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Shakespeare and Philosophy

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Shakespeare and Philosophy¹

The nineteenth-century poet, critic and philosopher, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, once characterized the mind of William Shakespeare as "oceanic". Oceans, of course, teem with myriad forms of life: is philosophy one such form in the oceanic vastness of Shakespeare's creative genius? If so, how do we identify philosophic elements in his plays and assess the place they occupy? What sense does it make to speak of "philosophical criticism" of individual plays? How does Shakespeare incorporate epistemologies of his own time and how dramatically appropriate are they? To what extent is Shakespeare of use to contemporary philosophers and how does he anticipate them; and, vice-versa, can such philosophies refine our understanding of certain issues to which literary critics may fail to do justice? That is, can philosophy take us beyond the purely literary examination of plot structure, character, poetic imagery, speech rhythms, dialogues, settings, etc. to grant us new insight into the problematical issues the plays raise? In the time at my disposal, I am going to attempt some answers to at least some of these questions, by dwelling briefly on *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*.

Strange to say, in the four centuries since he wrote, linkages between Shakespeare's drama and philosophy have rarely been made. In effecting this linkage are we not bringing together the results of two different kinds of organized, verbal activity: on the one hand, dramatized fictions, or histories, delivered for the most part in sensuous poetic language often rich in symbol and literary allusion, exerting a strong appeal to the imagination, exhibiting varieties of rhetoric and, certainly in the case of tragedy, eliciting an emotional as well as an intellectual response, often admitting of more than one interpretation, if not resisting "conceptual closure" altogether; and on the other, logically and precisely argued systems of discourse where words are invariably used in their restricted

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denotatory sense with a progressive refinement of linguistic concepts as a result of rigorous questioning? Or, as Graham Bradshaw put it more succinctly at the beginning of his searching book, *Shakespeare's Skepticism* (1987) "... the processes of poetic-dramatic thinking are not those of logical discursive thought." And writing on works of art, the distinguished English philosopher, the late Sir Stuart Hampshire observed that "Human creativeness in art prevents the recognized varieties of feeling and established conceptions of the mind, from ever hardening into a final pattern." In other words, works of art, including Shakespeare's plays, will always be open-ended and should not be treated as closed systems.

Furthermore, John F. Danby, a scholar of Renaissance literature, pointed out in his book, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (1949) – a full-length study of *King Lear* – that whereas "A discursive philosopher is tied to the script of his single part... the universal playwright, without self-contradiction, can include two different schools of philosophy in the same play", as he demonstrates in the case of *King Lear*.

But, when it comes to exploration of Shakespeare's personal philosophy, a declaration by a fellow-Canadian, the distinguished scholar and critic, Northrop Frye, is hardly encouraging. Shakespeare, according to him, "had no opinions, no values, no philosophy, no principles of anything except dramatic structure." Perhaps, though, on the other hand, as far as the plays are concerned, we can take heart from the extraordinary reflection by the widely-respected French ethical philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas: "It sometimes seems to me that the whole of philosophy is only a meditation of Shakespeare." More temperate, though equally challenging – perhaps more so – is an observation by the major American poet, Wallace Stevens: "Shakespeare's plays engender a fortuitous probing of philosophical ideas", though some may wish to question the word, 'fortuitous.'

As I suggested earlier, Shakespeare incorporates Renaissance bodies of thought – philosophical, theological in some instances – into his drama. These are made apparent when a character waxes philosophical.

To illustrate, let me dwell on a speech that appears towards the end of *The Merchant of Venice*, a speech that succeeds in being both amorous and philosophical (I hesitate to pronounce how rare or not this may happen to be!). It is spoken by Lorenzo to Jessica on a moonlight bank at Belmont, Portia's dwelling. It concerns the moral effect of music, what Professor Carmen Cozma of this university has termed "meloethics", a

branch of moral philosophy that she treats at full in her book whose English title is *The Meloethics. A Semiotic Essay on the Moral Values of the Musical Creation* (1996).

Lorenzo begins his discourse by referring to the "music of the spheres" that we mortals are prevented from hearing as long as our souls are "grossly close[d] in" by our mortal flesh. (5.1.160f) He then proceeds to reflect on "the sweet power of music":

... nought so stockish, hard, and full of rage,
But music for the time doth change his nature.
The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;... (5.1.81-85)

If Lorenzo's observations point forward to contemporary philosophical studies – such as those by Professor Cozma – they are also rooted in Plato whose expositions of the music of the spheres and the moral benefits to human individuals from music and harmony were mediated by Ficino and the neo-Platonists to the Renaissance where they were treated – often at length – by Shakespeare's contemporaries, notably Sir John Davies in his long philosophical poem, *Orchestra or A Poem of Dancing* (1596).

As for Lorenzo's speech, few young women in Shakespeare – or anywhere else for that matter – can have been the recipient of a more learned discourse than Jessica receives from Lorenzo, though its poetry masks its learning. Behind it, in addition to Plato, there are Quintillian and Plutarch; Ovid and Chaucer provide literary sources.

But however persuasive an instance it may be of a poetic treatment of a specific concept, such a philosophical component, forming part of a drama, cannot be considered in vacuo, in isolation from both its immediate and wider dramatic context, from all that constitutes a play by Shakespeare. Philosophical exegesis (to borrow Morris Weitz's term) has to be conducted *pari passu* with a consideration of the elements of the drama: character, plot structure, setting, imagery, symbolism, language generally. Only in conjunction with these can the philosophical element be fully evaluated. Let us then briefly consider the dramatic value of Lorenzo's speech. First, it indicates a marked change in dramatic atmosphere: the "soft stillness" of the night, the sleeping moonlight upon the bank, form a total contrast to the fears, tensions, and discords of the preceding trial scene, where the drama has been at its most intense. Here in this scene the harmonies of heaven foreshadow the

emotional harmony shortly to be achieved (though not before some comic misunderstandings) by all the young lovers. Second, it has been customary to construe Lorenzo's philosophical exegesis of music as a retroactive moral commentary on Shylock:

The man that hath no music in himself,...
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils (83-85)

Earlier, Shylock had indeed inveighed against masques and "the drum" and the "vile squealing of the wry-necked fife." (2.5.29-30). But deeper reflection (that Graham Bradshaw encourages) will reveal that in "his successful ransacking of another man's daughter and treasure chests" with (one might add) that daughter's total co-operation, Lorenzo has ably demonstrated *his* fitness for "treasons, stratagems, and spoils" carried out incidentally to the accompaniment of that very kind of raucous music Shylock has condemned. It is worth adding that in *Julius Caesar*, a parallel comment is offered by Caesar himself on Cassius, the most fanatical of the conspirators against him: "he hears no music" and therefore is not to be trusted. (Quite simply that; there is, needless to say, a world of linguistic difference between the sensuous effusions of a young lover and the shrewd pronouncements of a military autocrat.)

Let me now move from neo-Platonism to Christian theology. In *Romeo and Juliet*, very early in the morning after the night when the hero and heroine have met, fallen in love, and exchanged vows of love in the famous Balcony Scene, we meet, for the first time, Friar Laurence. He is gathering, as is his custom, herbs and flowers for their medicinal properties, a special interest of his. (Hence we are prepared for the sleeping potion he is later to administer to Juliet.) In a speech influenced, I am sure, by the art of the Renaissance emblem book, he dilates upon a flower whose twin properties of medicine and poison emblemizes for the Friar the dual nature of man, a creature of 'grace and rude will.' (2.3.28). The Friar, of course, in using theological terms, is speaking in the character of his calling, though he offers no further explication of these binaries. (After all, we are dealing with a play and not a theological treatise.) But allow me to mention that in its basic theological sense, grace meant "the free and unmerited favor of God." Contemporary predestinarian theology taught that to God's Elect grace was irresistible – as is indeed the love Romeo and Juliet feel for each other. Only a few moments later, Romeo joins the Friar and takes up this word by assuring him that, in contrast with the loveless Rosaline, Juliet "doth grace for grace and love for love allow." (2.3.86).

Romeo's use of the word – that recalls its presence in Petrarcha's love poetry – combined with the Friar's, creates both a theological and amatory context: human love is an earthly reflection of the divine dispensation of grace. The individual human will is the mental faculty responsible for acts of intent ("rude will" will lead to violent acts); so it is active, whereas grace is passive. So that rather than give a fully formed theological discourse, the Friar, is in effect, and in a broader sense, suggesting a polarity or moral dichotomy that is deeply embedded in this tragedy. It results from the basic dramatic situation in which two innocent young people have to fulfill their love in a society long riven with strife between their two families, a strife that results in public outbreaks of violence. "Grace" and "rude will" find their equivalents in the more common terms, "love" and "hate" as these are used by both Romeo and Juliet. "Here's much to do with hate, but more with love": this statement made by Romeo about the latest affray in the streets of Verona and his unhappiness in love before he has met and fallen in love with Juliet turns out to be premonitory and an accurate summary of the Romeo and Juliet story. "My only love sprung from my only hate!" is Juliet's exclamation on learning of Romeo's identity and family, again reflecting, indeed anticipating, the Friar's theological antithesis, and expressing *in minimis* the tension at the very heart of the play. Thus the Friar's theological comment, brief though it is in itself, affords us a good instance of how much a philosophical notion can be viewed as an indirect, yet integral, summation of the tragedy. "Grace" is the love between Romeo and Juliet, a constant moral force throughout; "rude will" is manifested by the street violence between the Montagues and Capulets (as vicious as a director wishes to make them), Tybalt's slaying of Mercutio and (we should not forget) Romeo's playing of Paris; some moralists would also include the self-destruction of the two lovers.

In broader terms, *Romeo and Juliet*, being the deterministic tragedy it is, raises the age-old philosophical question of the efficacy, even the very existence, of free will in a world ruled by fate, where consequences of human action hang in the stars and names are written in "sour misfortune's book." (5.3.82). Free will, according to the seventeenth-century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, writing in 1654, was the "third way of bringing things to pass, distinct from necessity and chance." But it is this last agent that determines the action in this play, from Romeo's chance meeting with the illiterate Capulet servant that gets him to the Ball, to the disastrous mistiming of events at the Capulet vault only five days later. As the Friar is compelled to acknowledge: "A

greater power than we can contradict/Hath thwarted our intents" (5.3.152-153). What implications does such a fate-ruled world have for the moral responsibility of human actions? The play fails to answer this question, except to imply that the sacrificial death of the young is what it takes to reconcile the elders and bring healing and regeneration to the community. Grace therefore continues to exert its benign influence and is ultimately triumphant over all the hostile workings of fate – and rude will.

Arguably, the play of greatest philosophical interest in the Shakespeare canon is *Hamlet*, not least because the protagonist "philosophizes" in the old and widely-understood meaning of the word, on man himself. Hamlet is the intellectual moralist, meditating on human nature, particularly on universal sinfulness, corruptibility and judgement as seen by his early reflections as he goes to meet his father's ghost and prompted by the degraded, sybaritic lifestyle of Denmark, exemplified by the Court, and the harm it will do to the country's reputation: so an individual, Hamlet maintains, will "in the general censure" "take corruption" from his "particular fault," "the stamp of one defect." (1.4.31-36); or by his rebuke to Polonius over the players: "use every man after his desert, and who shall scape whipping?" (3.2.529-30); or his observation to Ophelia that "virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock, but we shall relish of it" (3.1.116-18) meaning that virtue cannot completely obliterate former sinfulness. Indeed, the precariousness of virtue is Hamlet's persistent preoccupation. During his key confrontation with the other woman in his life, Gertrude, his adulterous and incestuous mother, he urges her to 'assume a virtue' even though she does not have one. He lectures her on

That monster custom, who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives frock or livery
That aptly is put on

(3.4.161-65)

– that is, custom, or habit, though it wears away all natural feeling and acts like a devil in establishing bad habits, yet provides an outward predisposition of virtue, easily assumed in times of stress.

Then there are the ironical, questioning and subdued reflections on man Hamlet utters to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The exultant opening is quickly undercut.

What a piece of work is a man,
 how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties...
 and yet to me what is this quintessence of dust? (3.2.303-8)

– an image that anticipates his reflections on mortality as he holds Yorick's skull in the graveyard scene. His brief meeting with the captain of Fortinbras' army on its way to attack Poland leads him to reflect on the puny nature of national honour and, significantly, on man endowed by his Creator with reason which He intended him to use and not neglect:

What is a man,
 If his chief good and market of his time
 Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
 Sure He that made us with such large discourse,
 Looking before and after, gave us not
 That capability and godlike reason
 'To fust in us unus'd
 (4.4.33-39)

Later, and again on the theme of divine providence and dispensation, he observes:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
 Rough-hew them how we will.
 (5.2.10-11)

and

There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. (5.2.219-20).

Both these pronouncements are spoken to Horatio, the second echoing Christ's words in St. Matthew (10:29) and uttered just a short while before the final and ill-fated duel scene.

But it is not only Hamlet who is given to philosophical comment. In his unsuccessful attempt to find grace and forgiveness for his "foul murder," Claudius raises a theological question that lies at the heart of his failure: "May one be pardon'd and retain th'offence?" – that is, the *results* of the offence: his throne and Gertrude. And then there is the philosophy of the good life that Polonius expounds to Laertes at some length, culminating in

This above all to thine own self be true
 And it must follow, as the night the day,
 Thou canst not then be false to any man.
 (1.3.78-80)

Philosophically, the notion of "thine own self" raises the question: "Do we really have only one self?" And if there were really only one self, and it happened to be grasping, rapacious, destructive, even with a tendency towards self-destruction, the consequences of such advice would be appalling.

No other play by Shakespeare has such a philosophical cast to it as this one. No other play is as rich in moral generalizations, no other play has such an insistence on the very act of thinking itself, especially in relation to action. The observation Hamlet makes in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy is the best-known instance:

Thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn away,
And lose the name of action.
(3.1.83-87)

The same thinking/acting antithesis is seen in some sententious couplets in a speech of the Player King in the Mousetrap play:

... what we do determine, oft we break...
What to ourselves in passion we propose,
The passion ending, doth the purpose lose.
(3.2.187; 194-95)

And the scheming Claudius lectures in similar terms to the enraged Laertes after Hamlet has killed his father.

That we would do
We should do when we would; for this "would" changes,
And hath abutments and delays...
And then this "should" is like a spendthrift's sigh,
That hurts by easing.
(4.7.118-20; 122-23)

Bearing all this mind, we can now turn to an important book produced in 1959 by Sir Stuart Hampshire, the title of which, *Thought and Action*, it so happens, unintentionally names this central, dual concern in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Although it makes no mention of Shakespeare's tragedy and very little of creative writing (even though Hampshire published good literary criticism elsewhere) it can nevertheless serve to focus and clarify this antithesis.

In his last soliloquy Hamlet is all too aware that he has not yet revenged his father's murder. In not very specific terms, he wonders whether his failure might not be due to "bestial" oblivion, or some craven scruple/Of thinking too precisely on th'event" (i.e. outcome). He claims he has "cause, and will, and strength, and means/To do't." Now Hampshire argues that "the notion of the will, of action, the relation of thought and action – these problems find their meeting place in the notion of intention" (p. 96); and "Thought cannot be thought as opposed to day-dreaming or musing, unless it is directed towards a conclusion, whether in action or in judgement" (p. 159). In his soliloquy at the end of Act 2 (after meeting with the Players) Hamlet in fact does castigate himself for moping like "John-a-dreams," but above all Hampshire's insistence on intention makes the student of *Hamlet* aware (if he or she were not aware already) that Shakespeare's protagonist at no time formulates an *intention*, clearly conceived, to carry out his act of vengeance. The closest he comes is when, after he has witnessed Claudius at prayer, he determines to dispatch him when he is "about some act [unlike prayer]/That has no relish of salvation in't." (3.3.91-92). But, regarding Hampshire's use of the term, Hamlet in his soliloquies is not thinking but musing, there being no resolution of his thought in action, only self-judgement. For example, the closing words of his last soliloquy are about his thoughts, not action: "O, from this time forth,/My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth." (4.4.65-66). And we should note that some of his most powerful musings are directed towards his adulterous, sexually-yielding mother, seemingly unable to resist her sexual nature, as heard in his anguished first soliloquy.

Hamlet is too complex a play to be summed up in a neat philosophic formula. Should we devise one, it could well be intrusive and foreclose on other interpretive possibilities. We certainly have to reckon with the profound effect of his mother's sexual behaviour on Hamlet, from the shock of which he never really recovers and robs him of the initiative he needs to carry out his duty to revenge his father's murder, whose memory he holds so profoundly dear. How to exercise the will against psychological obstructions is a problem that could well be of philosophical concern but one to which Hamlet fails to address himself. Hence, his notorious delay in killing Claudius which when it finally happens, swiftly, as Hamlet is close to death, does so in response to Claudius' villainy against him.

Let me close with some thought-provoking words from Hampshire's *Thought and Action*. They must surely be some of the best unintended comment on Shakespeare's most-discussed and perhaps most-admired character:

A man to whom we attribute a rich inner life of belief and disbelief, of unexpressed doubt and self-questioning, must be a man of great powers of self-restraint, to whom the inhibition of action is natural... He does not shout but he exults inwardly; he does not weep, but he feels sad. He does not ask questions, but he doubts; he does not deny, but he disbelieves. This habit of inhibition, which replaces the substance of perceptible behaviour with its shadow in the mental life of thought and feeling, is the process of civilization.

Here both Shakespeare and his most philosophical creation have found *their* philosopher.