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34

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SHAKESPEARE'S OPEN SECRET

KENNETH MUIR

One of the embarrassments of writing about Shakespeare is to discover when one appears in print that, as Hector remarked about Troilus and Paris, one has glozed but superficially on the question at issue. I grew up in the age of Bradley; and, like most Shakespearians of my generation, I was later influenced by the criticisms made of his method by Edgar Elmer Stoll, Lily Bess Campbell, Levin Schücking, and L. C. Knights. I came to assume that Bradley read subtleties into the plays which would have astonished an Elizabethan audience or, indeed, the poet himself; that he was too little aware of theatrical considerations; and that (as Knights put it) he did not know that *Macbeth* was more like *The Waste Land* than *A Doll's House*. In fact, as we now know, Bradley was a keen playgoer and he always believed and asserted that Shakespeare's plays were essentially dramatic poems. Some of the most memorable passages in his *Shakespearean Tragedy* are on a subject he professedly omitted – the poetry of the plays; while, on the other hand, the most memorable passages of his critics are not those where the plays are considered specifically as dramatic poems, but rather those which concentrate on the moral issues raised in them. Leavis's quarrel with Bradley on Othello, and Knights's quarrel with him on Hamlet and Macbeth were largely due to their conviction that these tragic heroes were bad men who had been whitewashed by Bradley. He had been seduced by the poetry Shakespeare puts into their mouths, much as

we are seduced by advertisements which persuade us to buy nicotine and alcohol by associating these slow poisons with attractive and apparently accessible girls.

Some of the criticisms made of Bradley are unjustified. He was fully aware that there was a vital difference between characters in a play and living persons. He pointed out:

To consider separately the action or the characters of a play . . . is legitimate and valuable, so long as we remember what we are doing. But the true critic in speaking of these apart does not really think of them apart; the while, the poetic experience of which they are but aspects, is always in his mind; and he is always aiming at a richer, truer, more intense repetition of that experience.¹

Although he sometimes made the mistake of considering what happened off stage, or before the beginning of the action, he could never have made the kind of mistake into which Helen Faucit fell in her letters about Shakespeare's heroines. When she played Imogen she was convinced that that character would not long survive after the end of the play:

Happiness hides for a time injuries which are past healing. The blow which was inflicted by the first sentence in that cruel letter went to the heart with a too fatal force. Then followed, on this crushing blow, the wandering hopeless days and nights, without shelter, without food even up to the point of famine. Was this delicately nurtured creature one to

¹ *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909), pp. 16–17.

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go through her terrible ordeal unscathed? We see that when food and shelter came, they came too late. The heart-sickness is upon her: 'I am sick still – heart-sick'. Upon this follows the fearful sight of, as she supposes, her husband's body. Well may she say that she is 'nothing; or if not, nothing to be were better'. When happiness, even such as she had never known before, comes to her, it comes, like the food and shelter, too late. Tremblingly, gradually, and oh, how reluctantly, the hearts to whom that life is so precious will see the sweet smile which greets them grow fainter, will hear the loved voice grow feebler! The wise physician Cornelius will tax his utmost skill, but he will find the hurt is too deep for mortal leech-craft.²

Bradley did not read *Hamlet* as though it were *Middlemarch*. Nor was his aim to give separate character sketches of the dramatis personae, but rather to encourage people to 'read a play more or less as if they were actors who had to study all the parts . . . This, carried through a drama, is the right way to read the dramatist Shakespeare; and the prime requisite here is therefore a vivid and intent imagination.'³

Bradley's weakness, oddly enough, was not that he was a bardolater – though he once remarked that the appreciation of Shakespeare was the whole duty of man – but that he often seems to be apologizing for faults which would not be visible to an audience. He did not fully appreciate that things invisible to an audience should not be regarded as flaws. The performances he witnessed in the later years of the nineteenth century were adaptations, and he never understood that the plays were perfectly designed for the Elizabethan theatre. It may be added that Bradley sometimes invented psychological reasons for actions dictated by the plot; that he ignored the differences between Elizabethan and nineteenth-century psychological theories, and that his own theories did not make enough allowance for irrationality.

The situation has, of course, changed during the last seventy-five years. Everyone now agrees that Shakespeare's plays belong pri-

marily to the theatre, and most of us believe that in all his mature plays Shakespeare was professionally as competent as modern directors, and wiser than most of his critics. We have had the opportunity, which Bradley's generation had not, of seeing productions which obeyed, or at least acknowledged, Elizabethan stage conventions. Everyone now knows about unlocalized scenes, the fluid construction of the plays, Shakespeare's scenic art, the use of rhetorical patterns, multiple consciousness, direct self-explanation, the use of imagery, and so on. One result of this critical revolution is that we have had to modify our views on Shakespeare's method of characterization. This does not mean that Bradley's method was absolutely wrong, or that Shakespeare was so careless an artist that he cheerfully allowed absurd inconsistencies in characterization – that he created a Macbeth who could not have murdered Duncan, an Othello who could not have developed into a jealous maniac, an Angelo who could never have lusted after a novice.

Bradley provides a useful introduction to the subject of my paper: how far ought we to modify Bradley's method of approach to Shakespeare's characters? To put it in another way, what are the means by which Shakespeare creates characters who seem to be more life-like than those of other dramatists?

In many ways, of course, Shakespeare's method is not very different from that of Racine, Molière, Chekhov or Ibsen. He, like them, creates credible characters by the actions they are made to perform, by what they say about themselves and others, by what other characters, friends and enemies, say about them, by the speech patterns they use, even by their silences. We may choose Hamlet as a convenient example because he is the best known of all Shakespeare's characters. Hamlet

² *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (Edinburgh and London, 1885), pp. 278–9.

³ *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), p. 2.

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feigns madness, spares Claudius, kills Polonius, sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their deaths, grapples with Laertes at Ophelia's grave-side. He laments Gertrude's remarriage, vows to avenge his father's murder, admires an old play about Dido, inveighs against Ophelia, castigates his own delay, praises Horatio's imperturbability, meditates suicide, preaches to Gertrude. He is said by Ophelia to have had a noble mind, and to have been the observed of all observers; by Claudius he is said to be a fever in his blood, but also most generous and free of all contriving. To Horatio he is 'sweet Prince' and to Fortinbras one who would have made an excellent king. Any interpretation of Hamlet's character would have to take note of these and many other words and actions; but (as he tells us) he is not so easily played upon as a pipe. This is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the old method of character analysis, and no one would now regard it as adequate. If we consider some of its limitations we shall obtain an insight into Shakespeare's own method of creating character.

The main limitation is that such an attempt to pigeon-hole a Shakespeare character evades the ambiguities and ambivalencies which are an essential part of his method – what Maurice Morgann meant by the term 'secret impressions'. Our 'impressions and understanding of a scene may be at variance', and Morgann argued that this was an effect deliberately contrived by the poet and that 'the Principles of this Disagreement are really in human Nature'. He was arguing that we have conflicting impressions about our friends and acquaintances and Shakespeare's realization of this made his characters truer to life – more real – than the characters of other dramatists. Morgann was concerned with the conflicting impressions which are caused by what the characters do and say, and by what others say about them. I want to enlarge the question, so as to embrace five or six points that Morgann could ignore in writing on Falstaff.

First, we may consider the expectations of

the audience from their previous knowledge of the story, and the extent to which Shakespeare fulfilled or disappointed those expectations. This is a matter which is assumed by anyone who writes on Greek tragedy. The plays written by Euripides and Sophocles about Electra derive much of their interest and significance from their deviations from the Aeschylean version; just as, in our own day, Sartre and O'Neill assumed our knowledge of the Oresteia, and Cocteau and Anouilh played on our knowledge of the Oedipus story.

Most of Shakespeare's original audience would have been acquainted with the story of Lear, and they would all expect him to be restored to the throne. When Edmund sends his sword to countermand the death-sentence, most members of the audience must have believed – or at least hoped – that Cordelia would be saved.

Hamlet (to take another example) had been popular for a decade when Shakespeare transformed it. He relied on the fact that the audience would make comparisons. He tantalized the expectations of the audience and teased them into thought. Waldock and other critics have argued that Shakespeare was foolishly pouring new wine into old bottles, and that traces of the old motivations, of the old primitive avenger, blatantly conflict with the character of the introspective hero of the new version. The original Hamlet would doubtless have made obscene remarks to Ophelia, spared the King at his prayers so as not to send him to heaven, referred callously to the corpse of Polonius as 'the guts', and murdered his old friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern without a qualm. But, we are told, the Prince who speaks the great soliloquies or meditates on the special providence in the fall of a sparrow, would never have done such brutal things. *But he did*: Shakespeare deliberately retained some of the characteristics of the old avenger. The conflict between the old avenger and the new – one might almost say between the Old and New Testaments – was one of the ways by

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which the character of the Prince was made stereoscopically real. It is not surprising that there have been several hundred interpretations of Hamlet's character, many of them based on the text, or a fraction of it, and therefore plausible.

There may well have been more than one play about Julius Caesar before Shakespeare wrote his. In any case – and this was the reason why Ernest Schanzer called *Julius Caesar* a problem play – Shakespeare could dally with conflicting views on the assassination: whether Brutus and Cassius were martyrs in the cause of freedom, or criminals who deserved to be relegated to the lowest circle of hell, alongside Judas.

The story of Coriolanus was also well known, but not previously dramatized. It was frequently used by political theorists to illustrate the evils of democracy: only Machiavelli condemned Coriolanus for his treachery. But Shakespeare could nevertheless set up conflicting impressions about his hero. He does this, more overtly than usual, in a curious speech by Aufidius, who advances a number of different explanations of Coriolanus's banishment:

I think he'll be to Rome
As is the osprey to the fish, who takes it
By sovereignty of nature. First he was
A noble servant to them, but he could not
Carry his honours even. Whether 'twas pride,
Which out of daily fortune ever taints
The happy man; whether defect of judgement,
To fail in the disposing of those chances
Which he was lord of; or whether nature,
Not to be other than one thing, not moving
From th'casque to th'cushion, but commanding
peace
Even with the same austerity and garb
As he controll'd the war; but one of these –
As he hath spices of them all – not all,
For I dare so far free him – made him fear'd,
So hated, and so banish'd. But he has a merit
To choke it in the utterance. So our virtues
Lie in th'interpretation of the time,
And power, unto itself most commendable,

Hath not a tomb so evident as a chair
T'extol what it hath done.

(*Coriolanus*, 4.7.33–53)

Aufidius offers several explanations: pride, defect of judgement, trying to apply military discipline to peace-time government. There is some truth in all of them; but as Aufidius has good reason to hate Coriolanus, what he says is not the whole truth. We have to balance it with what his friends and relations say; what the choric figures who prepare the senate house for a meeting conclude about his virtues and defects; and above all we have to consider the subtext of his own speeches, his love for his wife, his fatal devotion to his dreadful mother, his feeling that compromise was the enemy of integrity – this is underlined by his repeated theatrical imagery – and his hatred of the common people which may be traced to his inadequate upbringing. It has often been pointed out that Valeria's description of the boy Marcius was intended to reflect on the immaturity of his father:

O' my word, the father's son! I'll swear 'tis a very pretty boy. O' my troth, I look'd upon him a Wednesday half an hour together; has such a confirmed countenance! I saw him run after a gilded butterfly; and when he caught it he let it go again, and after it again, and over and over he comes, and up again, catch'd it again; or whether his fall enrag'd him, or how 'twas, he did so set his teeth and tear it. O, I warrant, how he mammock'd it!

(*Coriolanus*, 1.3.57–65)

If one analyses any of Shakespeare's major characters one soon unveils similar complexities; and Morgann was surely right when he argued that the impression of overwhelming reality given by Shakespeare's characters was due to this. A similar impression of human reality is obtained by Paul Scott in the *Raj Quartet*, in which we get a variety of conflicting impressions of the different characters, according to the viewpoint of the person through whose eyes we see the events. This is rather different from the technique used by

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Browning in *The Ring and the Book*; for although Browning uses as his spokesmen nine or ten different characters, there is no over-all ambiguity: we never doubt that Pompilia is an innocent and saintly victim and that her husband is a villain.

I turn now to another cause of conflicting impressions: the use of stage types as the basis of a character, though never as simply as the *commedia dell'arte* types in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Sometimes, indeed, there is an ingenious fusion of several different types. Falstaff, for example, is based on the *miles gloriosus*; but he is also a Vice or Riot, derived from moralities and interludes – and as such he represents the World, the Flesh and the Devil; and imposed on these is the allegedly hypocritical heretic, Oldcastle, whose characteristics survive in the occasional sanctimoniousness displayed by the fat rogue. (It may be added that several critics believe that the character reflects the feelings of the poet in his relationship with Mr W. H.) It was appropriate for Morgann to choose Falstaff as his chief exhibit in his essay on Shakespeare's method of characterization; and it is a pity that most commentators on Morgann have concentrated on his paradoxical defence of Falstaff's courage.

The influence of morality plays is more apparent in the tragedies; and it has often been shown that Shakespeare blends the influence of the metaphysical struggle between vice and virtue with a more modern, secular, psychological characterization. Iago is a demi-devil, anxious to bring Othello's soul to damnation; but he is also a character animated by jealousy, colour prejudice, and other very human motives. In addition to this blending of the psychological and the metaphysical, we have to remember (as Muriel Bradbrook reminds us) that Shakespeare was breaking the stereotypes of honest soldier and barbarous Moor. This, which so disgusted Rymer, was yet another way by which Shakespeare played with his audience. Rymer thought that a dishonest soldier was an incredible character: he did not

realize that Shakespeare made use of this assumption by making everyone refer to Iago's honesty. An audience, with its inevitably stock responses, would expect a white professional soldier to be a plain blunt man; so that Iago's deviousness, apparent in the opening dialogue with Roderigo, would upset their expectations. In the same way, they would believe that blackness was the devil's colour, and that a black-moor would be cruel, evil, and passionate. Shakespeare in the first two acts depicts a Moor who falsifies these expectations.

It would be easy to show that both *Macbeth* and *King Lear* combine the metaphysical with the psychological. I am not, of course, arguing that they are morality plays, but merely that the background of the psychomachia adds a metaphysical dimension to the characters. In *Macbeth* the good and evil supernatural are continually presented, and in *King Lear* the good and evil children are as plainly differentiated as the sheep and goats in the parable. With *King Lear* there is an additional complicating factor. The story was not merely well-known and legendary, but archetypal and mythical, so that the audience has the feeling, as it watches the love test in the first scene, or the scene in act 4 where the proud King and the proud daughter kneel to each other, that they are witnessing, one might almost say *re-enacting*, something that happened 'A great while since, a long long time ago'. Such a feeling is bound to affect, if only subliminally, an audience's reactions to the characters of the play. Lear and Gloucester, Goneril and Regan, are vividly realized characters, with different speech patterns, characters so delusively real that they have attracted the attention of psychoanalysts. On the other hand, they are mythological figures as fated as Oedipus to fulfil their destinies.

Another branch of Shakespeare's art which affects his method of characterization is his use of verse. It is more difficult to differentiate characters in verse than in prose. Shakespeare's triumphs in the plays written at the

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end of the sixteenth century – Shylock, Beatrice, Falstaff, Rosalind – must have tempted him to abandon verse, as Ibsen did in mid-career, because, as he said, verse had done immense injury to the art of the theatre. Stendhal, earlier in the century, had reached the same conclusion. His reason for preferring Shakespeare to Racine was that blank verse is closer than rhymed alexandrines to natural speech. English verse, he declared enthusiastically, was able to say everything. The alexandrine was no more than a *cache-sottise*. He allowed that verse plays gave a great deal of pleasure, but it was not a dramatic pleasure. Audiences enjoyed listening to noble sentiments expressed in beautiful verse, poetry recitals rather than drama. The most precious moments in the theatre were the short moments of perfect illusion; and beautiful verse was the enemy of illusion. What was needed, Stendhal wrote in 1822, was prose tragedy. He quoted Macbeth's words on seeing the ghost of Banquo and asked: 'What verse, what rhythm could add to the beauty of such a sentence?'⁴ The irony of this question is that the words he quoted were part of a regular line of verse. But he was right to feel that Shakespeare was able to express directly and simply things that were impossible for Racine. If Shakespeare had been born a hundred years later, he could not have used the words to which Dr Johnson objected in Lady Macbeth's invocation of the murdering ministers: 'peep', 'blanket' and 'knife'. To Shakespeare, born in the sixteenth century, nothing was common or unclean.

Yet Stendhal was wrong on several counts. His knowledge of English versification was apparently not enough for him to recognize a line of blank verse; his suspicion of anything poetic and his desire for prose tragedy showed that he appreciated only one part of Shakespeare's quality; and his belief in the supreme importance of illusion ignores the way an audience can believe in the reality of the scene at the same time as it enjoys the poetry. The illusion is never complete except for very naive

spectators (such as Partridge in *Tom Jones*) but it is not destroyed or even minimized by the poetry. No one listening to one of Macbeth's or Hamlet's soliloquies thinks primarily of the poetry unless the actor destroys the rhythm or the sense: it is the failure to do justice to the poetry which distracts our attention from the meaning.

In some dramatists, verse does indeed have a levelling effect, so that the style of an old man is no different from that of a young woman. But Shakespeare was careful, after his earliest plays, to alter his style to suit the character speaking. Romeo's initial speeches reveal the artificiality of his love for Rosaline, whereas the equally artificial sonnet he shares with Juliet on their first meeting is a means of revealing a marriage of true minds. In *Hamlet* the rhetorical excess of the Dido speeches throws into relief the colloquial agony of Hamlet's ensuing soliloquy, and the rhymed couplets of *The Mousetrap* (being a stage further away from colloquial speech than the blank verse of most of the play) make us believe that Hamlet is speaking naturally, however poetical his speeches are. Hamlet, indeed, has the most varied styles of any character in the whole of Shakespeare's dramas; and in the theatre we are hardly aware when he moves from prose to verse, or from verse to prose.

Since Caroline Spurgeon, Mikhail Morozov and Wolfgang Clemen wrote on the way imagery can be used to differentiate character, it has been generally recognized that even when characters draw their images from the same field, the particular images are appropriate to the characters who speak them. Othello uses sea imagery in a romantic and imaginative way; Iago's use of the same imagery is technical and pedestrian. Othello uses jewel imagery; Iago, like the enterprising monetarist he is, has straightforward references to cash. Troilus and

⁴ Stendhal, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. V. del Litto and E. Abravanel, 50 vols (Geneva, [1968–74]), vol. 37, pp. 8, 19, 86, 146.

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Pandarus both use cooking imagery, but in ways appropriate to their characters.

Imagery therefore provides another of the secret impressions which complicate our conceptions of the characters. The acting imagery used by Coriolanus reveals his revulsion against playing the part assigned to him by the patricians, the imagery used by Leontes when he falls a prey to the green-eyed monster conveys in the most economical way possible the turmoil in his soul, and Viola's image about her imaginary sister reveals something of her own secret passion – though she is far too sensible to pine away.

In the introduction to his translation of *Macbeth*, Maurice Maeterlinck suggested that Shakespeare used imagery to reveal the unconscious mind of his hero; and everyone recognizes that the prudential reasons he advances in the crucial soliloquy in act 1, scene 7 against murdering Duncan – universal condemnation, punishment in this life, compelled to drink the poisoned chalice – are all undermined and overturned by the sense of moral horror which the imagery discloses.

One other cause of conflicting impressions is the relationship of a particular play to those which immediately preceded it and, indeed, to the totality of the poet's work, and to the themes which occur in play after play. The seed of one play can sometimes be found in one he had written not long before (with which perhaps he was dissatisfied).

Now although Shakespeare was able to identify with a wide range of characters, wider than those of any other dramatist, he is more likely to identify with major characters, whether villains or heroes, than with a second sentry or a third citizen; with Angelo, Isabella and Claudio than with the Provost. To put it in another way, the reality of *Macbeth*, or *Othello*, or *Hamlet*, is so convincing to us because the poet imagined himself under the skins of those characters. Instinctively he was wondering how he would have felt, and what he would have done, if he had discovered that his mother

had committed adultery with the murderer of his father, what he would have done at Inverness or in Cyprus. I suggest that the presence of the poet as a secret and unacknowledged *dramatis persona* adds another and very potent secret impression to complicate our reactions to the characters. I am reminded by Inga-Stina Ewbank of a letter written by Strindberg about his *Son of a Servant*. He said he had not wished to write a biography or a volume of confessions, but that he had 'used his life, which he knew best of all lives, to try to formulate the history of the growth and development of a mind and to explore the concept of character on which the whole of literature rests'.

In the preface to the second edition of the book, Strindberg referred again to the same question: 'Whether the author has really, as he has at times believed, experimented with viewpoints, or incarnated himself in different personalities, polymerized himself, or whether a gracious providence has experimented with the author, must, for the enlightened reader, emerge from the texts.'

It was natural that Strindberg, simply because he was a dramatist, should speak, even about an avowedly autobiographical work, in such terms; and it can be said of Shakespeare too that he experimented with viewpoints, that he incarnated himself in different personalities, and that (to paraphrase *polymerize*) he passed through successive variations in his various characters. He would learn from his incarnation in different personalities, just as Edgar learnt from the various roles he assumed during the course of the play: Poor Tom, Demoniac, Peasant, Guide, Champion and Future King.

I turn now to a matter which applies not merely to Shakespeare but to all dramatists whose plays are regularly performed. Every new production of a play, whether good or bad, provides a different perspective on it; and, of course, no two performances of the same production can be identical. Let me give some examples from productions of *Troilus and Cressida*

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in the present century. When Edith Evans played Cressida in 1913 she went all out for comedy. As she took leave of Troilus, she was pinning on her hat, visibly intent on her change of fortunes, and bored with his demands that she should be faithful. When the play was staged in 1922 by the Marlowe Society to an audience which included war veterans, it seemed bitterly relevant to those who had been additionally disillusioned by the treaty of Versailles. When the play was performed in modern dress at the Westminster Theatre at the time of Munich, the war scenes became more interesting than the love scenes. As Desmond McCarthy wrote: 'The interesting result of modernising the play and presenting the characters in contemporary dress – Thersites as a dingy war correspondent (wearing a red tie); Helen and Cressida as cocktail party lovelies &c – is to bring us straight into contact with the mood in which the play was conceived and written.'⁵

In the days of the Phoney War – the lull before the invasion of France – the play was revived by the Marlowe Society and the debates in the Greek camp and on war aims were 'followed with a fascinated recognition of the immediate relevance at every point'. There was a revival in Edwardian costume directed by Tyrone Guthrie at the Old Vic, in which the love plot became 'thoughtless undergraduate seduced by bitch'. There have been six revivals at the Memorial Theatre since the first International Shakespeare Conference. In the 1960 revival directed by Peter Hall and John Barton the part of Cressida was taken by Dorothy Tutin, who (we are told) was 'a wisp of rippling carnality that [was] almost unbearably alluring', 'sweltering with concupiscence', 'almost unbearably erotic'. An actress who could so arouse the sexual fantasies of the critics went far to explaining why Troilus found her so enchanting. But this was not the most important thing about the production. The directors showed that the play was 'a planned, architected, coherent and powerful drama,

with Hector and Achilles the symbols of a conflict between chivalry and brutal opportunism, to which the ruin of Troilus by the faithless Cressida is secondary'. After more than 350 years the play had come into its own. In later Stratford revivals, the play was made more negative and more cynical, so that one critic in 1968 headed her review 'THERSITES WAS RIGHT'. I am not concerned here with determining which production was closest to Shakespeare's conceptions (supposing these could be ascertained) but merely with the effect of the over-all idea of the directors on the way the characters were presented.

We are bound to have our views of characters modified by brilliant performances, even when they run counter to our preconceptions, as (I confess) both Edith Evans's and Dorothy Tutin's Cressidas ran counter to mine. But when Sybil Thorndike played Volumnia at the Old Vic and could not conceal her dislike of that creature's opinions; or when Edith Evans delivered Katherine's sermon to the other wives as an ironical attack on male chauvinism; or when Judi Dench as Lady Macbeth seemed literally possessed by the spirits of darkness, we may disagree with these interpretations, but we cannot forget them.

Actors collaborate with dramatists, as the player Shakespeare appreciated. Stanislavsky declared that when an actor speaks Hamlet's soliloquy, 'To be or not to be', he puts into the lines much of his own conception of life:

Such an artist is not speaking in the person of an imaginary Hamlet. He speaks in his own right as one placed in the circumstances created by the play. The thoughts, feelings, conceptions, reasoning of the author are transformed into his own . . . For him it is necessary that the spectators *feel* his inner rela-

5 The quotations from reviews of productions will be found in the newspaper cuttings in the library of the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon. There is an admirable account of the stage history of the play by Jeanne T. Newlin in *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 17 (1969), 353-73.

SHAKESPEARE'S OPEN SECRET

tionship to what he is saying. They must follow his own creative *will* and desires.⁶

We may add that most directors and actors will have studied not merely the theatrical traditions of their roles, even when they strike out a new line, but they, and many members of the audience will know something, usually too much, indeed, of what the critics have said. Marvin Rosenberg's experiments with ignorant audiences showed that they often expected things to happen differently. More sophisticated audiences may not be fully conscious of what Coleridge, Bradley, Wilson Knight, L. C. Knights and Eleanor Prosser said about Hamlet, of what Bradley, Eliot, and Leavis said about Othello; but these ghosts will haunt us as persistently as the elder Hamlet haunted his son.

What I am arguing is that the conflicting impressions of a character which we get from all the factors I have been discussing – the disparity between source and play, the disparity between what different characters say about each other, the contrast between metaphysical and psychological motives, the shattering of stereotypes, the complicating effect of the poetry, the poet's presumed identification with some of his characters more than with others, the difference between one production and another, between one actor and another – these conflicting impressions are the means by which we are convinced that the characters are *real*, not real people, but startlingly natural.

Most of these effects were calculated and some were peculiar to Shakespeare. He must have known that in many of his dramas he was playing variations on old themes, that different opinions expressed by various characters would help to convert the subject of them from a flat to a round character, that he was modifying or fusing traditional types, and that some of the plays had a metaphysical dimension. When he was at the height of his powers he had as much delight in depicting an Iago as an Imogen or, one may add, a Cloten as a

Cordelia, a Desdemona as a Thersites. Sometimes, no doubt, as with the character of Iago, he could write from his inner knowledge of a dramatist's and an actor's psychology.

Shakespeare is the most popular world dramatist because of his unrivalled powers of characterization; and this power depends on the methods I have been describing. These methods run counter to all orthodox prescriptions of dramaturgy. William Archer, who thought that Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists were inferior to Robertson, Pinero, Galsworthy, and Henry Arthur Jones, and wrote a treatise on play-writing, would have condemned Shakespeare too if he had had the courage of his convictions. Make certain, the pundits tell the aspiring playwright, that there is no discrepancy between your characters and the actions the plot requires them to perform. When you have worked out your plot, put down character sketches as a guide to your scenes. Generally speaking, avoid any inconsistencies of characterization, but if you cannot avoid them, prepare for them and explain them. Give all your characters an easily recognized and consistent manner of speech. Never let them speak out of character etc. This is all very unlike Shakespeare's method. But he knew, as Stendhal said, that *la vraisemblance* was the enemy of *la vérité*: or, as one may put it, that naturalism is the enemy of realism.⁷

6 *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (1937; Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 228.

7 I am not advocating a retreat to Bradley, but an advance from Bradley; but it would be disingenuous to pretend that Shakespeare's inconsistencies always have the effect of convincing us of the truth of his characters. The character of Ajax is a case in point. In some scenes (act 2, scene 1; act 3, scene 3) he is brainless, illiterate, foolish and vain. In the scene of his combat with Hector (act 4, scene 5), he is sensible, sympathetic and courteous. But the first we hear of him – the Jonsonian character sketch spoken by Alexander in the second scene of the play – has no relation to the boorish butt of Thersites's sarcasm, nor to the gentle knight who fights with Hector. This is one of the reasons why critics suspect that *Troilus and Cressida* underwent some re-writing.