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# The Secret of Shakespeare (part 1)

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The Earl of Gloster (blind)

*The trick of that voice I do well remember.*
*Is't not the king? ... 0, let me kiss that hand.*

King Lear (mad)

*Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality*
(IV, 6.)

In the last few decades there has been a considerable increase of interest in the Middle Ages, which is no doubt partly due to a reaction, but which is also, much more, a case of ignorance giving way to knowledge. In another sense, it is simply a rising to the surface of something that has always been there and is always being rediscovered. Could it not be said that wherever the Middle Ages have not ceased to be accessible, wherever despite the barrier of the Renaissance they have always remained with us, as in the poetry of Dante, for instance, or—to take a more immediately accessible and inescapable example—as in their architecture, their superiority has always been felt at heart? This feeling implies also, if only sub-consciously, the acknowledgement of a more general superiority, for it is quite impossible that the great Norman and Gothic cathedrals should have sprung from an age that had no inward excellence to correspond to these superlative outward manifestations.

One of the particular reasons for the present increase of interest in the Middle Ages is in itself highly significant: during the last fifty years or so Europeans have taken more interest in the art of other civilizations than ever before, and this has no doubt uprooted many prejudices and opened the door to a certain freshness and objectivity of judgment. Having come to know some of the best examples of Hindu, Chinese and Japanese art, and then turning back their attention from these to the art of their own civilization, many people find that their outlook has irrevocably changed. After looking at a great Chinese

landscape, for example, where this world appears like a veil of illusion beyond which, almost visibly, lies the Infinite and Eternal Reality, or after having been given a glimpse of that same Reality through a statue of the Buddha, they find it difficult to take seriously a painting such as Raphael's famous Madonna, or Michelangelo's fresco of the Creation, not to speak of his sculpture, and Leonardo also fails to satisfy them. But they find that they can take very seriously, more seriously than before, some of the early Sienese paintings such as Lippo Memmi's Annunciation, for example, or the statuary and stained glass of Chartres Cathedral, or the XIIth and XIIIth century mosaics in St. Mark's at Venice, or the Icons of the Orthodox Church.

The reason why mediaeval art can bear comparison with Oriental art as no other Western art can is undoubtedly that the mediaeval outlook, like that of the Oriental civilizations, was intellectual. It considered this world above all as the shadow or symbol of the next, man as the shadow or symbol of God; and such an attitude, to be operative, presupposes the presence of intellectuals, for earthly things can only be referred back to their spiritual archetypes through the faculty of intellectual perception, the insight which pierces through the symbol to the universal reality that lies beyond. In the theocratic civilizations, if an artist himself was not an intellectual, he none the less obeyed the canons of art which had been established on an intellectual basis.

A mediaeval portrait is above all a portrait of the Spirit shining from behind a human veil. In other words, it is as a window opening from the particular on to the universal, and while being enshrined in its own age and civilization as eminently typical of a particular period and place, it has at the same time, in virtue of this opening, something that is neither of the East nor of the West, nor of any one age more than another.

If Renaissance art lacks an opening on to the universal and is altogether imprisoned in its own epoch, this is because its humanistic outlook considers man and other earthly objects entirely for their own sakes as if nothing lay behind them. In painting the Creation, for example, Michelangelo treats Adam not as a symbol but as an independent reality; and since he does not paint man in the image of God, the inevitable result is that he paints God in the image of man. There is more divinity underlying Simone Martini's painting of Saint Francis than there is in Michelangelo's representation of the Creator Himself.

Shakespeare was born less than three months after Michelangelo's death, and the two are often spoke of in the same breath as being among "the great geniuses of the Renaissance." Yet how does Shakespeare stand in the light of an intellectual approach which enhances, if possible, our respect for Dante, but which greatly diminishes our estimate of several others whose pre-eminence had long gone unquestioned? The following chapters are an attempt to answer this question in some detail; but a general answer can be given immediately. Let us quote, as touchstone, a masterly summing up of the difference between mediaeval and renaissance art:

"When standing in front of a Romanesque or Gothic cathedral, we feel that we are the centre of the world: when standing in front of a renaissance, baroque or rococo church we are merely conscious of being in Europe."[1] Now without trying to give Shakespeare so essential a place in the art of Christendom as the place which is held by the mediaeval cathedrals or by *The Divine Comedy,* could it not be said that to be present at an adequate performance of *King Lear* is not merely to watch a play but to witness, mysteriously, the whole history of mankind?

But this remark could not possibly be made about the majority of Shakespeare's writings; and if we wish to form any estimate of the mature dramatist whose secret bestowed on him a universality that is a prolongation of the universality of the Middle Ages, the first thing to be done is to set the histories and most of the comedies on one side for the moment so as not to confuse the issue. Few writers can have developed so much during their period of authorship as Shakespeare did. By the end of the sixteenth century he had written some twenty-two plays; but none of these can be said to represent his maturity, though some of them, in various ways, give an unmistakable foretaste of what was to come. Shortly after 1600 there was a sharp and lasting change, not in orientation—that change seems to have come before—but in intensity. It was as if Shakespeare had suddenly come to grips with the universe after having contemplated it for sometime with a half-detached serenity. From being in earnest, he had come to be in very deadly earnest. This change is forced on our attention above all by *Hamlet;* and the scope of this book lies mainly, except for one or two backward glances, between *Hamlet* and *The Tempest* which was almost certainly his last complete play.

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It is too often said that the marvelous variety of Shakespeare's characters makes it impossible to divine anything about the author himself. About his temperament this may be true to a certain extent, but as regards his outlook and ideals it is altogether false.

There are three characters in Shakespeare's maturer plays who have something of the looker-on about them and who maneuver the other characters, usurping as it were sometimes the role of dramatist. One of these is Prospero; another is the Duke of Vienna who, without magic, plays much the same part in *Measure for Measure* that Prospero plays in *The Tempest*; the third is Edgar in *King Lear.* They have much in common, being almost identical in their outlook; and as we shall see later, there are other strong reasons also for thinking that each of these characters is no more than a thin veil over the person of the author himself. But in any case they are not indispensable to us for our knowledge of Shakespeare the man. We can learn much about him, indirectly, even from his villains; and from his heroes we can learn much more, especially towards the end of a play, after he has fully developed them.

But when the hero, in a manifest state of un-development, at the beginning or in the middle of a play, gives vent to his ideas about this and that, he is perhaps revealing his own immaturity and may well even be saying the very opposite of what Shakespeare himself thinks. A striking example of this is in King *Lear* when Gloster, who has an important part in the subplot, says, before Shakespeare has fully developed him:

> *As flies to wanton boys, are we to the Gods:*
> *They kill us for their sport.*
>
> (IV, 1)

Edgar's comment on these words is:

> *Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow,*
> *Angering itself and others;*

and it is at this moment that he decides to set upon his strange course of action for the purpose of saving his father from despair and suicide. Thanks to his efforts, Gloster is able to say eventually:

> *henceforth I'll bear*
> *Affliction till it do cry out itself*
> *'Enough, enough,' and die.*
>
> (IV, 6)

and later still:

> *You ever-gentle Gods, take my breath from me:*
> *Let not my worser spirit tempt me again*
> *To die before you please!*
>
> *(Ibid.)*

Now the great weakness of Gloster which he eventually overcomes, is akin to one of the weaknesses of Hamlet which he also overcomes, and which is lack of faith in Providence. The "To be or not to be" soliloquy, from which so much has been deduced about Shakespeare's own views, does not merely express the immaturity of Hamlet but it shows him at his most immature, for in a sense the Prince goes back in development after the beginning of the play before he begins to go forward. When this particular soliloquy comes his faith is at its lowest ebb. Having more or less said at the beginning of the play that he would commit suicide if only God had not forbidden it, he now implies that he would do so but for the dread of something after death.

It is always possible that Shakespeare may have drawn on his own past experience for this soliloquy. But we can be certain that it does not represent in any way his settled convictions because its whole tenor is completely contradicted in the last scene of the play by the fully developed, perfectly balanced Hamlet voicing the maturity which Shakespeare has gradually shaped and built up for him. In this scene we find that he has altogether overcome his doubts. His now full-grown royalty of nature causes Horatio to exclaim, half in admiration, half in surprise: *Why, what a king is this!*; and his faith in Providence is unshakable. He says to Horatio:

> *There's a divinity that shapes our ends,*
> *Rough-hew them how we will.*

This conversation leads up to what is perhaps the greatest speech of the play, though it is seldom quoted, partly no doubt because it is in prose. Hamlet's fencing match with Laertes is about to take place. Hamlet tells Horatio that he is confident of victory; yet at the same time he has a premonition that he is going to die, and he intimates as much to Horatio, who begs to be allowed to postpone the match. But Hamlet will not allow this. He says:

> *There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow, if it be now, 'tis not to come, if it be not to come, it will be now; if*

*it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes? Let be.*

The gist of this speech, *the readiness is all*, is repeated almost word for word in an equally significant passage in the last act of King Lear. The news of the defeat and capture of Lear and Cordelia plunges Gloster once more into despair. Edgar pulls him out of it by reminding him that just as a man has to submit to Providence as regards the time and manner of his birth, so also he must submit as regards the time and manner of his death and not seek to pluck the fruit before it is ripe. The only thing that matters is fulfillment of destiny.

*Men must endure*
*Their going hence, even as their coming hither.*
*Ripeness is all.*

(V, 2)

It will be noticed that in these two speeches of Hamlet and Edgar, as also elsewhere, Shakespeare is concentrating on the most universal aspect of religion. He is concerned with man's having the right attitude of soul towards Providence rather than with any particular mode of worship; nor could he have written otherwise, with any safety, for in the extreme religious soreness and sensitivity of sixteenth and seventeenth century England, Christianity was a very dangerous topic. Before the end of his period of authorship it was even forbidden by law to mention the name of God on the stage. But one could always refer to "the gods"; and if he deliberately chose to set nearly all his maturer plays in a pre-Christian setting—Hamlet is almost the last to be set in Christendom—it is to be noticed that his attitude to Greece and Rome is far more typical of the Middle Ages than of the Renaissance. He does not merely borrow the surface of classical antiquity. He places himself at the centre of that world. For him, and for Dante, just as for the ancient priests and priestesses at Delphi, Apollo is not the god of light but the Light of God.

* * * *

In the form of his drama Shakespeare is typical of his age. Marlowe's Dr. Faustus is externally in some respects more mediaeval than anything Shakespeare wrote. But in outlook Marlowe was altogether a man of the Renaissance, as were Ben Jonson and

Webster, whereas Shakespeare seems in a sense to go back as time goes forward and by the turn of the century he had become, unlike any of his fellow dramatists, the continuer and the summer-up of the past, the last outpost of a quickly vanishing age. To say this is not really to say anything new; it is rather a case of putting two and two together. Bradley says, cautiously, of King Lear: "It does not appear to disclose a mode of imagination so very far removed from the mode with which we must remember that Shakespeare was perfectly familiar in the Morality plays and in the *Faerie Queene*." Of *Othello* Wilson Knight says: "Othello, Desdemona and Iago are Man, the Divine and the Devil," and he remarks in general that Shakespeare's heroes are "purgatorial pilgrims." Of *Macbeth* Dover Wilson says: *"Macbeth* is almost a morality play," and he says much the same of the two parts of *Henry IV*. Moreover, in this last connection, and with regard to Shakespeare as a continuer of past tradition, he reminds us: "Before its final secularization in the first half of the sixteenth century, our drama was concerned with one topic and one topic only: human salvation. It was a topic that could be represented in either of two *ways:* (i) historically, by means of miracle plays which in the Corpus Christi cycles unrolled before the spectators' eyes the whole scheme of salvation from the Creation to the Last Judgment, or (ii) allegorically, by means of morality plays, which exhibited the process of salvation in the individual soul on its road between birth and death, beset with the snares of the World or the wiles of the Evil One."[2] Dover Wilson does not define the word "salvation" and for the purpose of his book it is not necessary to do so. But as regards mediaeval art in general, it is important to distinguish between what may be called esoteric works, which look beyond salvation to sanctification, and exoteric works, in which sanctification is not really conceived of at all. If Shakespeare is a continuer of the past, which of these two categories does his art belong to, the exoteric or the esoteric?

An example of what may be called an exoteric work which stops short at salvation in the lowest sense is *The Castle of Perseverance*. In this morality play mankind (*humanum genus*) is represented as having led a very questionable life, and he is saved from Hell in the face of justice by operation of the Divine Mercy. A supreme example of an esoteric work is the *Divine Comedy* which presupposes salvation and deals with man's purification and his ultimate sanctification or in other words his regaining what was lost

at the Fall. It may be said that in the Middle Ages the mass of the laity was considered as following the path of salvation, whereas the monastic orders, and the lay orders attached to them, and one or two other brotherhoods such as those of the Free-masons and the Companions, aspired to follow the path of sanctification. In other words they aimed at passing through Purgatory in this life. It is now known that Dante belonged to a brotherhood which was affiliated to the Order of the Temple, and which was more or less driven underground when the Order of the Temple was abolished. Some have supposed that Shakespeare was a member of the brotherhood of the Rosie Crosse; others believe him to have been a Free-mason. This is a part of his secret which will probably never be known, and in any case it is not within the scope of these pages to dwell on anything that is not obvious from what he wrote. What is obvious, however, is that his plays far transcend the idea of salvation in its more limited sense; and it may be remarked in passing that this does suggest that their author was following a spiritual path, which itself implies attachment to an order.

At the beginning of Act V of the *Winter's Tale,* with reference to the long penance done by King Leontes during the sixteen years which elapse between the two parts of the play, the priest-like Cleomenes says:

> *Sir, you have done enough, and have perform'd A saint-like sorrow: no fault could you make which you have not redeem'd; indeed, paid down more penitence than done trespass. At the last, Do as the heavens have done, forget your evil; with them forgive yourself.*

In *King Lear* the blind Gloster, recognizing the King's voice, asks to kiss his hand. Lear, still mad, replies:

> *Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.*

This remark contains not only the very essence of the play but also of most of Shakespeare's other maturer plays; for in the course of them what does Shakespeare do but wipe away mortality, that is, the sin of Adam, from the hand of the hero? The hand must be altogether clean: there is no question of more or less. In *Hamlet* the prince says of himself in the middle of the play that he is not so bad as people go—or in his own words, I am myself indifferent honest; but Shakespeare's purpose goes far beyond such mediocrity. The porter to the Gate of Purgatory, that is, the gate to salvation, is by

definition of almost unfathomable mercy. Hamlet could have passed by him at the beginning of the play; so could Leontes at the moment of repentance, sixteen years before the speech just quoted; and so could Lear long before the end of the play. But the porter to the Gate of Paradise, that is, the gate to sanctification, is relentlessly exacting; and for his heroes and heroines, Shakespeare stands as that porter. He will let nothing pass except perfection. Character after character is developed by him to a state of virtue which is pushed, one feels, to the very limits of human nature until each could say, with Cleopatra:

> *Give me my robe; put on my crown; I have*
> *Immortal longings in me.*
>
> (V, 2)

Even those who refuse to admit that Shakespeare himself speaks through any of his characters cannot escape from the fact that it is Shakespeare himself, and no one else, who is the architect of his plays. And when, after a certain maturity has been reached, play after play follows the same quest for human perfection, each play in its totality (over and above the wide variety of detail) conveying the same message, we have no alternative but to conclude that Shakespeare was altogether preoccupied, at any rate for the last fifteen years of his life or more, by the same questions which preoccupied Dante.

(*To be Continued*)

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[1] Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions* (Faber), p. 84.

[2] *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (C.U.P., 1964), p. 17.