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Shakespeare and the Nature of Man

Analysing Shakespeare's historical background and craft, Spencer's 1943 study investigates the intellectual debates of Shakespeare's age, and the effect these had on the drama of the time. The book outlines the key conflict present in the sixteenth century – the optimistic ideal of man's place in the universe, as presented by the theorists of the time, set against the indisputable and ever-present fact of original sin. This conflict about the nature of man, argues Spencer, is perhaps the deepest underlying cause for the emergence of great Renaissance drama. With detailed reference to Shakespeare's great tragedies, the book demonstrates how Shakespeare presents the fact of evil masked by the appearance of good. Shakespeare's last plays, especially *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, are also analysed in detail to show how they embody a different view from the tragedies, and the discussion is related to the larger perspective of general human experience.

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SHAKESPEARE
AND
THE NATURE OF MAN

By THEODORE SPENCER

Lowell Lectures, 1942

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To
F. O. MATTHIESSEN

PREFACE

I

There are three main ways in which we can study the expression of human experience in the arts. We can study the historical—the intellectual and emotional—background which the artist was able to use; we can study the craft, the artistic medium, which he employed; and we can try to analyze and judge the final product in relation to what we believe to be true of human experience as a whole.

To study a great artist, such as Shakespeare, in all of these three ways may seem to be a presumptuous undertaking. Yet that is what I want to do in this book. And as a basis for this study I have taken the widest possible topic: “Shakespeare and the Nature of Man.”

Such a topic obviously needs definition before we can say anything sensible about it, for if we are to accomplish our threefold aim of understanding the past, analyzing a craft, and judging the truth of what is expressed in that craft, we must have as clear as possible a picture of what we are doing, and of what we are leaving aside. Though the topic is vast, and fundamental, it does not include everything, and what we are looking for is not a complete picture of Shakespeare. We shall not have much to say about the sources of Shakespeare’s plots, nor about the texture of his poetry, and we shall have to leave out any full discussion of his use of primarily literary fashions and technical dramatic devices. Frequently our account of his characters will seem incomplete. But this is inevitable; our aim is to describe the point of view that underlies all these things, the framework that gave Shakespeare his terms and his values. It is Shake-

spere's vision of life we are after, its dependence on contemporary thought, its development through dramatic form, and its universal truth.

The first chapter, therefore, will be devoted to a description of the ideal picture of man that Shakespeare's age supplied. According to every creditable theorist of the time man had a definite place in the universe, in nature, and in the state, and his relations to God, to the rest of creation, and to society, were, broadly speaking, universally agreed upon. The picture was quite different from any picture that we have at the present time; a man living in Shakespeare's day was living in almost the last generation that could unquestioningly accept, with all the available evidence before him, the old over-orderly scheme, the scheme which Galileo and Newton in one way, and Bacon and Locke in another, were to re-arrange so that its basic assumptions (to our ultimate confusion) could eventually be destroyed. In theory the picture was highly optimistic, and I shall begin by emphasizing its optimism, and the exalted position it gave to man in the scheme of things.

But it could be looked at in another way. Though man was essential in the scheme, he had, through original sin, betrayed his trust, and therefore his position, when seen realistically, was as dark and miserable as it was, theoretically, bright and noble. The second chapter will describe this pessimistic picture in order to bring out as clearly as possible the "Renaissance Conflict" about man's nature which is so important a part of Shakespeare's background. Yet there was a second element in the conflict which also needs emphasis, for in the sixteenth century the very basis of common agreement about man and his place in the world was being questioned. Was it really true that the earth on which man lived was the center of the universe and man himself the end for which the universe had been made? Did man show, in practice, that he was a proper member of an ordered

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state? Was he, after all, even a rational animal? These were the questions that were being asked, towards the end of the sixteenth century, with increasing anxiety and intensity, and they immensely re-inforced and brought into the open the more traditional conflict between the optimistic, ideal picture and the picture which emphasized the wretchedness of the human situation. The contrast between the theoretical good and the evil fact goes very deep into the thought and feeling of Shakespeare's age, and it was expressed by Shakespeare, among others, with great force and grandeur. To a large extent it was expressed in drama, the form of literature to which conflict is essential, and one of the assumptions I shall make throughout this book is that the existence at the end of the sixteenth century of this basic conflict about the nature of man is perhaps the deepest underlying cause for the emergence of great drama at that time.

For there are periods in recorded human history when the essential problems that concern human nature come to the surface with more than usual urgency and are expressed with more than usual vigor. We are living in such a period ourselves; Shakespeare lived in another: the difference between them may perhaps be summed up by saying that Shakespeare's age was breaking into chaos, while our age is trying to turn chaos into order. Shakespeare's age produced a new set of terms and references in the light of which the old problems—the problem of good and evil, of the dignity or worthlessness of man, the problem of reality—were being considered with a fresh vitality. These problems were so alive, so much a part of the age, that they became available for a popular form of literature, and I shall try to describe, in the main part of this study, how Shakespeare, through a growing realization of what a play could be about, was able to use them. When he did so he was not, of course, fully conscious of what he was doing (what artist ever is?), but there can be no doubt that they formed an important

part of the atmosphere or texture of his greatest tragedies, and that they profoundly affected his view of human nature and his way of presenting it on the stage.

I do not suggest however—and this is a point I should like to emphasize as clearly as possible at the outset—that Shakespeare made deliberate use of any of the particular authors or books which are quoted from or referred to in the first two chapters. We are in no way concerned with Shakespeare's specific knowledge of Ptolemy or Copernicus, Sabunde or Montaigne, Cicero or Machiavelli. Whether he knew them or not is of no importance to our argument. These writers are discussed because they give the clearest articulation to what Shakespeare's age was thinking and feeling; Shakespeare absorbed and used that thought and feeling in his own way, the way of the playwright who has a particular job to get done, who is sensitive to the temper of his time and who wants to use it in his work. In order to express his time, and the general truths with which its best minds, like himself, were concerned, Shakespeare did not have to spend his days turning pages in a library. That is the task of the critic and scholar who would try to understand him three hundred years later, and I trust that no reader of this book will shrink his mind into assuming that we are concerned, in any essential fashion, with the merely literal sources of what Shakespeare had so magnificently to say.

Shakespeare began his dramatic career with the dramatization of conflict on a relatively superficial level of action and character, and, as I shall point out in the third chapter, the traditional views of man are merely a part of the background. In the great tragedies the conflict goes deeper, taking on, as it were, another dimension, and in *Hamlet* and *Troilus and Cressida*, in *Othello* and *King Lear*, in *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, the Renaissance conflict about the nature of man finds its culminating expression as Shakespeare presents the discovery of the evil actuality under the good appearance, and

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describes the individual passion or weakness which has to be destroyed before order can prevail once more. The conflict between individuals is enlarged to include, in the kind of fusion which only poetry can manage, the conflict about man's nature which was so crucial in Shakespeare's age. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters I shall discuss the great tragedies in some detail, and in the seventh I shall turn to the last plays, especially *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, and show how they embody a different view, one exactly the reverse, in many respects, from that expressed in the tragedies. I shall conclude by trying to relate the discussion to literature as a whole, so that we may be able to see Shakespeare's work not merely against the background of his own time, but in the larger perspective of general human experience.

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This book was originally planned as a series of lectures which the Lowell Institute of Boston asked me to deliver in the spring of 1942. To the Trustee of the Institute I should like to express my gratitude for honoring me by the invitation, and I should like to express my gratitude to my original audiences for their appreciative understanding of what I tried to say. The material has been somewhat revised for publication.

In quoting Shakespeare, I have used, except where otherwise specified, the text of the Oxford Edition, edited by W. J. Craig. I have followed Sir Edmund Chambers' chronology of the plays. The spelling of all quotations from sixteenth and seventeenth century authors has been modernized. At certain points I have repeated or rephrased statements and interpretations which I have elsewhere expressed in published articles on individual plays and problems.

Anyone who writes about Shakespeare is bound to be conscious of his debt to those who have written about Shakespeare before. The debt is so large that complete acknowledgment of it

is impossible, and the reader of these pages will soon discover that they owe much to both previous and contemporary Shakespearean criticism and scholarship. Some of my debts are explicitly acknowledged in the notes; others are not, since I did not know how to acknowledge them. Who can tell where originality begins?

One of the rewards of the academic life under the right circumstances is that any book a man writes is never the work of the writer alone. His colleagues are always on hand for information, correction and criticism. In this respect I have been unusually fortunate. Mr. Harry Levin, Professor F. O. Matthiessen, Professor Perry Miller, Dr. I. A. Richards, and the late Dr. W. E. Sedgwick have all been interested in the kind of problem which is treated here, and they have all spent more time than they should have spent in discussing with me this particular example of it. The sharing of knowledge and wisdom which they have given me sharpens the intelligence and warms the heart, and I am grateful, not only to them, but to the circumstances which have allowed us, in the past and in the present, to be colleagues in a great university.

I should like to thank Miss Helen Jones of Harvard for her invaluable assistance in putting my words into readable shape. And I should also like to express my gratitude to those members of the staff of the Harvard College Library and to those members of the staff of the Library of Cambridge University who have so kindly enabled me to use the resources at their disposal.

But to Miss Victoria Schrager, who has helped me to collect, order and express the material and ideas set forth in the following pages, I owe a greater debt than I owe to anyone else.

T. S.

Eliot House
Cambridge, Mass.
September 1, 1942

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