated item in a prefatory scenario.

When in the last scene of *Othello*, Iago is led back a prisoner where Desdemona and Emilia are dead because of Iago's villainy and when he is brought face to face with the woe-tortured Othello, it is a plausible assumption that it was a poet's momentary inspiration which prompted Shakespeare to put into Othello's mouth the gorgeous line, "I look down toward his feet, but that's a fable." Iago has feet, not the hoofs of the conventional devil.

Sometimes these momentary inspirations led to surface inconsistencies, and sometimes they led to real inconsistencies. Sometimes the inconsistencies are no more than the inconsistencies natural to human beings tossed to and fro on the waves of their own emotions—emotion is seldom logical.

Sometimes the inconsistencies are inexplicable on any other theory than that of Doctor Stoll that Shakespeare simply overlooked the inconsistency. Again there is the case of Thackeray who killed off an old lady in one chapter and forgetting that he had done so brought her back in a later chapter blithely alive. Thackeray caught his error when he edited his serial for a bound novel. Sometimes Shakespeare never caught his errors at all, or if he did, the printers and editors had not access to the revised manuscript.

Doctor Stoll offers the only realistic and plausible suggestion for the statement in Iago's second speech in *Othello* that Cassio has a wife, though no wife appears in the play or is ever referred to again, namely that Shakespeare found in Cinthio's story on which he founded the play that Cassio had a wife, then as the play proceeded he realized that no wife was necessary to the story as he was dramatizing it, omitted further reference to this negligible lady and simply

forgot that he had mentioned her in the twenty-first line of the play. To which may be added the speculation that possibly in repeated performances of the play Shakespeare may have instructed the actor who played Iago to omit the line which refers to Cassio's wife (the line can be dropped without marring the effect of the speech—indeed dropping it “tightens up” the speech) but failed to delete the line in the script. Other oversights are not so easily explained away—are indeed among the things which Ben Jonson may have had in mind when he fervently wished that Shakespeare had “blotted” (that is to say erased) many lines from his plays. Shakespeare was not infallible.

The present writer takes these characters, then, as products of a man's imagination and pen, not as results of a divine fiat, takes them in their flaws as well as their merits, and comments on them accordingly. With all his admiration of Shakespeare he is under no obligation to defend Shakespeare's art. It is great enough as it stands in its defects and triumphs. It is a better defense of itself than any commentator can make of it.

But the writer purposes to go beyond this to permit himself liberty of assumption that Shakespeare's own thoughts may be detected here and there, especially when the same thought is repeated in many different situations through the mouths of many different characters.

Among the false proverbs about Shakespeare is that he “never repeats himself.” He repeats himself continually. And in the very repetitions there is a suggestion of an echo of Shakespeare's own personal thoughts. He was one of the most objective of writers, but being such did not inhibit him from sometimes taking the liberty of saying the things which he, William Shakespeare, really believed.

Here this writer is about to part company with the valu-

able, modern, realistic, historical criticism for whose corrective touch he is grateful. He is going to comment a little on the philosophy, yes and even the psychology, of the plays and poems. In defense he can say only that for at least thirty years the plays of Shakespeare have seemed to him, in his personal experiences and in his observations of the experiences of others, so apt a commentary on human life, individual and in association with other lives, that he cannot divest himself of the conception that there is in the plays a rather definite point of view, a very real philosophy. Not a philosophy which can be reduced to categories, but a philosophy which fits the facts of human experience rather better than does most formalized philosophy, better even than other philosophy in literary form with which this writer is acquainted, excepting only the philosophy of the Bible—which exception he makes not to square himself with orthodoxy but simply because the Bible really is superior to Shakespeare as a philosophy of life.

Shakespeare probably had little deliberate intention to philosophize, no intention to teach. He was by profession and by practice a showman. Wordsworth said, "I wish either to be considered as a teacher or as nothing," but it is because he happened to be a poet (sometimes) that his teaching has survived. Practical Shakespeare doubtless wished the theatre-going public to regard him primarily as a showman. But it happened that he also was a poet, and it also happened that he was a bit of a philosopher. When philosophy touches the issues of life and death it trenches on the solemnity of a sermon though the poet-philosopher had no sermonic intention. Colonel Robert Ingersoll told young Miss Marlowe: "Julia, *Macbeth* is the greatest sermon that was ever preached," and the more Miss Marlowe studied the play the more she became impressed by its solemn lessons.

It would not have been a great play if Shakespeare had written it deliberately to warn people against unbridled ambition. Few poets except Dante have contrived deliberately to weld dogma and art—Milton was imperfectly successful. But *Macbeth* would not be one of the most famous things in literature (the bane of schoolboys, the marvel of poets and ponderers) if it had not carried between the lines lessons applicable to people in the clutch of any temptation. It is a parable not only for potential murderers, but for all who are tempted to let their imaginations play with forbidden things.

Even after it was finished Shakespeare was not necessarily fully aware of its universal and terrific applicability. We cannot know what Shakespeare thought about that. All that is clear is that he felt no obligation to put the "lesson" or "sermon" in permanent form for posterity, for the careless Shakespeare (so careful about temporal things, like real estate investments, so careless about perpetuating his dramatic work) left it to the hazards of chance, died with *Macbeth* unprinted. It was not published until seven years after his death when his old friends Heminges and Condell coöperated with the publisher Jaggard to issue a collective edition of Shakespeare's plays.

But Emerson, something of an artist as well as a philosopher, refers to people "who builded better than they knew." If we take sonnet 29 as an expression of Shakespeare's personal feeling, it would seem that he was aware of that other side of art, its incapacity to express all the artist conceived (its "grasp" falling short of its "reach," as Browning put it) :

Desiring this man's art and that man's scope
With what I most enjoy contented least,

wrote Shakespeare in the sonnet.

Whether there is anything in his writing expressing the Emersonian ideas, the writer of this essay does not now recall, but so it is perhaps with every real artist, he "buildd better than he knew."

Sonnet 55 opens in a boastful strain:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme.

Shakespeare seems to have set some store by his non-dramatic poetry, but seems not to have anticipated posterity poring over his plays.

Yet the plays live: partly because they are good shows, partly because they are good poetry, partly because they are sound wisdom.

With all their tricks of the trade, the theatrical trade, a trade and the tricks thereof known better to no showman of the time than to Shakespeare, with all their shocking violations of character credibility, with all their mechanical soliloquies, such as those of Richard the Third, some of Iago's, and, worst of all, the soliloquy with which Prince Hal closes the second scene of the first act of the first part of *King Henry the Fourth*, with all the theatrical "business," with all that and much else that is arbitrary and artificial there is in the plays something which looks so much like psychology that the present writer accepts it as such—even in the face of Professor Stoll's protests.

Giving a name to a thing is not inventing it. Apples had been falling to the ground a long time before Sir Isaac Newton worked out a "law" of gravitation. Pendulous objects had been swaying a long time before Galileo stated the principle of the pendulum. There were operations of the human mind in normal and abnormal conditions a long time before the word "psychology" was coined. And though Shakespeare never heard the word he sometimes wrote with

a penetrating understanding of the phenomena which the word connotes. Indeed he wrote so perceivingly that some modern psychologists turn to his pages to illustrate principles.

The present writer made this discovery two or three years ago when he was meditating a different sort of work than this on Shakespeare, a profounder work.

He had studied psychology so long ago that it was called "metaphysics." He had read that old classic, now out of print, *The Mad Folk of Shakespeare*, by Doctor Bucknell, a specialist in mental diseases before the word "psychiatry" had been invented. He had read many articles on abnormal psychology in Shakespeare, some in transactions of The Shakespeare Society, some by medical men, some by laymen in the Variorum edition,¹ but had dropped all this long ago. Circumstances however renewed his interest in psychic phenomena in Shakespeare's plays and he meditated a little book on the subject, knowing it would be an amateurish book, but hoping that it might provoke someone better qualified to write a better book.

Being psychologically out of date he collected and read some modern books on the subject merely as background for his undertaking, hoping at most to find some scientific support for his preconceptions of Shakespeare's intuitive understanding of cerebral and nervous phenomena. He discovered that some of the most "hard-boiled" modern psychologists while reporting clinical cases—Mr. A., Mrs. B., Miss X., analyzed and discussed Lady Macbeth, Lear, and Hamlet as "cases." It seemed a professional corroboration of his naïf suspicion.

Then an eminent New York psychiatrist made the un-

¹Especially in the Variorum edition of *Hamlet*, edited by H. H. Furness, vol. II, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1877 and 1905, pp. 195-235.

solicited and astonishing statement that "only in the last fifteen years has psychiatry caught up with Shakespeare." Not even Coleridge ever said anything seemingly more exaggerative. It out-eulogized the Shakespeare eulogists. It would be a worthless remark from a mere litterateur, but the source made it interesting—a renowned, practicing physician, a man of science, young enough to get the most recent points of view in his specialty, old enough to have examined and treated thousands of patients in this country and abroad during the strain of the Great War, professional enough to assess mental phenomena, sufficiently a lover of books to have read Shakespeare attentively.

Which last remark calls for another. Prior to this professional testimony, another famous specialist in nervous and mental diseases had told the writer that "Shakespeare's madmen are merely stage madmen." This seemed to cut the ground from under the presuppositions of the amateur until he discovered that the great physician knew about all that was knowable concerning flesh-and-blood madmen but knew very little about Shakespeare. In his busy life of practice and study and writing of scientific articles he had found no leisure to read Shakespeare attentively.

Evidently the prerequisites for a modern book on Shakespearean abnormal psychology—the sort of book the amateur had hoped he might outrage some specialist into writing—are knowledge both of Shakespeare and abnormal psychology. What this writer had intended to make into a book is only a "trace of color" in the present writing. The evidence is overwhelming that in some way, God knows how, this extraordinary Shakespeare got an insight into processes of brain and emotion which singularly resemble some of the most modern findings.

Shakespeare wrote as a poet, not as a specialist, had

intuitions where a specialist has knowledge, could diagnose nobody, but could create people out of his imagination and observation whom modern men of science "explain."

One with a Shakespearean insight may know human nature in the concrete so well as to illustrate in anticipation the discoveries of the psychiatrists, psychologists and philosophers. And that is precisely what Shakespeare seems to have done.

Certainly Shakespeare never heard of the "inferiority complex," and maybe the next generation of psychologists will deny that such a phenomenon exists. Nevertheless Prince Hamlet, strong and at the same time weak ("a strength girt round with weakness," as Shelley called himself), urged from without and within to a severe duty, but baffled by a depressive sense of his own inadequacy, behaves as if he were afflicted with whatever the ailment is which at present is called the "inferiority complex." Whatever the truth about the "subconscious self," or whether there is a subconscious self, Lady Macbeth behaves as people sometimes actually behave after a profound nervous shock of which they were unconscious when the shock came to them.

After all, and Doctor Stoll to the contrary notwithstanding, it seems to this writer that besides an author's deliberate intention there are other meanings in his work. Long ago James Russell Lowell observed that Dante means different things when approached from different angles. That is indisputable. The devout Roman Catholic and the avowed agnostic find meanings in *The Divine Comedy*, but the meanings are not the same.

Professor Stoll is severe in his criticism of this attitude. Satisfied that Shakespeare intended in Shylock a comic villain, he is ironical about the modernized "pathetic" Shylock, as Professor Brander Matthews and others ("the number of

them is fewer than it used to be," says Stoll) would make it. With quiet sarcasm Stoll says, as if paraphrasing those who would "modernize" Shakespeare's meanings: "What Shakespeare intended does not much matter—what matters is what he did—and we have as good a right as Shakespeare to our opinions of Shylock, though [quoting Professor Matthews] 'the comic aspects of Shylock have disappeared from our modern vision and the pathetic interest of the desolate figure is now most obvious.'¹ Art then ceases to be a means of communication from soul to soul, the author and his meaning are a matter of indifference, and there is really no work of interpretation, but only of expatiation to do. Apart from Shakespeare's opinion, what Shylock is there? One wonders bewildered."²

This is tonic. This is the strong wind of reality, blowing away the fogs of metaphysical and willful modernization. But sometimes the wind blows too hard, destroys.

Are there really no overtones in literary art? Is there really only one meaning in art, and that the artist's explicit meaning? Must everyone get precisely the author's meaning, or no meaning at all? A child and its mother witnessing a performance of Maeterlinck's *Bluebird*—do they get the same meaning from the episode of the little blue children impatient to be aboard the galley of life, and the song of the waiting mothers in the distance? Which gets Maeterlinck's meaning—the child or the mother? Either? Both? Neither?

Undoubtedly, the ground is more solid under the feet of the historical commentator when he is learned and competent, like Professor Stoll. But are the horizons, possibly, narrower?

¹*Shakespeare as a Playwright*, by Brander Matthews, Scribner's, 1913, p. 151.

²*Shakespeare Studies*, pp. 331–332.

Shakespeare's comic Shylock (assuming that Shakespeare kept consistently to his initial conception, and drew nothing but a comic Shylock) is not very interesting on the modern stage, if one may judge from having witnessed Ben Greet's performance of Shylock as comedy. Must there be no Shylock, then, on the modern stage? Grant that David Warfield's Shylock was oversentimentalized, that Henry Irving's Shylock was too realistic a Jew of the Ghetto, that half a dozen lesser Shylocks have been inadequate, what of Edwin Booth's Shylock? Doctor Stoll is scarcely old enough to have seen Booth as Shylock, but we who did see the performance know that, without altering the lines, Booth presented an unforgettable Shylock who was not comic.

This writer must believe that the greater Shakespearean plays have wider significances than were always perceived by Shakespeare's contemporary audiences, that there are surplusages of meaning in them when read in the light of widened human experience. Why this should be so, the writer does not undertake to say, for, being an old-fashioned person, he accepts the old-fashioned view that, after all our fresh biological learning, the mystery of genius still remains a mystery. Eugenics can do much, but eugenics cannot breed Shakespeares—at least not yet.

In a longer book which this writer hopes to perpetrate he purposes to argue out the thesis, with plentiful supporting citations from the plays, that not only by repetitions but also by the "drift" of Shakespeare's writings, it becomes more than plausible that Shakespeare, with all his flaming genius, was essentially conservative, in his dramatic technique, and in his political, judicial, ethical, and religious views.

That he was conservative in his dramatic technique is demonstrable from his practice when that is studied against the background of Elizabethan-Jacobean stage usage. He

was not an innovator, like Ben Jonson, or even Heywood, or Beaumont and Fletcher.

The rest is more debatable, his political, judicial, ethical, and religious conservatism. That is a conclusion (disputed by some) derivable from the "drift" of his thoughts and his repetitions in varying circumstances. What is to be argued out in another volume can be only summarized now. The English historical plays indicate to some of us that Shakespeare was a firm supporter of constituted authority under the crown. To those who say that there is nothing personal in this, that it was the universal attitude in the age of Elizabeth, the retort is simple—the Essex rebellion, in which Shakespeare's friend Southampton was involved. The bane of faction, the puissance of England under a united government, seems to be an underlying theme of Shakespeare's stirring dramatization of the English Civil Wars of the fifteenth century.

Though the plea for mercy is reiterated in his plays, the general attitude of the plays, as has been noted by others, is one of profound respect for law and order.

Even so iconoclastic a writer as Frank Harris was impressed by the evidence of the plays that Shakespeare refused to muddle his judgment concerning the ineradicable distinction between right and wrong. "Truth is truth to the end of reckoning," is a dramatic phrase uttered by Isabella in *Measure for Measure*,¹ but it seems to sum up Shakespeare's own view—in contrast to some of the sophistries of some of his contemporaries. Even the aloof Doctor Stoll quotes with approval Coleridge's great utterance: "Keeping at all times in the high road of life Shakespeare has no innocent adulteries, no interesting incests, no virtuous vice;—he never renders that amiable which religion and reason alike teach

¹Act V, lines 45, 46.

us to detest, or clothes impurity in the garb of virtue, like Beaumont and Fletcher." The source and center of human tragedy, in the Shakespearean conception, seems to lurk in emotion getting from under control of will and judgment. Oddly enough, Shakespeare puts his most succinct statement of this ethical view into the mouth of the prince of rascals, Iago, in one famous speech.¹ Iago is a utilitarian (as well as a cynic), but he knows, intellectually, the paths that lead to the road to ruin. Omit the sinister application which Iago makes of knowledge (which he has never transmuted into wisdom), omit the first and last clauses of his speech, and you have the clearest statement Shakespeare ever made in a single passage of the causes of the woe which befell most of the protagonists of his great tragedies: "Our bodies are our gardens, to which our wills are gardeners." Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Coriolanus, Macbeth, Mark Antony—they all lived to learn the truth of this, the fatality of failing to act in accord with this truth.

Sidney Lanier, true understander of Shakespeare though he was, catalogued among the things on which Shakespeare is silent, religion. Alwin Thaler, in a recent book,² sees deeper, "can see no reason for including religion among Shakespeare's silences." By religion, on which Shakespeare is "silent," Lanier must have meant dogma, or some Browningesque attempt to probe the secret of life beyond the portals of death. Of these things, it is true, there is nothing in Shakespeare. If he was a sectarian the evidence does not appear in the lines, and at the grave's edge he is silent. But if religion means, in one aspect, a recognition here on earth of the over-ruling power of a Supreme Being, who

¹*Othello*, Act I, sc. 3, lines 322-337.

²*Shakespeare's Silences*, by Alwin Thaler, Harvard University Press, 1929, p. 5.

walks with us in all our walking, who is ever present whether we remember him or forget him, who "shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will," then there is profound religion in the book of Shakespeare.

In summary, the mind and spirit of Shakespeare are discoverable in his writings. There is no certain record in what he wrote of the occurrences of his life, but a very clear record of what and how he thought.