

# SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

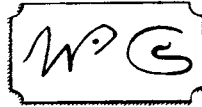
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SHAKESPEARIAN STUDY & PRODUCTION

II

EDITED BY  
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# CONTENTS

[Notes are placed at the end of each contribution. All line references are to the 'Globe' edition, and, unless for special reasons, quotations are from this text]

<i>List of Plates</i> . . . . .	page viii
Shakespeare's Romances: 1900-1957 by PHILIP EDWARDS . . . . .	I
The Structure of the Last Plays by CLIFFORD LEECH . . . . .	19
Six Points of Stage-Craft in <i>The Winter's Tale</i> by NEVILL COGHILL . . . . .	31
History and Histrionics in <i>Cymbeline</i> by J. P. BROCKBANK . . . . .	42
Shakespeare's Hand in <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i> by KENNETH MUIR . . . . .	50
Music and its Function in the Romances of Shakespeare by J. M. NOSWORTHY . . . . .	60
The Magic of Prospero by C. J. SISSON . . . . .	70
The New Way with Shakespeare's Texts: An Introduction for Lay Readers by J. DOVER WILSON	
IV. Towards the High Road . . . . .	78
A Portrait of a Moor by BERNARD HARRIS . . . . .	89
The Funeral Obsequies of Sir All-in-New-Fashions by F. P. WILSON . . . . .	98
Martin Peerson and the Blackfriars by MARK ECCLES . . . . .	100
Dramatic References from the Scudamore Papers by J. P. FEIL . . . . .	107
<i>International Notes</i> . . . . .	117
Hamlet Costumes: A Correction by RAYMOND MANDER and JOE MITCHENSON . . . . .	123
<i>Shakespeare Productions in the United Kingdom: 1956</i> . . . . .	125
Unto Caesar: A Review of Recent Productions by ROY WALKER . . . . .	128
The Year's Contributions to Shakespearian Study	
1. Critical Studies reviewed by KENNETH MUIR . . . . .	136
2. Shakespeare's Life, Times and Stage reviewed by R. A. FOAKES . . . . .	142
3. Textual Studies reviewed by JAMES G. MCMANAWAY . . . . .	149
<i>Books Received</i> . . . . .	156
<i>Index to Volume 11</i> . . . . .	159
<i>General Index to Volumes 1-10</i> . . . . .	171

# LIST OF PLATES

PLS I-II ARE BETWEEN PP. 96 AND 97

- I. The Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth, 1600  
(Anton Polakowski)
- II. The Funeral Obsequies of Sir All-In-New-Fashions  
(Bodleian Library, Douce Prints, Portfolio 138, no. 89)

PLS III-IV ARE BETWEEN PP. 112 AND 113

- III. *Timon of Athens*, The Old Vic, 1956. Produced by Michael Benthall and designed by Leslie Hurry
  - A. Timon besieged by his creditors  
(Dudley Jones)
  - B. Alcibiades pleads with the senators  
(Dudley Jones)
  - C. Timon turns on his false friends at the mock-banquet  
(Dudley Jones)
- IV. A. Timon throws gold to Alcibiades (left) who is accompanied by Timandra and Phrynia  
(Dudley Jones)
  - B. Timon in the woods rails at Apemantus  
(Dudley Jones)
  - C. Timon chisels his epitaph  
(Dudley Jones)

PLS V-VIII ARE BETWEEN PP. 128 AND 129

- V. A. Caesar's soul is made a star. An early seventeenth-century illustration of the climax of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Antwerp, 1606, etc.)  
(BM 11355a. 12)
  - B. *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1957  
Produced by Glen Byam Shaw, designed by Motley  
(Angus McBean)

## LIST OF PLATES

- VI. A. *As You Like It*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1957  
Produced by Glen Byam Shaw, designed by Motley  
(Angus McBean)
- B. *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1957  
Produced by Peter Hall, designed by Lila de Nobili  
(Angus McBean)
- VII. A. *King John*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1957  
Produced by Douglas Seale, designed by Audrey Cruddas  
(Angus McBean)
- B. *The Tempest*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1957  
Produced and designed by Peter Brook  
(Angus McBean)
- VIII. *The Tempest*, Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1957  
Prospero and Miranda  
(Angus McBean)

# SHAKESPEARE'S ROMANCES: 1900-1957

BY

PHILIP EDWARDS

It would be vainglory to suggest that recent criticism has succeeded in justifying the large claims it has made for Shakespeare's Romances. Though we may be convinced, because of the constant insistence, that the Romances are important, it is hard to point to the critic who has shown where the importance lies. At any rate, a retrospect of this century's work on the last plays has little progress to report. "We cannot enlarge our conceptions," said Hazlitt, "we can only shift our point of view." The chronological story of the changing attitude to the Romances is often told; to repeat it here would give a false impression of organic development. The views of Dowden, Strachey and Wilson Knight do not act out Tillyard's tragic scheme of Prosperity, Destruction and Regeneration. Although critics may see themselves as moving on from positions already reached, confounding the errors and enlarging on the hints of those who have preceded them, the chart of criticism over the years shows no continuous course, but a series of different vectors from different starting points. To make any sense out of the record of twentieth-century criticism of Shakespeare's last plays, with its bewildering disagreements on what the plays contain, it is essential to discuss criticism in the light of the assumptions the writers make about literature. This essay is more of an attempt to distinguish between the prevailing critical attitudes to the Romances in the last fifty years than an account of work done. I have chosen some two dozen studies in order to illustrate the four or five main critical approaches and the different conclusions which writers using a similar approach may come to. I am particularly sorry that this scheme, partly because it is rather arbitrarily selective and partly because it gives weight to criticism relating to the Romances as a group, does not allow me to discuss many important studies of individual plays.

The 'problem' of the last plays may be stated quite simply. *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, with (sometimes) *Pericles* and (sometimes) *Henry VIII* as outriders, form a group with similar characteristics, incidents and endings. They seem more closely related than any other group of Shakespeare's plays. What they have in common makes them startlingly different from the plays which go before them. They are, moreover, written at the close of the author's writing career. So there is something of a mystery to be solved. The mystery is all the more interesting because the change in character appears to be a change away from the control and concentration which Shakespeare had achieved in the great tragedies. Construction and characterization seem to show not greater artistic maturity, but less. Inevitably, a good deal of the criticism we have to review is genetic criticism. The question, "Why should Shakespeare turn to writing these plays?" is inextricably entwined with the question, "What is the significance of these plays?" For some, the first question has been much more absorbing than the second, and, indeed, the second has only troubled them as a means of answering the first. But it is not curiosity alone that has led others, who set themselves no other object than the understanding of

## SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

the Romances, into a discussion of Shakespeare's motives. S. L. Bethell puts the point explicitly (*The Winter's Tale*, p. 20):

Why does Shakespeare in the last phase of his dramatic activity turn to these naïve and impossible romances? And why is his dramatic technique apparently crude and incoherent? Was his interest waning—in the drama, or in life? Was his technical ability deserting him? These are the questions which every critic of the last plays must attempt to answer. . . .

There is some danger of errors in critical logic when Shakespeare's motives, inferred from the nature of the Romances, are used to aid enquiry into the nature of the Romances, but the only point I want to make here is that in reviewing recent criticism it is impossible to separate discussion of the motives of the artist from artistic achievement. It is perhaps not a profitless speculation, however, to wonder what criticism would have made of these plays, or any one of them, if all Shakespeare's other plays had been lost.

### THE POET HIMSELF

In the first decade of this century, most of the 'schools' of criticism we have to consider already existed in one form or another. But the dominant interest was biographical, and the search was for the poet himself. Poetry being the expression of a poet's feelings, discussion of poetry amounted to discussion of the poet. The re-creation of Shakespeare from the larva of his emotions took various forms. One was the reconstruction of personality. Lytton Strachey gives us a text: "Is it not thus that we should imagine him in the last years of his life?" ('Shakespeare's Final Period', *Independent Review*, III (1904), reprinted in *Books and Characters* and *Literary Essays*.) So little does Strachey question the duty of investigating the poet's state of mind, that, at the outset of his essay, he steam-rollers over his own doubts about the relations between an artist and his art, and "assumes the truth of the generally accepted view, that the character of the one can be inferred from that of the other". His masterful and entertaining onslaught was directed not at a method of enquiry, but at the conclusions which the enquiry usually led to. These conclusions he exemplified from Dowden and Furnivall, whose work lies outside my arbitrary limit of years. But in 1902, two years before Strachey's essay, Morton Luce had put forward strongly enough his own version of the "serene self-possession" remarked on by Dowden, in the old Arden edition of *The Tempest*. "Style is a revelation of soul" is his starting point—style in the largest sense. If *The Tempest* does not reveal the personal feelings of the author, it is "imposture", "subtle and despicable hypocrisy". *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest* and part of *Pericles* represent a definite stage in the author's career. The structure of these plays shows, if not carelessness, a lack of "concentrated artistic determination and purpose", for the writing of plays is for their author now "more of a recreation". The spirit of the plays, however, is marked by a high morality of tone, and "they all tell of repentance and reconciliation, of pardon, love, peace". There is "a passionate return to nature", to "the happy, innocent life of hill and stream and field and flower"; there is "a reverent recognition of the supernatural", and "the thoughtful yet affectionate interest felt by maturer years in the woes and joys of youth". "He is now approaching his fiftieth year; and his experience, if it left him sadder when he wrote his great tragedies, has now left him wiser also." He is "kindlier with his kind". A good deal

## SHAKESPEARE'S ROMANCES: 1900-1957

of the information for this picture of Shakespeare comes from an identification of Prospero with his creator.

There is a similar point of view in Walter Raleigh's chapter on 'The Last Phase' in his *Shakespeare* (1907). Shakespeare was weary of the business of drama and cared only to indulge his whim. The plays are the toys of serenity. The structure itself, then, is a reflection of the author's mood, and so are the incidents and situations—the pastoral scenes, for example, with their "peaceful round of daily duties and rural pieties". This mood is an all-embracing tolerance and kindness, a mood or state of mind issuing from his mood during the tragic period. As he wrote his tragedies, Shakespeare was not aloof from the suffering and horror he portrayed. "His foothold is precarious on the edge that overlooks the gulf." Though "the smell of the fire had passed on him", he regained a perfect calm of mind.

Against this view of serenity and benevolence, Strachey rebelled. The happy endings of the plays showed, not Shakespeare's tranquillity, but that he knew how to end a fairy tale. "And in this land of faery, is it right to neglect the goblins?" Strachey points to the evil and the violence in the last plays, the infamy, the figures of discord, in Iachimo, Cloten, Caliban, for example. Shakespeare's powers of writing a good play, of creating interesting minor characters, of good-humoured tolerance, have all deteriorated. The reader is often bored—

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that he was getting bored himself. Bored with people, bored with real life, bored with drama, bored, in fact, with everything except poetry and poetical dreams. . . . on the one side inspired by a soaring fancy to the singing of ethereal songs, and on the other, urged by a general disgust to burst occasionally through his torpor into bitter and violent speech.

Strachey's essay was, as they say, a 'useful corrective'. The vision of the mellowed and matured Shakespeare, sitting by the banks of the Avon, the wind playing gently with his white hair, submerged to reappear only furtively. But the essay has offended most succeeding critics, who, admitting the presence of evil and discord and acknowledging its importance, repudiate the idea that the plays are knitted out of boredom, disgust and poetic dreams. A view not unlike Strachey's, however, has recently been put forward in a pair of sharp and disconcerting essays by Clifford Leech (in *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, 1950), though Strachey's "impish account" is expressly rejected as respects dramatic care, thought and execution. Leech's account of the "new ethical attitude" of the last plays is something to which the biographical reconstruction, stressed here, is only incidental: no one would suggest that he reads the plays only for what he learns about their author. Leech discerns a "puritanic tinge" in the last plays, an urge to discipline man's unruly flesh. He finds forgiveness forced, or allowed only after severe punishment. "It is the more passionate nature that seeks in time for the curb upon itself." There is a tension between indulgence and restraint, between a love of beauty and a new asceticism in sexual matters. Strachey found Prospero a crusty middle-aged gentleman, and for Leech, too, he is no benign figure, but a disgruntled "schoolmaster-magician", lacking human sympathy, striving to discipline human nature, whose "tired and sententious epilogue. . . is significant of Shakespeare's own sense of the futility of castigation". It is a brave man who can talk of the concluding scenes of *The Tempest* in terms of "their recurrent harshness of tone and their burden of moral exhaustion" and a braver man still who can, in this post-war world of criticism, dare to attribute this



## SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

tone to the emotional life of the dramatist. Shakespeare criticism would be the weaker without its dissentient voices.

A second type of biographical criticism uses the last plays as the material to create a chart of the dramatist's spiritual development. There is a clear distinction between this approach and the re-creation of the author's 'mood', though the two are often seen together. One must also make a distinction between criticism which goes no further than saying that a play expresses an attitude to life (or that the Romances as a whole express an attitude to life) and criticism in which the dominating interest is the consistent and gradual enlargement or alteration of the poet's attitude to life. Two studies of the last plays which illustrate this interest are discussed in a later section of this essay: D. G. James, 'The Failure of the Ballad Makers', in *Scepticism and Poetry* (1937), and G. Wilson Knight, *Myth and Miracle* (1929) and *The Crown of Life* (1947).

### CONDITIONED ART

Throughout the century there have been critics fundamentally opposed to a 'subjective' solution of the problem of the Romances. Biographical criticism argues that they are plays which Shakespeare must write if he is to speak the truth about himself. Either his mood, or his vision of things, demands that *The Tempest* be written. In 1901 Ashley H. Thorndike had denied the propriety of such hypotheses (*The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher upon Shakespeare*). He admitted that Shakespeare's mind was not the same at the time of writing *Hamlet* as at the time of writing *The Tempest*, that no one can disprove conjectures that personal circumstances may have accompanied his "varying creative moods". But he insisted that objective influences were decisive in the change of style towards the Romances. Shakespeare was an actor and a theatre-owner, with more than a detached interest in stage fashions and stage rivalries. His plays must pay, and he was determined to produce something which would gratify his public. Towards the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century, it was obvious that Beaumont and Fletcher had created a new type of drama, the heroic romance, which was immensely popular. Sensitive and obedient to the public demand, Shakespeare wrote his own tragi-comic romances. The happy endings of the plays are required by the form and the subject; Shakespeare may have wished to express the sweetness of forgiveness and reconciliation, but happy endings are naturally a feature of Beaumont and Fletcher also, and Shakespeare's mood may well have differed from those of the two younger men.

The thesis, then, is that Shakespeare imitated Beaumont and Fletcher. The whole theory depends upon the relative dating of Shakespeare's Romances and the work of Beaumont and Fletcher; in particular, of *Cymbeline* and *Philaster*, which certainly have incidents and passages which ring alike. The dating is an extremely uncertain business, and it is a marvel that so serious a theory can be built on very dubious foundations. Thorndike's arguments about the chronology of the relevant plays is highly conjectural, based upon probability and a sense of fitness more often than on fact. In addition, he does not take *Pericles* properly into account, and *Pericles* almost certainly precedes *Philaster*. *Pericles* is relegated to an appendix, and it is argued that it is not similar in tone and mood to the other Romances or to Beaumont and Fletcher. Another study of chronology might just as well show that Shakespeare was the pioneer and Beaumont and Fletcher the followers. There is also weakness in the insistence on the similarities between the

## SHAKESPEARE'S ROMANCES: 1900-1957

work of Shakespeare and that of his young colleagues. On this, Thorndike has often been answered. (See, e.g., Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions*, p. 304.)

Another image of a Shakespeare bound to create what the public were clamouring for is seen in J. Q. Adams' *Life of Shakespeare* (1923), but now the change in the drama is caused, not by bright young men, but by the climate of the times: the enervating reign of James and the withdrawal of the theatre to a courtly audience. Adams notes a decline in seriousness and a vitiation of moral tone. Beaumont and Fletcher lead the new fashion, and Shakespeare must needs do his best to purvey what is required, finding his own style of play old-fashioned. But, reluctant and defeated though he may be, this Samson in Gaza will not totally destroy the spirit of his work; he meets the fashion half-way, so that the Romances are Shakespeare's attempt to hold fast to his moral tone in an alien world and an alien form of drama.

A much more attractive 'explanation' of the Romances in terms of theatrical conditions is in G. E. Bentley's 'Shakespeare and the Blackfriars Theatre' (*Shakespeare Survey*, 1, 1948). Here is a striking, vivid picture of Shakespeare as a man of the theatre, a picture which never belittles him, as Thorndike's does. Though Shakespeare is shown preoccupied with theatre-leases, engaging new dramatists, planning new plays in committee, concerned with finance, anxious to avoid box-office failure, we are not given a crafty impresario whose art is subdued to the main chance. Bentley's theory is simple. The King's Men acquired the lease of the 'private' theatre, Blackfriars, in the summer of 1608 (though playing hardly began before 1610). Here was a new, important and daring venture—a public company entering the world of the coterie-theatre, with its different type of audience and their different expectations in entertainment. Bentley suggests that there must have been earnest conversations amongst the leaders of the King's Men to make sure that their venture would be no failure, and that Shakespeare must have taken a chief share in these conferences. The King's Men, it is argued, decided to engage Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, with their experience in writing for the private theatre, and agreed that Shakespeare, their most successful dramatist, should turn his talents to providing a new sort of play for the Blackfriars audience, namely *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, and, in collaboration with Fletcher, *Henry VIII* and *Cardenio*. Whether *Cymbeline* or *Philaster* came first no longer matters. "It is their common purpose and environment, not imitation of one by the other, that makes them similar."

One could wish that Bentley had dealt in his article with several possible objections. Again, there is the problem of *Pericles*, on the boards at the Globe by the spring of 1608 at the latest. Though Shakespeare may be responsible for only half of it, he undoubtedly enters the world of his Romances through that play. Secondly, there is no proof that the other Romances were not Globe plays. As J. M. Nosworthy points out (New Arden *Cymbeline*, p. xvi), Simon Forman saw *The Winter's Tale* and, presumably, *Cymbeline* at the Globe. Related to this is a deeper objection (for a play written for Blackfriars might also be played at the Globe where Forman could see it more cheaply) implied in Harbage's conviction (*op. cit.* p. 86) that the Romances are popular in type and do not belong to the moral world of the coterie-theatres. Harbage suggests that Shakespeare in his last plays is turning back to the popular adventure-drama of his youth. To this point we shall have to return.

The attractiveness of Bentley's thesis is that he does not trespass on what Shakespeare made of the challenge presented to him. He is in no danger of maintaining that, since the plays are written

## SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

to order, they are, shall we say, 'insincere'. It is a foolish position to be at either of the extremes of 'subjective' or 'external' motivation. If theatrical circumstances influenced Shakespeare, he may still find freedom in his service. The saner criticism of the last plays, before and after Bentley, has been willing to accept the idea that there may well be 'pressure' of some kind on Shakespeare in these last years, but that his genius is not therefore subdued. The point is made with individual variations, as by Una Ellis-Fermor (*Jacobean Drama*, p. 268), or by J. F. Danby (*Poets on Fortune's Hill*, p. 106), who remarks: "A change of taste in the audience, a tiredness in the writer himself—any of a number of secondary causes would equally account for the shift of subject matter, without compromise to Shakespeare's integrity or his sincerity."

## MYTH, SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY

By far the biggest and most influential school of criticism we have to consider is a school of many sects. Its members are united in the belief that the Romances are written in a form of other-speaking, and must be translated before their significance can be understood. There is little point at this stage in the waning of the century in speaking once more of the tremendous impact of anthropology and comparative religion on criticism, but it must be said that interest in the last plays would have been a shadow of what it has been in fact, if vegetation rites and royal deaths and resurrections, and the symbolic patterns in which the inner realities of human experience display themselves, had been less enthusiastically received into the small-talk of the age.

Allegory, of course, has been popular in *Tempest* criticism for a very long time, and it may help to make clear the spirit of the revelations that were yet to come to look at one specimen of allegory in the days of Edward VII. Churton Collins ('Poetry and Symbolism: A Study of *The Tempest*', *Contemporary Review*, January 1908) lacks the confidence which the findings of Miss Bodkin and Miss Weston gave to later interpreters; he is modest and humble. He found that Browning only laughed when he asked him if 'Hugues of Saxe-Gotha' were not symbolic of man's bewilderment before the divine providence. But he could not believe himself wrong to interpret the poem so; perhaps a poet is often unconscious that his work is an allegory of an experience deeper than it professes. If the inner significance of great poetry is not always defined in the author's mind, diffidence and tentativeness must accompany the criticism which would try to explain an inner significance. With all caution, Collins suggests that the island in *The Tempest* may be considered as the world, with Prospero as the controlling divinity. The characters are various aspects of humanity. The plot tells how those subjects who have sinned against and wronged a Power are at last brought before the Power. The wrong done is answered with forgiveness, "sealed and ratified by the marriage of the child of the wronged one with the child of the wronger". Like the last plays as a whole, *The Tempest* portrays the moral government of the universe in optimistic terms, Shakespeare being deeply influenced by the beauty of Christian belief. Whether we find an allegorical approach permissible or not, Collins is attractive, not only because he fears the rigid scheme, but because the play he is talking about is clearly the play of the same title which we have read. And critics who do not find allegory permissible have been content to summarize *The Tempest* on the text of *felix culpa* as Collins does: "The whole play is saturated with irony, an irony reversing the terrible irony of the tragedies: its very title

is ironical—that tempest which was no tempest, that wreck which was no wreck, that salvation in loss, that harmony in discord.”

If we jump over the years, the change in tone is sharp. Northrop Frye, for example, remarks: “With the disappearance and revival of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*, who actually returns once as a ghost in a dream, the original nature-myth of Demeter and Proserpine is openly established” (“The Argument of Comedy”, *English Institute Essays*, 1948 (1949)). No doubt one could push this kind of criticism further back than 1921, but it was in that year that Colin Still published his original study of *The Tempest* as *Shakespeare's Mystery Play*; it was “enlarged and clarified” in 1936 as *The Timeless Theme*. The titles together are admirably significant of his view that art is not what it seems, but “spontaneous reflections of the unchanging facts of mankind's spiritual pilgrimage”. (This pilgrimage, a struggle out of darkness into light, is symbolized not only in art but in rituals, like, for example, the Eleusinian mysteries.) *The Tempest* is “a dramatic representation of the Mystery of Redemption, conceived as a psychological experience and expressed in mythological form”. Only the critic who is himself a mystic can perceive the truths which great works of art reflect, and is able to interpret them. The office of hierophant is rarely assumed so candidly, but Still's conception of his role is not fundamentally different from that of other critics who take us through one or more of the Romances, explaining as they go, like Bunyan's Interpreter, what it all really means.

A few examples will illustrate Still's method and his wealth of comparisons. The story of the court party, for instance, reveals the pattern of the Lesser Initiation through Purgatory. The Ceremony of Water takes place when the courtiers are flung into the sea from their wrecked ship; as they emerge from the water their clothes are even finer than they were at first. This Ceremony takes place on a voyage from Tunis to Naples, almost identical with the voyage from Carthage to Cumae of Aeneas, at the end of which he too undertook his purgation in the descent into the underworld. The adventures of the court party, which include a banquet offered and removed, may be compared with the temptation of Christ as described by Milton in *Paradise Regained*. Stephano and Trinculo shadow forth the Fall. Ferdinand makes the ascent to the Celestial Paradise which constitutes the Greater Initiation. Prospero, as the initiating priest, may also be considered as the God whom the priest represents.

There are several ‘anthropological’ studies of the last plays: two on *The Winter's Tale* may be mentioned. F. C. Tinkler was himself an anthropologist; his interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* appeared in *Scrutiny* in 1937. Much of the article is about a synthesis of the rural and court ‘modes’, which I shall discuss later. But “the larger rhythm of the play” is “the association between the idea of a divine king and the rhythm of the seasons”. Mamilus is the concrete symbol of the spiritual health of his father, Leontes, and his death is always talked of in terms of its effect on other people. Perdita and Florizel are “almost vegetation deities” and in the final reunion “the rhythm is complete and the Waste Land is made fertile once more”. F. D. Hoegner's discussion of the play in 1950 (*University of Toronto Quarterly*) was put forward as “a re-valuation based on a new and revolutionary interpretation of its meaning”. Hoegner justifies his parabolic reading of the play as being in the medieval tradition of anagogy. His essay is not so much on how one may perceive in *The Winter's Tale* the age-old vegetation myth of rebirth, but on the play as an allegory of that deep scheme. He notes the significance of references to the seasons, and to the similarity of children and parents. He then draws the parallel between

## SHAKESPEARE SURVEY

Perdita and Proserpine, and Hermione and Demeter. "The Persephone of the one year becomes the Demeter of the next. By analogy, we can understand the close similarity between Perdita and Hermione." The myths and mysteries of the vegetation cycle also expressed "man's hope in a blissful immortality". "Leontes' paradise at the end of the play is not, like Perdita's, that of a garden, but of a city and a temple, corresponding to the Heavenly City in the New Testament, the Temple of God. There he remarries Hermione, just as Dante meets Beatrice again, and Faust the eternal form of Gretchen."

The most vigorous exponent of the theory that the last plays are myths, bodying forth man's apprehension of the mystery of salvation and immortality, is, of course, Wilson Knight. In his essay on *The Tempest*, Knight makes a most important statement of belief about the nature of drama (pp. 226-7). "Fundamental verities of nature, man and God do not change." For these verities there is "a certain common language of symbol", found in mythology, ritual and poetry. In the Middle Ages the dominating ritual was the Mass. "The medieval system losing its hold, the way was open for a far more richly varied drama, with manifold dangers but also new possibilities of illumination."

A common store of racial wisdom for centuries untapped is now released, as Prospero releases Ariel; and the highly responsible artist has himself to explore and exploit the wide area of imaginative truth apparently excluded (though perhaps in some sense surveyed and transcended) by Christian dogma.

The vision of "fundamental verities" which the last plays symbolically express is one towards which Shakespeare's plays have been remorselessly working, and this unfolding vision it is the office of the critic-priest to mediate to the public. There is a remarkable consistency and symmetry in Knight's account of the development of the Shakespearian vision, and of its relation with the increasing understanding of truth to be found in the work of other great seers: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Keats.

The progress from spiritual pain and despairing thought through stoic acceptance to a serene and mystic joy is a universal rhythm of the spirit of man. . . . As for my contention that the Final Plays of Shakespeare must be read as myths of immortality, that is only to bring them into line with other great works of literature. Tragedy is never the last word.

Another comparison is made with the three books of *The Divine Comedy*, and then this three-stage development is to be seen as a reflection of "that mystic truth from which are born the dogmas of the Catholic Church—the incarnation in actuality of the Divine Logos of Poetry; the temptation in the desert, the tragic ministry and death, and the resurrection of the Christ" (*Myth and Miracle*, reprinted in *The Crown of Life*. See pp. 29-31). It is a sign of the times that one's response to patterns of this kind is not exaltation but considerable nervousness.

It is impossible for a summary of Knight's book to do more than indicate very sketchily the direction of his arguments. *Pericles* stands on the threshold of the Romances, as the Romances stand on the threshold of *Henry VIII*. "We are watching something like a parable of human fortune, with strong moral import at every turn." *Pericles* is less a tragic hero, related by his own deeds to his disaster, than a suffering Everyman, though he may be said to endure "a fall in the theological sense" in his immoderate desire for Antiochus' daughter. The movement of his career ends beyond tragedy, in some "higher recognition and rehabilitation" with the recovery