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SHOWMAN AND ARTIST

THE revolt against nineteenth century commentary on Shakespeare as closet drama has been wholesome.

Oversight of the simple fact that Shakespeare wrote his plays as a commercial venture, to catch and hold the attention of audiences, led to many fantastic, gossamer theories, comments and annotations.

With the rise and development of historical and technical scholarship, many cobwebs have been swept from Shakespearean commentary. The new criticism began with a fresh emphasis upon the fact, long almost ignored, that Shakespeare's plays were written for stage performance,¹ and that a playwright in any age must take his audience along with him, must make clear the situation and action, must inform his audience. "Audience" means "hearers," and people get less through their ears than through their eyes bent upon printed words.² Then some thirty years of research brought to light much knowledge about the physical stage³ in the Elizabethan-Jacobean period and a clearer understanding of how this governed the playwrights' technique—a stage and technique in many ways different from modern conditions and modern usage. All this was valuable.

¹An eminent pioneer in this study was Professor George P. Baker, with his *Development of Shakespeare as a Dramatist*, Macmillan, 1907. The editors of the volumes in the *Arden Shakespeare* series, D. C. Heath & Company, were also early in the field.

²Cf. Schücking, pp. 18-21.

³The workers in this field have been and are numerous; among them: C. Brodmeier, William Archer, W. J. Lawrence, A. H. Thorndike, V. E. Albright, G. F. Reynolds, G. K. Chambers, and (again) G. P. Baker.

At present, however, there is danger of overemphasizing the merely theatrical aspect of Shakespeare's work. Criticism from that point of view alone will distort the Shakespearean product as much in one direction as closet criticism distorted it in the other direction. In short, Shakespearean criticism may become too objective, too "external." The criticism of Coleridge and Schlegel needs to be supplemented and often corrected by criticism from behind the scenes, but this does not mean that Coleridge and Schlegel are obsolete.

Much of Shakespeare must be understood as mere showmanship, an endeavor by hook or crook to get the story across to the audience. But because Shakespeare was a remarkable poet and something of a philosopher he loaded his plays with excess baggage, with surplusage over and above what was necessary to make the plays "go." Why he did this is not far to seek. An artist must put art into his product, even when his showman sense tells him that the shadings, nuances, surplusage, will add nothing to the selling value of his commodity. An artist must satisfy his sense of art in so far as circumstances will permit.

Sometimes limitations of time and space compel a playwright to violate his artistic conscience, to do things which he knows are false both to credibility and to art, and then the showman has the upper hand of the artist. Sometimes it is possible to blend exhibition with art and then there is pleasant harmony. Sometimes the artist defies the playwright and overloads his lines with meanings superfluous to showmanship but inherent in the artist's instinct for the way the thing should be done.

Often when this happened in the case of Shakespeare, there resulted a double meaning in his lines, the obvious meaning which a first performance audience would get, a sweep of poetry with a general sense sufficiently clear to

carry the audience along with the action; and a latent "in-between-the-lines" meaning which at first only Shakespeare clearly understood but which becomes comprehensible to the student who scrutinizes the lines carefully, who perceives that practical, experienced Shakespeare, the showman, must have known that the subtleties were too fine for an audience to catch, but were not too obtrusive to confuse the audience as to the drift of the story, and which pleased the artistic sense of Shakespeare himself. And, after all, the artist himself is the person whom the artist is most compelled to please, even as young John Keats, most Shakespearean of nineteenth century English poets, said in a notable letter to his publisher.

Anticipating an example which will be dwelt upon later, there are in *King Lear* striking instances of double meaning. Elizabethan-Jacobean audiences delighted in sensational effects, and among the sensations they craved and got was the raving of madmen. The drama of the age is vocal with the shrieks of maniacs and the clanking of their chains. Shakespeare showed his audience a raving lunatic in *Lear*, enough to excite the audience and forward the story, but while presenting *Lear* in his delirium Shakespeare satisfied his artistic taste and his acute understanding of the operations of distraught minds by making *Lear* rave, as we now say, "psychologically."

The audience got the desired spectacular effect. Shakespeare and we who can read the play reflectively line by line perceive the underlying psychology. Parenthetically, it may be remarked that here is the line of division between too many Shakespearean actors and those that profess to be Shakespearean scholars; it is no uncommon experience to hear an actor say "Shakespeare is very simple"—and in one aspect of him he is, but alas and alack, the actors who say this are

precisely the actors who give very unsatisfying performances of Shakespeare, who obviously have never probed his depths, who substitute declamation for profound interpretation. Edwin Booth realized that Shakespeare was sometimes simple but sometimes profound and complex. One needs more than a good voice, a good memory and a good stage presence to act the greater rôles in Shakespeare; he needs to be also something of a philosopher—Shakespeare himself was.

There are three fairly distinct stages of impression in studying Shakespeare's best work: first, a long sweep of poetry and situation which gives a general idea of story and character; secondly, a rereading which exposes much that seems arbitrary, artificial, unlikely both in situation and character, a violation of credibility due to the fact that Shakespeare had to "put across" his stories; then comes a third step—it comes only from very close reading—a perception that in brief, swift lines, in parenthetical phrases, sometimes in mere ejaculations, Shakespeare was giving a subtle credibility to that which is superficially incredible.