

An Objective Evaluation of Shakespeare's Universal Appeal

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Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance; that you o'verstrep not the modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end both at the first, and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature, to show Virtue her own feature, scorn her own Image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

- Hamlet: III.ii.17-24

Man is the nucleus of all Shakespeare's writings- poems, songs, sonnets or plays. The recurrent themes in all of his plays are the invisible forces of character that shape the destiny of man. The ancient Greek dramatists pitted man against the divine forces; but Shakespeare presents the struggle of man fighting against himself. He presents the drama of the struggle of man fighting against the contending forces within his own psyche. Here man battles not against gods or against supernatural agencies but against himself. Shakespeare intuitively knew more than four hundred years ago, as an expert in modern psychology knows today, that the different psychic forces determine human behavior. Hence his plays deeply explore human motive and emotion, both conscious and unconscious. He borrowed the bare skeleton of the plot from different sources, but by the alembic of his genius transmuted it into a true-to-all-time story of man. His fellow actors – John Heminge and Henry Condell – described him as “a happie imitator of Nature”, and he himself in “Hamlet” condemned those playwrights who “imitated humanity so abominably.” In his Roman plays he depicts the pagan values of that time and place in “King Lear” the setting is pre-Christian Britain; in “The Merchant of Venice” the dramatic conflict is based on the struggle between the Christian and the Hebrew. But the cynosure of attention is neither the heathen Roman, nor the bigot Jew, but the universal man; and the contending forces are his own psychic impulses. So the leitmotifs of the plays are human ingredients, such as jealousy, malignity, hatred, ingredients, such as jealousy, malignity, hatred, ingratitude, revenge, love, fear, anger, ambition etc. The insubstantial motives, feelings and emotions are made palpable through his consummate power of imagination. Thus, ingratitude in “As you like It” is more unkind than the winter wind; in “Twelfth Night” it is more hateful than “any taint of vice”; in “King Lear” it is a “marble hearted fiend” which turns Lear mad, and in “Timon of Athens” it is “an iron heart” which makes Timon a misanthrope. Criminal ambition to usurp the throne spurs Richard Plantagenet to a succession of plot and murders ultimately leading him to his doom. Lady Macbeth's ambition awakens in her the unquenchable desire to bear to bear the name of a queen, and eventually leads her to unconscious somnambulistic strolls with incriminatory mumblings, and to suicide. Othello strangulates his beloved-wife and thrusts a bare bodkin in his own heart. Loyalty, either between lovers, or between husband and wife, or between friends, or from soldier or citizen to king or country – is one of Shakespeare's constant themes; so is courage, whether in battle or in facing great trials, perils and adversity. Love pure (as in Beatrice, Desdemona, Helene, Hermoine, Hero, Imogen, Isabella, Julia, Juliet, Miranda, Perdita, Pisanius, the two Portias, Rosalind, Thaisa, or Voila) or profane (as in Cleopatra, Helen, or Tamora) is another constant theme of Shakespeare. He neither degrades purity nor idealizes profanity. He does not make adultery commendable nor does he present incest as interesting, nor does he show evil as fascinating. He never renders that amiable which religion and reason alike teach us to detest. He does not clothe vice in the attractive garb of virtue, as Beaumont and Fletcher do.

The 'historical' and the 'new' critics have made vain efforts to prove that what matters in Shakespeare is not drama and character but poetry and imagery. Distinguishing between naturalistic drama and poetic drama, Bethell writes: "whereas naturalistic drama requires the same sort of attention as is given to happenings in ordinary life, poetic drama requires the same sort of attention as is necessary in reading lyric poetry. An apposite rejoinder to this erroneous statement comes from Katak, who writes:

"The recent concentration upon the nature and function of poetic imagery has, it is true, made us aware of a new dimension – the power exerted by these images in weaving a fabric full of imaginative significance. At the same time, we are forced to recognize that, in the excessive zeal with which these explorations have been pursued, there is developing a dangerous separation between the poetry and the drama, with the result that the uniqueness of Shakespeare's works is being obscured.

In view of this, two propositions may be submitted: (1) The 'character' approach, obviously erroneous in the form it took during the nineteenth century, is still a legitimate approach basically related to the dramatic form. In attending to the imagery we should not overlook its importance. (2) The poetry that a character speaks, in an important sense, 'belongs' to and is revelatory of that character. It cannot simply be regarded as though it 'belonged' only to Shakespeare in the way lyric poetry belongs to an author."

Bradley stated about Macbeth: "The bold ... ambitious man of action, has within certain limits, the imagination of a poet, ... an imagination on the one hand extremely sensitive to the impressions of a certain kind, and, on the other, productive of violent disturbance both of mind and body. A 'historical' critic like Bethel would resent such a statement, for he thinks it preposterous to discover the personality trait of the character in his speech. He would argue that if Macbeth's language is imaginative, it is the imagination of Shakespeare, not of Macbeth: We do not think of the character, Macbeth, as a man who speaks in blank verse; we must not even think of him as a man of poetic imagination, since the poetry is Shakespeare's not Macbeth's. Bethel argues that Shakespeare wrote poetic dramas, and hence all his characters invariably speak poetry. Therefore, the poetry a character speaks is a conventional device; it is not revelatory of any particular characteristic of the speaker. To quote Bethell:

"After 'Othello', Shakespeare nearly always gives his best verse to every character, regardless of individual differences, his dramatic material is thus completely transmuted into poetic terms. It is therefore dangerous to speak of certain characters as being more 'poetic' than others: in poetic drama everyone necessarily speaks poetry."

A similar idea in almost identical language has been expressed by Kenneth Muir: 'Every character in a poetic play may speak poetry; but this poetry does not necessarily reflect their poetic disposition – it is merely a medium.' But neither Bethell nor Muir explains why Shakespeare thought it necessary to make the poetry of Macbeth's speech more imaginative than that of Lady Macbeth's, or Banquo's or Malcolm's or Macduff's or Lennox's. Katak writes:

"A statement such as 'Every character in a poetic play may speak poetry but that does not necessarily reflect their poetic disposition', leaves unexplained how it is that, though all speak poetry, the poetic speech of one has a distinct quality setting it off from that of another. There is consistency in the speech of a character; each is given a sort of personal idiom which is maintained throughout. When there is a pronounced change or growth in the character, it is reflected in a corresponding change of tone and imagery and in the rhythm of the poetic speech."

Like the 'Historical' critic the 'new' critic also would not attribute any amount of imagination to Macbeth, for he would argue that it would be tantamount to confusing art with life. Kenneth Muir, for example, makes this comment on Macbeth's soliloquy, "If it were done when 't is done', (I. vii):

"The imagery of the speech shows that Macbeth is haunted by the horror of the deed, and impresses that horror on the audience. But if we go further and pretend that this poetic imagery is a proof that Macbeth had a powerful imagination that he was, in fact, a poet, we are confusing real life with drama"

Muir means to say that the poetry of Macbeth's speech is not revelatory of his character; it is rather a part of the general poetic design of the play:

“Once again it must be emphasized that because Shakespeare makes Macbeth take as only a great poet could talk, we are not to assume that Macbeth is a great poet: he is merely part of a great poem.”

This approach is totally misleading. Hence Harold S. Wilson writes:

“We may think that the ‘confusion’ of Macbeth’s poetry with Shakespeare’s is precisely the effect Shakespeare aimed at in the theatre. As we listen to Macbeth’s eloquence, we forget about Shakespeare the poet, we forget that we are listening to a poem, we think only of the figure imaginatively evoked for us and embodied upon the stage...If this is to confuse drama with real life, it is also the ‘willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith’... We feel that Macbeth is a poetic person and we value him for the poetry of his utterance.”

A poetic drama is a drama written in verse. The primary interest of the audience in the theatre is the dramatic action and dramatic conflict as exemplified in the characters of the play, but Bethell says that “a Shakespearean audience is even more busy with the subtleties of a highly complex poetry.” The absurdity of the following statement hardly need be explained:

“The naturalistic approach treats stage characters as if they were real persons, and seek a psychological explanation for their words and deeds. An audience in the naturalistic theatre is busy with conjectures about the states of mind which would produce certain actions and remarks presented before them. But a Shakespearean audience is even more busy with the subtleties of a highly complex poetry, and it is unlikely that they would have time to spare for any but the most obvious naturalistic indications of characters.”

On the one hand Bethell writes:

“To treat the play-world as it were the real world, to apply to a play of Shakespeare the psychological categories applicable to actual life or to a play of Ibsen, most often result in serious misrepresentation.”

On the other hand he accepts that:

(i) “A single flash of natural dialogue, breaking the boundaries of convention will reveal an intuitive understanding of human nature, unshared by his contemporaries.”

(ii) “Shakespeare happened to possess, beyond his contemporaries, a

Sympathetic insight into human nature: his characters do not always conform to type, and sometimes surprise us by the naturalness of their behavior.”

It may legitimately be enquired of Bethell that if Shakespeare’s play-world is not like the real world, how do his plays reveal that Shakespeare had “an intuitive understanding of human nature?” The fact is that in drama characters are created in the image of living persons, and the dramatist’s success is largely measured by this criterion. Katak rightly observed: “It is true that the characters are not ‘real’, but part of Shakespeare’s artistry lies in convincing us that they are and in getting us emotionally involved with them.” The characters in a drama talk and act like real human beings; “and much of the discussion of the consistency of a given character turns on the assumption that he was alive. And all this notwithstanding our knowledge that he has never existed save in the dramatist’s imagination... No dramatic criticism of the personae in a play is possible except under the pretence that they are living people, and surely one is well aware of this pretence.”

Every character of Shakespeare has an individual identity; and this identity is best revealed in his speech and action. The poetry a character speaks reveals the distinctive mark of his personality as has well been demonstrated by Clemen, Ifor Evans, and Morozov. Shakespeare strictly follows Hamlet’s advice to the actors: “suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature.” Consequently his characters reveal truths of human nature. And, that is the secret of Shakespeare’s greatness and universal appeal.

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