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978-1-108-00235-6 - Character and Symbol in Shakespeare's Plays: A Study of Certain Christian and Pre-Christian Elements in Their Structure and Imagery

Honor Matthews

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Character and Symbol in Shakespeare's Plays

First published in 1962, Matthews' study examines the symbolic elements which persistently recur in Shakespeare's plays. The book focuses on the traditional material from medieval and sixteenth-century drama which seems to have been present in Shakespeare's mind as he worked, and which, Matthews argues, inspired significant themes which resonate throughout the plays. Divided into three parts, the book addresses in turn the concept of sin, the opposition of justice and mercy and the hope of redemption. Matthews investigates these motifs and their currency in Elizabethan England, and traces their presence in Shakespeare's created worlds with detailed reference to a wide range of the plays. Awareness of them provides fruitful avenues for the interpretation of the plays, and sheds light on Shakespeare's motives and methods.

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CHARACTER & SYMBOL
IN
SHAKESPEARE'S
PLAYS

A STUDY OF CERTAIN CHRISTIAN AND
PRE-CHRISTIAN ELEMENTS IN THEIR
STRUCTURE AND IMAGERY

BY

HONOR MATTHEWS

*Principal Lecturer, Department of Speech and Drama
Goldsmiths' College, University of London*



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PREFACE

In the belief that it is now possible to accept Elizabethan drama in terms of both individual characterisation and universal symbolism, this book studies certain symbolic elements which recur persistently in Shakespeare's work. Their cumulative impact, after they have been traced in successive plays, enforces the conclusion that they do reveal something of the dramatist's own values and attitudes and hence offer an indispensable clue to the interpretation of his work. As the symbols are traditional, the reader is asked patiently to become familiar with them in their earlier forms—or to revive his memory of these—before going on to examine their use by Shakespeare. Such a review involves a slow start to our survey, but it will be rewarded, it is hoped, by a clearer and more confident awareness of Shakespeare's motives and methods.

It is impossible to name here all those to whom the author is indebted for much of her own delight in the plays. She gratefully acknowledges the help of the many editors and critics who have opened new paths of study and developed new sensibilities for the present generation. She also owes much to the men and women who have presented the plays in the professional theatre. In especial she would wish to thank Sir John Gielgud for those memorable performances of *King Lear* which demonstrated once and for all that tension between the particular and the universal which she has come to believe represents Shakespeare's own purpose and unique achievement. Finally, she would like to recognise the help of the many students of Goldsmiths' College who have single-mindedly striven with her to learn of the plays' significance through recreating them on the stage and submitting their interpretations to the acid test of practical production.

H. M.

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The purpose of this book is to offer to the reader a thread which may lead him to a finer appreciation of one pattern discernible in the complexity of Shakespeare's created world. It is the pattern formed by the concepts of sin, judgment and redemption. Throughout the plays there ring, for all who care to listen, echoes from the culture which was their author's inheritance, and the importance of these echoes must inevitably be differently assessed by readers for whom their sound is clear or faint. It is the belief of the writer that some very simple and even obvious reminders of the sources of such resonances will attune the reader's ear to a music which is a significant part of the plays' content, and such reminders therefore precede the consideration of the selected themes in Shakespeare's own work. If this study helps any lover of the plays to be more vitally aware of the stuff of which such masterpieces are actually made and therefore to enjoy them more acutely, the writer's purpose will have been achieved.

The threefold pattern to which the reader's attention is invited is, of course, clearly laid down in the teaching of the Christian Church and formed the raw material of a powerful drama on the medieval stage. Miracle and morality plays were acted until the last decade of the sixteenth century, and Elizabethan audiences were the direct inheritors of a drama which reflected the principal ideas and values of a unified view of life. Basic elements in their outlook were their conception of man's place in a divinely created universe and of his ability to know and to choose between good and evil. Hence came the belief in the reality of sin bringing with it the fear of God's justice, the desire for his mercy and the realisation of a clash between them. The primary sin, committed first by Lucifer, was conceived as ambition—the desire to be as God, and this sin was reflected in all men's lesser attempts to transcend the proper limits imposed on them by their Creator. The only excuses which could be pleaded in mitigation of man's admitted failure were the

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strength of his temptation by forces of evil outside himself and the frailty of his own nature which made him a ready prey to deception. No excuses, however, could alter facts, and man remained lost unless he received the help of a Saviour who could ensure the mystic reconciliation of justice with mercy.

The stories embodying these concepts are the prototypes after which much of Shakespeare's greatest work is shaped. Up to the writing of *Measure for Measure* there is observable a passionate interest in what an Elizabethan homilist called 'the Luciferian sin' and an almost obsessional concern with the irreconcilability of justice and mercy. Already, however, a counter-subject is discernible accompanying these themes, one which also had its place in the medieval drama. The horror of man's predicament is that, while it is essential for him to perceive the good that he may choose it, he is constantly misled by his inability to penetrate below the false appearances with which the evil powers in the universe attempt to destroy him. This cause of his continual need of mercy, not judgment, from his God and his fellow-men gradually assumes a place in the plays so important that it replaces Shakespeare's earlier concern with the simple opposition of justice and mercy. Finally, there is the third part of the triptych to be considered: the hope of redemption, a new life in a new world. Here the Christian archetype is the return of the suffering Saviour in glory at the end of the present age to bring the final judgment of eternal life or eternal death. This element is present in Shakespeare's earliest dramatic conceptions, but it becomes dominant only in his last phase, and here the sources of the plays change. No longer does the Christian symbolism stand alone, although it never disappears. What does disappear completely, however, is the finality of Doomsday and the cataclysm of damnation.

In reminding the reader of some of the traditional material which seems to have been present in Shakespeare's mind as he worked, narrow and arbitrary limits must be set. No attempt can be made here to summarise the content of medieval philosophy or theology, nor would such material be relevant to our present purpose. Only such elements of this thought as were lively in the minds of the

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dramatist or his audience and were, therefore, taken for granted by them in interpreting their experience and in assessing its values are of importance. Because we are concerned with the making of plays, the illustrations used will be sought principally in the popular medieval and sixteenth-century drama, for it is not without interest to remember what audiences and dramatists alike had been conditioned to accept as the normal stuff of theatrical entertainment. Such entertainment was frequently religious in its overt content, but it had never been confined to the Christian drama which is still familiar because so many examples have survived in written form. Countless dramatic and semi-dramatic activities going back to pre-Christian times survived in Elizabethan England and played some part in informing Shakespeare's imagination. It is, of course, difficult to know with any reassuring certainty the significance in Shakespeare's picture of life of these echoes and recurrences. Some may be the merest stock-in-trade of his surface mind, standing out to us only because they are no longer the stock-in-trade of our own. When, however, he makes them the media of outstandingly fine imagery—condensed, musical, ambiguous—or uses them in moments of intense dramatic emotion, when his powers are obviously fully extended and his involvement with his material deep and effective, then we can assume that the images and associations are significant and must not be discounted.