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978-0-521-29642-7 - 'Hamlet' and Other Shakespearean Essays

L. C. Knights

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Preface

The republication of essays on Shakespeare, selected from work done over a period of forty-five years, is only justified to the extent that they can still prompt fresh understanding and enjoyment: they succeed or fail by that primary criterion of all literary criticism. They do not offer an approach to Shakespeare claiming any sort of primacy over a variety of other approaches. They do not, in fact, offer a systematic approach at all, nor anything that could be subsumed in a system. All the same, I should claim that behind all of them are certain beliefs, or critical attitudes, that I take this opportunity to make briefly explicit.

An idea that I keep coming back to in my own reading is that the continuing life of masterworks of the imagination is a continually changing life, for the life in question only exists in the quickened apprehension of different people in different times and circumstances: not a startlingly original idea, though it has not yet I think, had the recognition and clarification it deserves. What it means, among other things, is that the critic's job is to prompt his readers to see what, *for them*, is genuinely 'there': that is why he works, so far as possible, in terms of what can be pointed to as functions and aspects of a work's central drive, of—in Coleridgean terms—its living and life-producing 'idea'. Naturally he can only do this if he has something of his own to say; but he does his best to avoid what Martin Buber calls 'the gesture of interference'. The studies of individual plays included here (with the exception of the earliest of them all, on *Macbeth*, which has the dogmatism of a youthful convert, and is commented on in another essay) were conceived and carried out in this spirit.

In the second place, the imaginative vitality of great literature—even though, when engaged with it, we may be directly conscious only of that—is part of the whole life of the mind. So any genuinely responsive reading of Shakespeare, as of any other great author, necessarily—and perhaps indispensably—fertilizes other fields of thought, about history, social and political life, even about the nature of 'thought' and the way we make our

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personal affirmations. Some of the essays are directly concerned with these more general matters, which also find their way into the more circumscribed critical essays.

Each essay can be read as a single excursion into its subject. But I should like to think that some readers will make cross-references and connexions, both for the fuller development of a point made in passing and sometimes (since the essays were, after all, written over a considerable period of time) for correction and readjustment. Thus, 'Shakespeare and the Question of Moral Judgment' adds something to the conclusion of 'An Approach to *Hamlet*', though certainly without cancelling that conclusion; and in the essay on *The Tempest*, I relate specific—or 'practical'—criticism to the ways in which we reach out for meaning and significance. There is one essay, an attempt to define the limitations of the historical approach to Shakespeare, that calls out for development. Certain paragraphs offer a first shot at defining the problems covered by my phrase about the continually changing life of a work of art—at defining, say, what Mandelstam meant when, remarking that 'Dante's contemporaneity is inexhaustible, measureless and unending', he called the cantos of the *Divine Comedy* 'missiles for capturing the future'. Professor John Lawlor's critique of this essay (*Sewanee Review*, LXIV, 2, Spring, 1956) notably challenged and expanded my then conception of 'historical scholarship', without, I think, diminishing the importance of the point I have chosen to comment on here: it is a matter to which, in a different context, I hope to return.

All the essays started life as lectures. Most of them appeared in *Explorations* (1946), *Further Explorations* (1965) and *Explorations 3* (1976), all of which were published by Chatto & Windus, as was *An Approach to 'Hamlet'* (1960). I should like to acknowledge the help of publishers with whom my connexion goes back so far in easing the way of the present reprint. Two of the essays here, not previously collected, appeared in the *Sewanee Review*: "'Integration" in *The Winter's Tale*' (originally a lecture to the Scientific Section of the British Psychoanalytical Society) in the issue for Fall, 1976 (LXXXIV, 4), and 'Shakespeare and History' (originally a public lecture at the Queen's University, Belfast) in that for Summer, 1978 (LXXXVI, 2). I am deeply grateful to the University of the South, the publishers of this admirable journal, and to its Editor,

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Professor George Core, for permission to reprint. I also owe a special debt to my editor at the Cambridge University Press, Miss Diane Speakman.

Finally, I apologize for a small amount of repetition (as distinct from cross-reference) that it was impossible to eliminate.

L.C.K.

Cambridge, 1978