

# SHAW ON SHAKESPEARE

BURNS MARTIN.

*With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare when I measure my brains against his.—Bernard Shaw.*

A TRAINING in tub-thumping, or soap box oratory, is not an unmixed blessing. True, it sharpens the wits, develops quick thinking and amusing repartee, and gives insight into the mental processes of the ordinary man. But because the tub-thumper must hold his audience at any cost, he becomes superficial, smart rather than witty, eager to delight, shock, or even irritate; he knows the value of advertising and of a "good show". In a word, he smacks of the charlatan and the jester. In this art George Bernard Shaw served his apprenticeship, and when in 1894 as a dramatic critic he crossed over to journalism—a somewhat related field—he took along with him the tricks he had learned on the street corners of London. We must be cautious, then, in examining his declared opinions of Shakespeare. In *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* we have the fruits of this early journalism. Wishing to advance certain views concerning drama, mainly of Ibsen and the "problem play, Shaw found Shakespeare a useful flogging horse to make the public take notice. Feeling it his duty to make comfortable, unthinking people uncomfortable, he attacked the accepted national idol. To the prefaces of his earlier plays he brought this business point of view; consequently, in them we find the same exaggeration and note of conceit. But in the later plays there is a different note: in *Back to Methusaleh* and *Saint Joan* we have the passionate intensity of a man clinging desperately to his faith despite the World War. He feels more than ever the part that literature might play in the salvaging of civilization; at times the jester lays aside his cap and bells. When in the prefaces to these plays Shaw says that Shakespeare was a dramatist without ideas and a poet without faith in life, we need discount nothing, for we are seeing into the heart of Shaw.

## I

In one of his reviews he calls himself an ardent Shakespearean.<sup>1</sup> As such, he made it his business to expose the enemies of the dramatist. For one group he coined the happy name *bardolaters*; they

1. Where I do not quote *verbatim* I give the gist of Shaw as much as possible in his own words. Unless otherwise noted, his views are from *Dramatic Opinions and Essays* and the prefaces.

are the people who set Shakespeare on Olympus and then pronounce anathema on all who refuse to prostrate themselves. Here Shaw would doubtless include such romantic critics as De Quincey and Swinburne. The uncritical paeans of the bardolaters he felt good for neither Shakespeare's reputation nor British honesty. He wished Shakespeare to be considered as a dramatist and a fellowman—the attitude of Ben Jonson and Dryden. Shaw would lay at the doors of the bardolaters another error. Not content with putting Shakespeare on Olympus, they have tried to place the other Elizabethan dramatists high on the slopes. This critic's most virulent attack on the minor Elizabethans was written after he had read Henry Arthur Jones's statement that it must be remembered that Shakespeare was one of a great school. Shaw felt that he "could not do justice in moderate language to the suggestion that most of these men were but slightly inferior to, and Beaumont and Fletcher hardly inferior to, Shakespeare". Here was a piquant situation that must have appealed to him: the playboy of dramatic criticism defending Shakespeare from his admirers!

Commentators and editors are also enemies of Shakespeare. Ignorant of the poet's language, they sharpen their reasoning faculty to examine propositions advanced by an eminent lecturer from the Midlands, instead of sensitizing their artistic faculty to receive the impression of moods and inflexions of feeling conveyed by word-music. This is, indeed, the old quarrel of scholar and amateur; and when we recall many a thin line of text struggling against a wave of commentary, we are not sure that Shaw has been unjust.

He divides the theatrical profession into two classes: elocutionists and actors. All of the former and many of the latter are enemies of Shakespeare. A born fool, the elocutionist devotes his energy to breaking beautiful poetry into impossible prose. Actors—especially actor-managers—take supreme delight in substituting characters of their own creation for Shakespeare's. Sir Henry Irving is grossly culpable when he "nurses his own creations on Shakespearean food, like a fox rearing its litter in the den of a lioness." Sir Henry gives a tragic Shylock, but it is not what Shaw has paid to see, for it is not Shakespeare's Shylock; he plays an Iachimo that Shaw sees "with unqualified delight", but it too is not Shakespeare's. On the other hand, Forbes Robertson's Hamlet is almost beyond praise because he has seized Shakespeare's idea.<sup>1</sup> So the tale goes, and it carries conviction—until we ask how Shaw knows better than others the real intention of Shakespeare.

1. This review of a performance of *Hamlet* (2 Oct., 1897) is a masterly piece of criticism.

But the enemies whom we have been passing in review are mere juvenile delinquents compared with the producers. Shaw cannot find words violent enough to describe them and their malpractices, or punishment severe enough—hanging is certainly too mild for Mr. Daly. People pay to see a play by Shakespeare and get a thing of shreds and patches: "The whole company will gain by the substitution of a much better play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as a basis for Mr. Daly's operations. No doubt, he is at this moment like Mrs. Todgers, 'a dodging among the tender bits with a fork, and a eatin of them' ". Daly, Beerbohm Tree, and Irving tell of their love and admiration for the "bard", but think he was a mere amateur compared with Cibber, Garrick, and themselves. Shocked at the mere thought of a young lady's saying, "Oh, hell," Daly cut out the antiphony between Hermia and Lysander. Irving dared desecrate the dirge in *Cymbeline* by omitting the third stanza. Finding the plays too long, producers omit all the passages of pure poetry, retaining, in their fatuousness, all the moralizing and all the platitudes. To Shaw this procedure is nonsense or worse: "You can no more cut an hour out of a play and have your play too, than you can cut a yard out of the Sistine Madonna and have Raphael's picture too". For Shaw there was, however, a ray of hope: "Every revival helps to exhaust the number of possible ways of altering Shakespeare's plays unsuccessfully, and so hastens the day when the mere desire for novelty will lead to the experiment of leaving them unaltered". That was written in 1895, but we are still awaiting the dawn.

Producers offend equally in the staging of the plays. To Shaw their vulgar attempts at realism and their general lack of imagination are distasteful, for their attempted improvements serve only to destroy the illusion. In a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Daly supplied "all his fairies with portable batteries and incandescent lights, which they switched on and off from time to time, like children with a new toy". Producers insist on giving the rôles of pages to young women: "Nothing can be more absurd than the spectacle of Sir Henry Irving elaborately playing the uncle to his little nephew when he is obviously addressing a fine young woman in rational dress". Worst of all, they spend large sums for scenery although "the best scenery you can get will only destroy the illusion created by the poetry"; when managers bemoan their losses in producing Shakespeare, Shaw retorts that the loss is not on Shakespeare, whom they never present, but on the garish scenery. Scenery is also the cause of frequent cutting, for the numerous changes of scenery retard the rate of performance so

much that only truncated versions can be given. The critic has here raised an important problem. For Shaw, who is content with Sir Philip Sidney's references to signs hung about the stage, the solution is very simple; but the truth is that we know too little about the physical conditions of the Elizabethan stage and the probable developments from 1580 to 1616 to be dogmatic. If we could approximate the Elizabethan "apron stage," all would be well; but obviously we cannot, except, perhaps, in a house given over wholly to Elizabethan drama. The writer remembers performances by Sotherne and Marlowe in which gray curtains were used instead of scenery, and the use of a somewhat similar device at Stratford-on-Avon; here the attention was not distracted from the action by garish hangings. Perhaps the solution of this vexing problem lies along this path.

## II

It will have been noted how frequently in his attacks on the enemies of Shakespeare Shaw emphasized the fact that Shakespeare was above all else a poet. Poetry means witchery of music and mastery of words. For Shaw here lies, perhaps, Shakespeare's greatest appeal:

The ear is the sure clue to him; only a musician can understand the play of feeling which is the real rarity in his early plays. . . . Even the individualization (of character) owes all its magic to the turn of the line, which lets you into the secret of its utterer's mood and temperament, not by its commonplace meaning, but by some subtle exaltation, or stultification, or slyness, or delicacy, or hesitancy, or what not in the sound of it. In short, it is the score and not the libretto that keeps the work alive and fresh.

But this insistence on musical appeal will recall Shaw's professed antipathy to blank verse—Rosalind is a favourite because she speaks mainly prose, and he himself wrote *The Admirable Bashville* in blank verse instead of in prose because he had only a week for the composition. The reasons for this prejudice are obvious. As everybody was admiring blank verse, Shaw formed an opposition. In his later works Shakespeare's verse was very free, to become rhythmical prose with his successors. To most critics this development was a gain dramatically; but for Shaw the music is gone and only a bastard form left, and so he prefers the old "sing song" verse of Peele, Greene, Kyd, and the early Shakespeare. And lastly, ringing in his ears was the pseudo-Shakespearean blank verse of the Victorians. Once again, then, we can explain away the exaggeration.

The poet Shakespeare—and, as we have said, it was this side of the writer that Shaw was emphasizing—had a consummate mastery of language. All the Elizabethans had rich vocabularies, but Shakespeare was almost the only one who knew how to use this wealth. For Shaw *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play

in which Shakespeare, having to bring Nature in its most enchanting aspect before an audience without the help of theatrical scenery, used all his power of description and expression in verse with such effect that the utmost that any scene-painter can hope for is to produce a picture that shall not bitterly disappoint the spectator who has read the play beforehand.

Writing in the day of silent films, Shaw objects to the cinema because it "makes people who have seen a Macbeth film imagine they have seen *Macbeth*," and for him "a play with the words left out is spoiled".<sup>3</sup>

Because bardolaters never grow tired of praising Shakespeare's powers of characterization, this critic takes an occasional fling at them, but in reality he believes Shakespeare was a master of that art. Some of his thumbnail sketches—written, be it remembered, not in the leisure of a study, but between a performance and the printing of the journal—are hard to surpass for insight into Shakespeare's creations. "The Imogen of Shakespeare's genius [is] an enchanting person of the most delicate sensitiveness, full of transitions from ecstasies of tenderness to transports of childish rage, and reckless of consequences in both, instantly hurt and instantly appeased, and of the highest breeding and courage." Again of the Countess of Rousillon (*All's Well That Ends Well*): "Miss Lena Heineky, with the most beautiful old woman's part ever written in her hands, discovered none of its wonderfully pleasant good sense, humanity, and originality". And finally, "Few living actresses could throw themselves into the sustained transport of exquisite tenderness and impulsive courage which makes poetry the natural speech of Helena". Shaw has given us a comprehensive confession of faith: "When I was twenty I knew everybody in Shakespeare, from Hamlet to Abhorson, much more intimately than I knew my living contemporaries; and to this day, if the name of Pistol or Polonius catches my eye in a newspaper, I turn to the passage with more curiosity than if the name were that of—but perhaps I had better not mention anyone in particular". Here is a key to his admiration—and, as we shall later see, his criticism—of Shakespearean characters: they have the very breath of life.

Perhaps in reaction against the "well made play" of the Sardou type, Shaw says that he avoids plots like a plague; he considers

3. Henderson, *Table Talk of G. B. S.*, pp. 52-53.

them quite unessential to good plays.<sup>1</sup> He appreciates, however, the story element in a play, and has admiration for Shakespeare's ability to tell a story. He remarks caustically that once, when he saw *Hamlet* given as Shakespeare had written it, the story of the play was "perfectly intelligible" to the audience.

### III

Lest Shaw should appear only an unblushing bardolater playing the clown for a moment, we must turn to the other side of his criticism. Like the majority of his contemporaries, Shakespeare was a romanticist. Now the romanticist, Shaw avers, does not face facts; he observes certain phases of life, and throws a glamour about them, so beclouding the real issue. The worst folly of romanticists is their treatment of love. Instead of realizing that it is merely an instinct developed by the Life-Force to further procreation, romantic writers represent it as the great motive power, even as the goal of life. It is silly enough when they let such nonsense dominate the field of comedy, but it is positively dangerous to portray sexual infatuation as a tragic theme. "To ask us to subject our souls to its ruinous glamour," says Shaw, "to worship it, to deify it, and imply that it alone makes our life worth living is nothing but folly gone mad erotically". *Antony and Cleopatra* comes under this criticism. This play must be "intolerable to every true Puritan" and "distressing to the ordinary healthy citizen". What has Shakespeare done? He has shown a soldier broken by debauchery, and a typical wanton, and "by his huge command of rhetoric and stage pathos" he has tried to convince the audience that these two had well lost the world. Shaw feels that the only people who can get pleasure from this glorification of lust are "the real Cleopatras and Antonys (they are to be found in every public house) who would no doubt be glad enough to be transfigured by some poet as immortal lovers."

*Antony and Cleopatra* also exemplifies Shakespeare's inability to face the question of morality. Never once does he venture to examine the foundations of our conventional moral code. Instead, he accepts it as the theme, foundation, and ornamentation of his dramas. Prince Hal is "a combination of conventional propriety and brute masterfulness in his public capacity with a low-lived blackguardism in his private tastes"; he intends treachery against his boon companions when the times will demand it, yet Shakespeare makes him a hero-king. Falstaffe is "a besotted and disgusting wretch". *Cymbeline* busies herself assuring people that

1. *Table Talk*, p. 63.



she would not steal, and her "object in life is to vindicate her own propriety and to suspect everybody else's". When Shaw considers the morality embodied in *As You Like It*, he can only exclaim: "What a play! It was in *As You Like It* that the sententious William first began to openly exploit the fondness of the British public for sham moralizing and stage 'philosophy.'" This lack of real interest in morality is seen also in the absence of any feeling of responsibility to improve society; it is precisely this defect, Shaw thinks, that makes Shakespearean characters seem so natural to the middle classes, who themselves are comfortable and irresponsible. Respectability, propriety, convention, "fictitious morals and fictitious good conduct" will not satisfy Shaw, and any dramatist who deals in these alone can expect from him nothing but contempt. Shaw has no fear that moral chaos will follow if we throw overboard all our romantic conventions about morality.

Shakespeare, then, deals only in second-hand and conventional principles. He has no original ideas, and never in his plays does he consider the problems of society. In three of the plays—*Troilus and Cressida*, *Measure for Measure*, and *All's Well That Ends Well*—Shakespeare, so Shaw thinks, came near to a discussion of social questions; indeed, he almost anticipated the twentieth century, but was held back by his age. (The truth about these plays is, of course, that they are much more of the Middle Ages than of either the Renaissance or the twentieth century). One wonders just what problems of the sixteenth century Shaw wishes Shakespeare had handled. Had Shakespeare "discussed" vestments, land enclosures, the Poor Law, vagrancy, or foreign policy, would even Shaw read him to-day? We doubt very much whether Shaw knows all the characters mentioned in the Martin Marprelate pamphlets, as he knows the characters in these anti-social plays. May it not be this very lack of practical and particular problems in the plays, and the fact that he gave his soul over to "the devil of emotion", that have saved Shakespeare from passing into the Limbo of lost playwrights?

Naturally, a dearth of ideas and convictions would preclude Shakespeare's having a philosophy or a religion. For Shaw there are artists and artist-philosophers; the latter are the world's geniuses. Shakespeare, like Scott and Dickens, belongs to the lower order. He had wonderful powers of observation and mimicry, but he could see only the diversity and not the unity of life. This inability to see the One in the Many is his great defect. Yet so great were his artistic powers that "he forced himself in among the greatest of playwrights without having entered that region in which Michael

Angelo, Beethoven, Goethe, and the antique Athenian stage poets are great". If, as was the case with Shakespeare, to this inability to find unity there are joined keen powers of observation, there can be, according to Shaw, only one result: pessimism. Such authors must "spend the rest of the lives they pretend to despise in breaking men's spirits". This pessimism shows itself in the moral bankruptcy of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and in Shakespeare's inability to balance the exposure of Angelo and Dogberry with the portrait of a prophet or worthy leader. (Who but Shaw ever considered Dogberry as an exposure of anything?) The tragedies are the cry of despair of a man who, seeing the world as a great stage of fools, was bitterly bewildered and, consequently, could see no sense in living. Shaw thinks that Ibsen and Strindberg join hands with Shakespeare in this fault. He contrasts all three with Goethe, who had an impelling idea and an unconquerable belief in the supreme value and purpose of life. (Incidentally, Shaw considers Goethe a creative evolutionist). Shakespeare is not, however, quite so much the preacher of despair as Ibsen and Strindberg, for, unlike them, he has not "refused us the consolation of laughter at mischief, accurately called comic relief". Despite his pessimism, Shakespeare is great because "he had religion enough to be aware that his religionless condition was one of despair". This realization raises him above his contemporaries, and makes his work vital. Shaw thinks that the real source of the trouble lies in Shakespeare's attempt to impose his petty and conventional system of morality on the universe.

This lack of philosophy greatly affects the characters of Shakespeare. Attempting to portray philosophers, he succeeded in creating nothing better than railers and pessimists who utter such wails as the Seven Ages of Man (*As You Like It*) and the Soliloquy on Suicide (*Hamlet*). Only one of his characters believes that life is worth living, and he is—Falstaffe. All his other creations are failures in life, glad to escape from it. Never once was he able to create a great-souled, energetic man. His heroes may appear life-like, but because of their spiritual decadence they cannot initiate action; their actions are always forced on them from without. Because he could not enter into the soul of a great man, Shakespeare misunderstood Caesar; consequently, he besmirched his character in order to exalt the soul-sick, incompetent Brutus. Shaw contrasts Macbeth and Hamlet with Bunyan's hero, and finds the calm assurance of the latter at the prospect of the Judgment Day far nobler than Hamlet's "The rest is silence" or Macbeth's "Out, out brief candle". Because of this feeling of the uselessness and



irrationality of life, Shakespeare, unlike Bunyan, could not depict even a coward—witness Falstaffe.

Truly, this is a thorough damnation of Shakespeare—if Shaw has read him aright.

#### IV

Shaw's adverse criticism cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand or a superior smile. It is not enough to say that he is merely playing the jester to amuse his readers or to irritate them into thought; the note of seriousness is too clear to allow that. Nor is it enough to say that he is defective in scholarship and historic sense: if he had read Maurice Morgann's essay on Falstaffe, he would not have fallen into the error of thinking that Shakespeare had meant the fat knight for a coward, and so forth. In the house of criticism there are many mansions, and the most important is not necessarily that of scholarship. The problem lies much deeper; it is a difference in temperament in the two dramatists, each the greatest of his age.

The sixteenth century produced two great movements: the Renaissance and the Reformation. There can be no doubt of which Shakespeare is the child. Shaw's sympathies are elsewhere; he speaks of the seventeenth century "when every art was corrupted to the marrow by the orgie called the Renaissance, which was nothing but the vulgar exploitation in the artistic professions of the territory won by the Protestant movement." This Puritanism of Shaw colours his conception of art. "I have, I think, always been a Puritan in my attitude towards Art. I am as fond of music and handsome buildings as Milton was, or Cromwell, or Bunyan; but if I found that they were becoming the instruments of a systematic idolatry of sensuousness, I would hold it good statemanship to blow every cathedral to pieces with dynamite, organ and all, without the least heed to the screams of the art critics and cultured voluptuaries".

In the same place he says that he can sympathize with, and share in, the pleasures of the senses, but that he considers the substitution of sensuous ecstasy for intellectual activity and honesty to be the very devil. Here again is his quarrel with the Renaissance, the seed-ground of Shakespeare: it was an imaginative and emotional outburst, lacking restraint, sincerity and sanity. In other words, Shaw's Puritanism is not corrected, but rather supported by a strong rationalistic turn. But modern psychology has taught us that thought and emotion are not separate, but interpenetrating activities. So despite his real fear of the emotions, we should not be

surprised to find him unconsciously coloured in his thinking. His emotional outlook is optimistic; he has faith in creative evolution and man's destiny if he will but co-operate with the Life Force.

Now Shaw is a twentieth-century Puritan, not a seventeenth; consequently, he is not interested in saving souls for a future life, but in saving people in this life. His great goal is the reformation of man and his environment here and now. Because he knows that mankind does not like sermons, Shaw realizes the usefulness of art. Art is, indeed, for him, as for all Puritans, the sugar to disguise the medicine, the anecdote to enliven the sermon. We find this view behind his own comedies, and at the basis of a discussion of the nature of comedy in a review of Meredith's well known *Idea of Comedy*. Meredith considered the function of comedy to be the exposure and correction of all departures from common sense, which, for him, is the basis of society. Shaw sees the reforming nature of comedy, but he does not accept Meredith's view that society is founded on common sense. He is not interested in bringing the individual to the norm of society, but in changing society; so he tells us that "the function of comedy... is nothing else than the destruction of old-established morals". Comedy, according to this definition, is an enemy of convention, accepted morality, and romance. It is a weapon of reformers, and not an art existing for its own sake. Finally, it is a thing given over to ideas. We see clearly why the romantic comedy of Shakespeare cannot satisfy his critic.

Shaw has not given us a definition of tragedy, but we can learn his point of view from an examination of *Saint Joan*. Here we have the death of a maid who is filled with a glorious certainty of her cause. There is no tragic flaw in her character to cause her ruin. She is more akin to Bunyan's Christian than to any of Shakespeare's "failures". Indeed, had the epilogue shown the heroine before her Maker, should we not have seen in her that calm assurance that Shaw admires so much in Christian? *Saint Joan*, the greatest play of the present century, passes as a tragedy only because Shaw did not write the last Act; had he done so, it would have been a comedy in the mediaeval sense. For him, then, a tragedy must have noble feeling, faith, beauty, and common kindness. The tragic hero must be filled with faith in the worthiness of life and the ultimate destiny of man—one is tempted to add that in religion he must be a creative evolutionist. Above all, the hero must have no so-called tragic flaw in his character.

It should not occasion surprise, then, that Shakespeare's tragedies should not seem perfect to Shaw. But is he right in

considering Shakespeare as a pessimist, devoid of a philosophy? In his tragedies Shakespeare never has petty heroes. Each is a great man who, in almost any other position, would have been a success. Through some defect in character comes his own ruin, involving with itself the ruin of others. Seeing this before our eyes, we are filled with wonder at the nobleness of man, and pity and terror at his overthrow; never are we scornful of man or of his possibilities. We have a sense of waste in the universe, and the realization of this carries us further into Shakespeare's reading of life. As Professor Bradley has pointed out, we have a feeling that there is an upheaval in the universe, that good is throwing forth evil; when that has been accomplished, serenity will come again. And in the soul of the spectator is a feeling of awe and acceptance of man's part in this mysterious scheme of things. Shakespeare has not been without a philosophy, nor has he tried to impose a "petty and conventional system of morality on the universe".

Shaw is, fortunately for himself, too big for his own neat scheme of things. His theories tell him that Shakespeare is wrong, but his own despised emotions tell him something of the greatness of Shakespeare. He knows full well that according to his plans for mankind he should not like Falstaffe, for that character embodies the inefficiency<sup>1</sup> and lack of self-respect and discipline that cause most of mankind's troubles; but he has to admit that he greatly enjoys the old rogue. Launce is a poor specimen for the Life Force to work through; yet Shaw, admitting that this character appeals only to the most vulgar risibility of man, says that he himself "laughed like a yokel".

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"After all, I have accomplished something. I have made Shakespeare popular by knocking him off his pedestal and kicking him round the place, and making people realize that he is not a demi-god, but a dramatist". Shaw may be arrogating too much credit to himself, but it cannot be denied that the twentieth century has a healthier attitude toward Shakespeare than had the nineteenth. Here may not be the perfect Shakespearean critic, but he is always an entertaining and stimulating one.

1. E. P. Howe (*Bernard Shaw*) has a fine chapter in which he shows that Shaw is dominated by an interest in economics.