

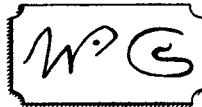
SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

AN ANNUAL SURVEY OF
SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

4

EDITED BY
ALLARDYCE NICOLL

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FIFTY YEARS OF SHAKESPEARIAN CRITICISM: 1900-1950

BY

KENNETH MUIR

This survey of twentieth-century criticism will be mainly confined to works of interpretation. Bibliographical and textual works will be entirely excluded; biographical works will be discussed only in so far as they contain criticism, so that for the present purpose E. K. Chambers's *Shakespeare: A Survey* is more relevant than his imposing and indispensable *Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*; works of scholarship which deal with special problems, such as authenticity or sources, will be mentioned only incidentally; and little attempt will be made to do justice to the many valuable books which have appeared during the last fifty years on such subjects as the Elizabethan Stage—books which have profoundly affected our understanding of Shakespeare's own works. Impressive as much of the interpretative criticism of the period has been, it might be argued that it has not been the literary critics who have added most to our understanding of the plays but rather the textual critics who have brought us nearer to what Shakespeare wrote, the scholars who have increased our knowledge of the stage and audience for which he wrote and of the mental climate in which he lived, and the producers who have given us a chance of seeing Shakespeare's plays more or less as they were written, so that we can see that many of their alleged faults vanish when they are performed with some understanding of Elizabethan conventions. As a last *caveat*, it should be mentioned that although an attempt will be made to consider all important English-speaking critics only occasional reference will be made to those who have written in other languages. To deal with them adequately would have doubled the length of the article, and in any case the important contributions to Shakespearian criticism made in other countries are being surveyed by other hands.¹

THE SITUATION IN 1900

The situation at the end of the nineteenth century may be roughly summarized. There were signs in the last quarter of the century of a revival of Shakespearian criticism after the barrenness of the period that followed the death of Coleridge. The Victorian period had seen the settlement of the chronology of Shakespeare's plays; it produced a textual orthodoxy which remained undisturbed for many years;² it started many lines of investigation; but it produced no major Shakespearian critic. Arnold preferred to say 'Others abide our question', and leave it at that. Dowden's famous book, *Shakespeare, A Critical Study of his Mind and Art*, which appeared in 1875, was still the standard work a generation later. It was followed by Swinburne's *Study*, in which, like his master Hugo, he was perpetually losing himself in a cloud of superlatives, and by Moulton's *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*. There was Sidney Lee's *Life* and Brandes's voluminous *William Shakespeare*. These are the only critics of the period who are likely to be consulted to-day. Dowden and Brandes believed that Shakespeare's works were in some measure a reflexion of his inner development; Lee, on the other hand, assumed that there was

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a complete separation between Shakespeare the Man and Shakespeare the Artist, for the odd reason—amongst better ones—that Shakespeare was prosperous, and therefore happy, when he wrote his tragedies. The chief outcome of Shakespeare's toil was to Dowden the building up of the poet's moral nature and the fortifying himself for the conduct of life, but Lee declared that Shakespeare's "literary attainments and successes were chiefly valued as serving the prosaic end of making a permanent provision for himself and his daughters". Dowden's description of Shakespeare 'in the depths' and 'on the heights' proved irresistibly comic to Lytton Strachey who in his famous essay on 'Shakespeare's Final Period' (1903) argued that the poet's 'ultimate mood of grave serenity' was a sentimental myth invented by Victorian critics, and that his real mood was one of boredom and disgust, alleviated only by 'visions of loveliness'. Dowden was certainly a sentimentalist, but it is nevertheless arguable that he was nearer to the truth than his critic and that the influence of Strachey's brilliant essay was for many years disastrous. Its effect was reinforced by Thorndike's valuable study of *The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare* (1901), in which he pointed out, for example, many resemblances between *Philaster* and *Cymbeline*, and explained the characteristics of the plays of the last period by the popularity of Beaumont and Fletcher. The chronology of their plays is still unsettled, and we cannot be certain that *Philaster* preceded *Cymbeline*. In any case, we can see from *Pericles* that Shakespeare had already broken new ground, and that although some cross-fertilization was natural Shakespeare's development might not have been very different if Beaumont and Fletcher had never lived. But Thorndike's theory led later critics to adopt an apologetic attitude to the Romances as being pot-boilers, and this prevented them from attempting to find out what Shakespeare was really trying to do when he wrote *Cymbeline*.

Another subject that was exercising critics at this time was Shakespeare's morality. R. G. Moulton clung to the belief that Shakespeare was a teacher, and he tended to forget that he was this only incidentally. His book on *The Moral System of Shakespeare* (1903) suffers from a somewhat rigid systematization, and also from his abstraction of plot from the play as an artistic whole. W. B. Yeats, reacting against the Victorian conception of Shakespeare as a worshipper of success, wrote an essay on the historical plays, published in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903), in which he denies that Shakespeare preferred Prince Hal and Bolingbroke to the 'sweet lovely rose', Richard II. Yeats's essay derives partly from Pater, and in its denigration of Prince Hal and in its sympathy with failure it was to influence Masfield a few years later. Another book of the period, T. R. Lounsbury's *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (1902), has a misleading title, for it is mainly an account of the gradual breaking down of the assumption that Shakespeare was a barbarian of genius. It contains little positive criticism of Shakespeare's artistry, and the author is unduly disturbed by the quibbling and indecency to be found in the plays. But the classic exhibition of this disturbance is to be found in 'The Influence of the Audience on Shakespeare's Dramas' (1906) in which Robert Bridges complained bitterly of the bad taste and low morals of those wretched beings, the groundlings, "who can never be forgiven their share in preventing the greatest poet and dramatist of the world from being the best artist". It can, on the contrary, be said that Shakespeare's original audience, if only because it took an intelligent and informed delight in poetry, made possible the great tragedies. But, like Lounsbury, Bridges complained of obscenity and quibbling; he argued that Shakespeare pardoned the wicked (such as Angelo) to please his audience; and above all he accused the poet of sacrificing coherent

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psychology for the sake of striking situations. This last point was later to be developed by Stoll, and we shall return to it in discussing J. I. M. Stewart's book. It is odd that in Bridges's own plays, which were uncontaminated by the taste of any audience, and had indeed few readers, he continually sacrificed psychology to situation. His essay was, in fact, a kind of pendant to Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, to which we must now turn.

BRADLEY AND THE BRADLEYITES

Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) was at once the culmination of the kind of criticism which had started a hundred years before—that of Morgann and the great Romantics—and it was also to be for a whole generation the truest and most profound book ever written on Shakespeare. Indeed, when all deductions have been made, it probably retains that high position to-day with the majority of readers. Bradley is not without weaknesses, though they are mostly those of his age and not peculiar to himself. The catalogue he gives of Shakespeare's faults, for example, seems now as presumptuous as Johnson's similar list in his great Preface. He complains of the stringing together of short scenes, as in the middle part of *Antony and Cleopatra*; of the introduction of irrelevant anachronisms; of the direct addressing of the audience in soliloquies; of the excessive use of metaphor and bombastic language; of Shakespeare's failure to distinguish between the speech of different characters; and of the use of 'gnomic' passages. There is not one of these accusations which would be supported by a competent modern critic, at least without many qualifications. And this fact is not, of course, due to the superiority of modern critics, but rather to the fact that the conventions of the Elizabethan stage are now better understood and appreciated.

Bradley was very conscious of the imperfections of even the best stage performance compared with the ideal performance in the critic's mind; and unfortunately the actors of his day never gave him an opportunity of seeing a play uncut and unhampered by the elaborate scenery which was supposed to be indispensable to success, even though it slowed down the action to an intolerable degree. Yet Bradley's avowed object was to examine each play more or less as if he were an actor who had to study all the parts. This—and the example of Coleridge and Hazlitt—led him to devote two-thirds of his space to a consideration of the characters of the plays. It is not quite fair to say that he substituted an interest in psychology for the dramatic interest, for he was well aware that "the psychological point of view is not the equivalent of the tragic"; but it may be said fairly enough that he was sometimes led to consider the characters as real people rather than as imaginary characters in a drama. His discussion of what Cordelia would have done in Desdemona's place, his musings on the childhood of Cordelia, which remind one of Mrs Jameson and Mary Cowden Clarke, and the notorious note on "How many children had Lady Macbeth?" are examples of Bradley's weaker side. On the other hand, his Hegelianism is comparatively harmless, and the frequent accusation that is made against him that he read into the plays subtleties that would have astonished their author is seldom true. His interpretations of the chief characters, developed as many of them are from those of previous critics, especially from Coleridge, have remained the standard. We may feel, with Lily Campbell, that he ignores the Elizabethan acceptance of certain "abnormal states of mind as resulting from the unchecked domination of passion over reason". We may think that he passes too lightly over Hamlet's

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faults; that he makes too little of Iago's motives; and that he credits to Macbeth's character the poetical genius of his creator. But when all is said the main characters of the great tragedies have never before or since been analysed so brilliantly or so convincingly; we diverge from him, as we often must, at our peril. His other Shakespearian essays in *Oxford Lectures* and *A Miscellany* possess the same qualities, though he perhaps sentimentalizes the rejection of Falstaff and fails to appreciate the wonderful constructive power displayed in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Nearly all recent critics have been influenced by Bradley in one way or another, not least when they have reacted against his methods. Three books which are mainly concerned with the analysis of character may conveniently be mentioned here: Agnes Mure Mackenzie's *The Women in Shakespeare's Plays* (1924) and John Palmer's *Political Characters* and *Comic Characters of Shakespeare* (1945-6). Palmer is particularly good in his defence of the Tribunes in *Coriolanus*, while his understanding of how modern politicians behave frequently enables him to reveal unnoticed touches of realism in Shakespeare's characters. Palmer's knowledge of the world and his unpedantic understanding of drama, displayed in his books on Jonson and Molière, combine to make both his Shakespearian books excellent of their kind.

H. B. Charlton's *Shakespearian Tragedy* (1948) was avowedly written as a kind of supplement to Bradley's book on the same subject. With needless modesty Charlton speaks of himself as 'a mere scholar' who can only hope 'by an examination of sources and a study of the 'cosmic framework' of each play to add a little to the truth about Shakespeare which is contained in its purest form in the pages of Bradley. One might complain that his discussion of Saxo Grammaticus and of some of the earlier versions of the Lear story is not strictly relevant to his purpose, especially as he seems to think that *The Mirror for Magistrates* and *The Faerie Queene* contributed nothing to *King Lear*, and as he misses the opportunity of examining Shakespeare's indebtedness to Sidney's *Arcadia*. But he has a useful discussion of the way Shakespeare transformed the sources of *Macbeth* and *Othello*, and some interesting remarks on the background of all four tragedies.

His companion volume, *Shakespearian Comedy* (1937), is one of the surprisingly few books devoted to its subject, and it contains a generally plausible and certainly erudite account of how Shakespeare learned from his various experiments to write the three masterpieces. But Charlton is so anxious to believe that Shakespeare went from strength to strength that he plays fast and loose with chronology, and assumes that the 'dark comedies' were written before *Much Ado*, merely because he would like to have it so. He does much the same thing in his book on the tragedies, where he states that *King Lear* was written after *Macbeth*. In both books, too, he expresses an abnormally low opinion of the Romances, arguing that though the poetry is as great as ever Shakespeare's power of imaginative vision is blunted. There would seem to be a contradiction here, for it would have been impossible for great poetry to have been written by the ageing sentimentalist of Charlton's description, a man who was almost, we are led to understand, like Johnson's Polonius, declining into dotage.

It will be convenient to mention here two other books on Shakespearian Comedy. George Gordon's book of this title (1944) is Bradleian only in the sense that he approaches the comedies mainly through the characters; he is nearer to Raleigh in spirit. It is unfair to judge the author by this posthumous book, as he prepared only one chapter, on Shakespeare's English, for publication. There are chapters on *King Lear* and *Othello*, and scattered through the chapters

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on the comedies there are flashes of wit and humour which made his lectures delightful to listen to, and which deepen our regret that he left no book on the subject worthy of his talents. Some of his most attractive criticism is contained in school editions of nine of the plays.

Very different is *Shakespearean Comedy* (1949) by the veteran Thomas Marc Parrott, the learned editor of Chapman's plays. The work is intended for the general reader rather than the scholar, though it is more likely to be read by the student than either. Parrott believes that "it is neither in action nor in speech that Shakespeare attains the height of his art, but in character creation". Although, therefore, he discusses Shakespeare's sources at some length, his main concern is with the characters. He refers to a number of modern performances of the comedies, and he obviously enjoys them; but his long commentary, sensible as it is, seldom startles the reader with a new critical insight. Sometimes his statements are questionable, as when he asserts that "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* has never enjoyed great success on the stage"; that Poor Tom was a comic character; and that "the vulgar dissertation of the effects of drink" in *Macbeth* was not written by Shakespeare. In spite of the books of Palmer, Charlton and Parrott, there is still no interpretation of the comedies as outstanding as Bradley's on the tragedies.

APPROACHES TO SHAKESPEARE

All through the period under review there has been a continuous stream of short surveys of Shakespeare, ranging from Swinburne's shrill eulogy to Hardin Craig's solid and sensible *Interpretation of Shakespeare* (1948). Some of them were intended for students, and some for the general reader; most of them contain points of originality; but as they cover such a wide field they are very difficult to classify. Stopford Brooke's *Ten Plays* (1905) and *Ten More Plays* (1913) no longer mean very much to us. Walter Raleigh's *Shakespeare* (1907) is still one of the most popular introductions, because of its sensible tone and its pleasant style. George Saintsbury's account in *The Cambridge History of English Literature* (1910) is still worth glancing at, in spite of its style. John Masefield's little book (1911) is brilliant, aphoristic and original, but sometimes spoilt by the author's imposition on Shakespeare of his own moral views. His later lecture 'Shakespeare and Spiritual Life' is notable for eloquent passages on *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*; but *A Macbeth Production* (1945) contains only elementary, if admirable, advice to the players.

The various volumes of E. K. Chambers form perhaps the most impressive achievement of literary scholarship in our time, but he has also given us in *Shakespeare: A Survey* (1925) his personal interpretations of the plays. Among his notable points are his discussion of Richard III as an actor, his suggestion that the interlude of Pyramus and Thisbe is a burlesque of *Romeo and Juliet*, his mention of the "temper of the inquisitor" displayed by Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure*, and his remarks on the egotism of Coriolanus. These essays appeared originally as introductions to the separate plays, and they may be compared with M. R. Ridley's book, written after he had edited the New Temple Shakespeare. Two other brief introductions may be mentioned here: John Bailey's *Shakespeare* (1929), which is the work of a cultured man but of one who is apt to be offended by certain characteristics of the poet—as when he complains that *Venus and Adonis* is "without reserve or reticence, dignity or manliness or morals"—and J. W. Mackail's *The Approach to Shakespeare* (1930) which is excellent in its traditional style.

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More substantial and more original are two books which appeared in 1939. Peter Alexander's *Shakespeare's Life and Art*, as Tillyard remarks, "makes the strategic error of uniting in one treatment the most severely factual with the delicately critical". But Alexander, by a judicious use of the great critics of the past, exhibits old problems in a fresh light; and where he permits himself to be original he is often illuminating. He suggests, for example, that "the great comic artists are even more ruthless with men's virtues than with their vices"; that Shakespeare's ironic reserve about his religious convictions "is itself an artistic device that gives an added force to the evidence his work affords us about the ultimate nature of things"; and, in reference to Isabella, that "the charity of Shakespeare's art embraces the virtuous as well as the sinner". His defence of Shakespeare as a dramatic artist would have been strengthened if he had taken more note of Elizabethan conventions.

Mark Van Doren's *Shakespeare* is remarkably independent and original. In some respects the author reminds us of the critic he most admires, Samuel Johnson. He is not afraid to say that the seventy-first sonnet alone "maintains its music to the ending syllable"; that the sonnets are addressed to Shakespeare's own poetry—an aberration of which Johnson would hardly have approved; that *Venus and Adonis* contains 'desperate rhetoric'; and that Constance is the "last and most terrible of Shakespeare's wailing women". He even dares to speak of the melodramatic inferiority of Macbeth's speech beginning "Come, seeling night". But, on the other hand, there is hardly a page without an illuminating comment, as when he links Cleopatra's 'immortal longings' with the Clown's use of 'immortal' just before, when he speaks of Gloucester and Lear as having "learned too much, too late", or when he remarks that Imogen's devotion, being complete, "has its pressing tendernesses, its urgent delicacies, its passionate reserves". The book is particularly valuable for its comments on the development of Shakespeare's verse, and on the way verse and prose are used to differentiate character. Sometimes, however, he falls into the mistake of forgetting that verse is only a medium, and that we should not say that Imogen made Iachimo a great poet, any more than we should say that Hamlet in his address to the players "may be a little proud of the nobility which knows its way so well among the short words and the long ones, the epigrams and the periods". It is Shakespeare, rather than Iachimo and Hamlet, who is the poet and the stylist.

Finally, a word is due to Charles Williams's interpretation of *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* in *The English Poetic Mind* (1932).

PERSONAL AND IMPERSONAL SHAKESPEARES

In the nineteenth century, as we have seen, critical opinion was divided between the view that Shakespeare's life was reflected in his plays and the view that his art was absolutely impersonal. Frank Harris's *Shakespeare the Man* (1909) gave a portrait of the poet as a neurotic, obsessed with sex; his views still occasionally appear in a modified form, as, for example, in the books of Hesketh Pearson and Ivor Brown. Wyndham Lewis's study of the role of the hero in Shakespeare's plays, entitled *The Lion and the Fox*, is a violent attack on the idea that Shakespeare was impersonal. Lewis argued that the poet was an executioner who identified himself with his victims, and that all the tragedies were a criticism of the assumption that action is the end of existence. The book, which is brilliant, intemperate and amateurish, deals also with the impact

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of Machiavelli's supposed views on Elizabethan dramatists. It is difficult to accept without qualification the portrait of Shakespeare that emerges, though a suffering bard is at least more acceptable than the Smilesian pachyderm of Lee's biography.

G. L. Kittredge's tercentenary address, Sisson's lecture on 'The Mythical Sorrows of Shakespeare' (1934) and R. W. Chambers's on 'The Jacobean Shakespeare' (1937) persuasively argue the danger of deducing anything about the poet's biography from his plays. No doubt the danger is there, even if we assume that the sonnets were not entirely fictitious. Eliot once declared that "the greater the artist, the wider the gulf between the heart that suffers and the mind that creates". This aphorism implies the existence of a suffering heart, and Shakespeare had obviously experienced

The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to—

even if we can never know the details.

DISINTEGRATION AND REINTEGRATION

J. M. Robertson's chief contribution to Shakespeare criticism—what he wrote on Montaigne's influence has been superseded—was his attempt to give away to other dramatists, such as Marlowe, Greene, Peele and Chapman, those plays, scenes and passages which he regarded as unworthy of Shakespeare himself. All his work in this field is rendered nugatory by the simple probabilities that Shakespeare in his youth imitated Marlowe and others, that he did not always write well, and that he sometimes wrote excellently without earning Robertson's approval. The New Cambridge editors also detected other hands or the signs of revision when they came across passages they disliked. Dugdale Sykes used some of Robertson's methods in his *Sidelights on Shakespeare* in discussing the authorship of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Pericles*; and Alfred Hart in *Shakespeare and the Homilies* supported Shakespeare's partial authorship of *Edward III* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* by more reliable vocabulary tests than those employed by Robertson and Sykes.

E. K. Chambers made effective counter-attacks on the disintegrators in his British Academy lecture on 'The Disintegration of Shakespeare' and in his *Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*. Peter Alexander, by his overwhelming demonstration that *The Contention* and *The True Tragedy* were bad quartos of the second and third parts of *Henry VI*, shattered the orthodox conception, on which Robertson largely relied, that Shakespeare began his career as a reviser of plays written by one or more of the University Wits. A third critic, Lascelles Abercrombie, in his 'Plea for the Liberty of Interpreting' (1930) rightly claimed that if Shakespeare incorporated other men's work into his own, we should still judge the result as a work of art for the whole of which Shakespeare must be held responsible. There are only one or two cases where Shakespeare's work was completed or altered by other dramatists—*Macbeth* certainly, and *Timon of Athens* possibly. Abercrombie urged that we should judge by results, rather than by intentions, because knowledge of the conditions of the time cannot confer any right to say what was intended. By 'liberty of interpreting' Abercrombie did not mean the liberty "to read into a play of Shakespeare's whatever feeling or idea a modern reader may loosely and accidentally

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associate with its subject", but rather "anything which may be found in that art, even if it is only the modern reader who can find it there, may legitimately be taken as its meaning". This is to open the door wide for cranks of all kinds; but if reasonable discretion is maintained Abercrombie's plea is at least a useful antidote to those critics who would circumscribe Shakespeare's genius by the poetasters of his own age.

Abercrombie's own book, *The Idea of Great Poetry* (1925), illustrates the way he used the liberty he claimed. He addresses himself to the question of why we enjoy in tragedy what seems a version of the mere evil of life, and argues that Shakespeare finds the good in the character which creates and endures the evil. Macbeth's personality, for example, "towers into its loftiest grandeur" by experiencing to the full the imbecile futility of life, and in that very act personal life "superbly signifies itself". It may be argued, however, that Macbeth should not be credited with the poetical power of his creator, and that significance is restored to life not, surely, by the character but by the revelation of moral order in the play as a whole. Abercrombie's analysis of *Hamlet* is equally interesting, and perhaps more convincing. He thinks that Hamlet's delay, for which he is continually upbraiding himself, exists only in his own mind.

SCHOLARSHIP AND CRITICISM

Some eminent Shakespearians can best be judged by their profound influence on their pupils. G. L. Kittredge, for example, though he produced an excellent one-volume edition of Shakespeare (1936) and annotated editions of sixteen of the plays, was more influential than any of his works. He was impatient of Romantic excesses; and his annotations are often extremely valuable because his Johnsonian common sense was controlled by an immense learning. Another famous teacher, C. F. Tucker Brooke, edited a number of plays, but his *Essays on Shakespeare and other Elizabethans* (1948) do not do justice to his powers.

Scholarship and criticism would both suffer from a divorce, and numerous works of scholarship have affected the interpretation of Shakespeare. Leslie Hotson, for example, by his periodic discoveries has thrown new light on Shakespeare's methods of topical allusion. In *Shakespeare versus Shallow* (1931) he argued that Shallow and Slender were portraits of Justice Gardiner and his stepson, with whom Shakespeare had quarrelled, and thereby cast doubts on the old legend that Shakespeare had been a poacher. *I, William Shakespeare* (1937) contains an account of one of Shakespeare's executors and, by tracing links between the poet and the Virginia Company, Hotson fills in the background of *The Tempest*. His latest book, *Shakespeare's Sonnets Dated* (1949), seeks to prove that the sonnets were written by 1590, though not all readers have been convinced by his arguments. He is now grooming a new candidate for the role of 'Mr W. H.'

T. W. Baldwin, in the latest of his learned and voluminous works, also has designs on the orthodox chronology. By an examination of *Shakespeare's Five-Act Structure* (1947) and a comparison of it with numerous commentaries on Terence's plays he argues plausibly that several of the plays were written before 1590. Dover Wilson's theories that many of the plays underwent one or more revisions would suit an early date for the commencement of Shakespeare's career, and it has even been argued that the *Ur-Hamlet* was written by Shakespeare himself. Other books by Baldwin, also demanding a leisured reader, argue that Shakespeare adopted