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978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of
Shakespeare's Poetry Both Good and Bad

Richard David

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THE JANUS OF POETS

Being an essay on the
Dramatic Value of Shakspeare's Poetry
both good and bad

by

RICHARD DAVID

*Scholar of Corpus Christi College
Cambridge*

The very Janus of poets; he wears almost everywhere
two faces; and you have scarce begun to admire the one,
ere you despise the other. DRYDEN

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NOTE

The first two of the following Parts, together with a very rough draft of the third, formed the Harness Prize Essay for 1934. My thanks are due to the Awarders for permission to expand and re-organise the whole before publication.

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INTRODUCTION

THIS is an attempt to discover exactly what Shakspeare, as a *dramatic poet*, was doing, and how he came to do it.

These particular questions are part of a general problem: what are the advantages and disadvantages accepted by the dramatist who writes his plays in verse, and the poet who chooses the dramatic form as the shape in which to cast his imaginings? This larger question has already been answered by two poets, one of whom was himself a dramatist, the other believed that he possessed “a turn for philosophical criticism, and especially for insight into the genius of Shakspeare”.

There are, according to Coleridge,

two legitimate conditions which the critic is entitled to expect in every metrical work. First, that as the elements of metre owe their existence to a state of increased excitement, so the metre itself should be accompanied by the natural language of excitement. Secondly, that as these elements are formed into metre artificially, by a voluntary act, with the design and for the purpose of blending delight with emotion,

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so the traces of present volition should throughout the metrical language be proportionately discernible.

It is unfortunate that no Skionar is a greater caricature of Coleridge, than is Coleridge himself. His philosophical jargon often obscures his naturally sound and straightforward sense, and even when the meaning has been properly understood the reader may doubt his understanding. The present passage, for all its practical application, is especially teasing, because in it the author seems to be stating, as parallels, two results of writing in verse which are not strictly so. His first condition is the well-known effect which poetry possesses, of raising thought or emotion to a higher pitch of intensity, of universalising them, of making them more than human. The second appears to be a different kind of condition: it is the disarming of the obvious layman's criticism—"Verse-speech is not life-like"; to which the answer is that the artificiality of verse is deliberately encouraged by the dramatic poet as an essential factor in the creation of that ideal world, "avoiding and excluding all accident", in which a dramatic action is set to greatest effect.

Whatever the intention of Coleridge's original, there is here extracted from it a concise account

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of the dramatist's final aim in writing in verse, and of the method of writing verse by which he attains that aim. Coleridge perhaps too much assimilates the method to the aim. Dryden may be thought to err in the other direction; his interest in the technical side of the problem leads him to treat the aim often as no more than a mere incident to the method. This is his answer to the question, as given in the Defence of his Essay of Dramatick Poesy:

To affect the soul, and excite the passions, and, above all, to move admiration (which is the delight of serious plays), a base imitation will not serve. The converse, therefore, which a poet is to imitate, must be heightened with all the arts and ornaments of poesy: and must be such as, strictly considered, could never be supposed spoken by any without premeditation.

Or, more particularly, in the Essay itself:

Verse, 'tis true, is not the effect of sudden thought; but this hinders not that sudden thought may be represented in verse, since those thoughts must be higher than Nature can raise them without premeditation, especially to a continuance of them, even out of verse; and consequently you cannot imagine them to have been sudden either in the poet or in the actors.

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The dramatist, then, who writes in verse, is accepting a convention, but one which properly used is rather a help than a hindrance to the full expression he desires. His action takes place in a world which is not the everyday world; but in it all thought and emotion are as it were distilled, of greater chemical purity than those of the everyday world. This means, of course, that he has deliberately cut himself off from the realistic play, and perhaps also from that in which the delineation of character provides the chief interest. By writing in verse he has pledged himself to the serious play, in the Aristotelian sense; to a play in which *πράξις*, action in its widest application—that is, the given tangle of interrelations with their overtones of emotion—is of primary importance. He has undertaken a piece of writing in which any lowering of intensity below a certain pitch is fatal. The play in verse, the action isolated in its universalised world, is more sustained, more of a piece, than the realistic play. There is no room for inessentials, nor for passages of padding such as are sometimes admissible, for instance, in the epic. The serious play needs a greater degree of concentration.

This last is a condition which the dramatic poet

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feels more in his second character, that of poet turned dramatist; and there are others which are better considered from this point of view than from its opposite. The poet who casts his work in dramatic form is imposing upon himself an additional restraint. It is possible to be too poetical for drama. Of the Elizabethans, Marston was always too conscious of his high calling, so that the more serious of his plays walk upon literary stilts, and only *The Dutch Courtesan*, aiming at low life, finds a dignified mean; Fletcher's luxuriance can hardly be kneaded into any dramatic shape; and even Shakspeare, at least in his early plays, may sometimes be accused of prolonging his lyricism further than the situation gives any warrant for. But this additional restraint is counterbalanced by the vastly increased range of expression which a dramatic form lends to poetry. The same phrase will vary immensely in its emotional force according to the character and situation to which it is assigned; and the dramatic poet can play the same melody, simple or complex, with a wide variety of stops. His compass too—at least in the case of the Elizabethans—is greatly increased; for the whole gamut of language is at his disposal, from the

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most colloquial prose to the most impassioned verse.

It is in the light of these conditions governing the work of a dramatic poet that I wish now to examine Shakspeare's verse; to see how he met the advantages and disadvantages that a dramatic poet incurs, how he used poetry to aid his dramatisation and dramatic effect to aid his poetry; to judge, in short, how far this title of *dramatic poet* does indeed become him.