

AN ENQUIRY INTO SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC ART

Apollo Nałęcz-Korzeniowski

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[...] Dramatic verse is the poetry of the multitude. Its power lies in its ability to arouse empathy, which in some mysterious way causes people to laugh when they see others laughing or weep when confronted with tears. When gathered together in great numbers to witness the same event, people become united by a single, common emotion, notwithstanding their different natures, characters and social backgrounds. [pp. 1–2]

[...] The dramatic poet writes for the amusement of the common people – the audience he moves and addresses – but at the same time has a duty to write for their ennoblement and moral edification. Power and duty go hand in hand. Duty is the price he pays for his status of visionary poet. [p. 2]

[...] Before and during Shakespeare's times plays were variously called *play*, *interlude*, *history* or *ballad* – irrespective of their form or genre. The classification of Shakespeare's own plays as tragedies, dramas and comedies is quite arbitrary and it is well nigh impossible to draw a clear distinction between the comic and the tragic in them – nor is it possible to use Lydgate's fifteenth-century rule, which stipulated that a comedy ought to begin with sorrow and end in contentment, whereas a tragedy ought to begin with contentment and end in death and desolation. As a playwright, Shakespeare was oblivious to such definitions. The new kind of drama which he created was the outcome of his reflections on the essence of Man. What struck and inspired his genius was [...] the image – an almost daily occurrence – [...] of the awesome struggle between the forces of Man and the power of fate – a struggle which evokes tears and pity when the free human will is confronted with the immense disproportion that exists between human endeavour and the immeasurable forces of destiny – between never-ending human aspirations and the paucity of human means. It also happens, however,

that a community is founded on weakness and ridiculous narrow-mindedness. [...] Its members – disfigured dwarves, no less – struggle with fate not in order to achieve great things, but for purely selfish ends that to a lesser or greater extent are connected with sheer gratification. [...] This other image evokes not pity or tears, but laughter and ridicule. [...]

These two distinct emotional experiences [the tragic and the comic] are characteristic of the works of Shakespeare, who sees tears and pain as the [essential] truth of our experience of reality. Laughter, on the other hand, results from the falsehood which is present both in individuals and in Society as a whole. [...] In his plays, Shakespeare portrays Man both as he really is and as he merely appears to be. [pp. 9–10]

[...] Shakespeare's plays, whose essence and content are the inner self, fall into three categories: those dealing with the reality of the individual, those dealing with the reality of the individual in a particular national and historical context and those dealing with delusion. Shakespeare presented the universal and individual reality of Man in those plays which were later called tragedies. He presented the reality of the individual in a particular national and historical context in the so-called historical plays. In the plays known as comedies we find Man at odds with his [true] dignity and nature [because he is] in [a state of] delusion. [p. 10]

[...] Posterity conferred the status of tragedy on the historical drama *Richard III* merely because Shakespeare was able to show that the historic events in the play were all due to the influence of one man who was always ready to seize the initiative. Alone among the main characters of the historical dramas, Richard III creates his own destiny, and so Shakespeare was able to write a play about the reality of the individual.

In [the other] historical dramas – and particularly those based on the history of England, which was so dear to Shakespeare's heart – the events themselves take precedence and the characters – far from actively shaping the course of history – are little more than participants. The historical dramas are: *King John*, *Richard II*, *Henry IV* (both parts), *Henry V*, *Henry VIII*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*.

All the other plays of Shakespeare – from *The Comedy of Errors* [...] up to and including *The Tempest*, together with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Timon of Athens*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *The Merchant of Venice* – are classified as comedies. *The Tempest* without any doubt conveys the immense gulf between Shakespeare's ideals and the reality of the Society in which he lived. The other four plays mentioned above depart somewhat from the realm of delusion and partake of the essence of human reality. They are, as it were, an intermediate genre between comic delusion and the reality of the tragic. [pp. 11–12]

[...] Elevated moral ground, one powerfully drawn character and the correspondingly powerful, single impression which this makes on the audience – that is the one natural unity of a Shakespearian play. Consciously or not, the playwright uses this

technique in various ways in order to convey the reality of the individual as well as the reality of the individual in a particular historical and national context, i.e. in his tragedies and in the historical dramas. [pp. 12–13]

[...] In the historical dramas Shakespeare suspends his organic principle of unity, or rather transfers it from one [particular] character to Society itself. Instead of one [man's] passion we have the providential, constant march of humanity which has been mapped out in the destiny of nations. [...] In a tragedy the individual must perish, after which we gain a glimpse of Man's immortality. In a historical drama the main character – humanity – survives, albeit amidst the ruins of history. Whereas in a tragedy Shakespeare portrays the inner man, in a historical drama he portrays Society – not by means of a heroic deed, but by means of the effects that such a deed has on the common people. This is the second principle in Shakespeare's development of the art of drama. [...] The third and paramount principle [...] is the playwright's inescapable duty to portray or at least convincingly convey Man's moral greatness, which in the Book of Genesis is called the likeness and image of God – a greatness which is independent, sovereign and free of the effects of earthly struggles and of Man's fight against collective destiny and the inexorable march of human progress. [pp. 14–15]

[...] Hence the clarity of Shakespeare's plays. [...] Our attention is not dissipated, nor are we torn between two conflicting impulses or feelings. No sooner have we seen the characters of the play – no sooner has the action begun – than we are in a position to choose [...] what to fear, what to hate and what to love. [...] The characters of the play do not move from virtue to crime or from weakness to sin – they are well and truly what they are and there is no mistaking their true nature. All of them, however, are shot through with that mysterious truth about human nature – the fact that even in a criminal heart there remain strings which – were it not for a lack of good will – might well resonate to the harmony of virtue. [p. 16]

[...] Shakespeare drew the three principles outlined above from his observations of the outside world. However, there was a fourth principle, [...] which lay within the poet himself – within his spirit [...] without which his observations of the outside world could only have produced a cold and lifeless image. This indispensable element is that poetic anointment which allows the visionary poet to truly experience whatever emotions are created by the deeds which are acted out on stage. This anointment is a mystical bond which links the poet with the outside world and which enables him to fathom its innermost recesses. Shakespeare [...] does not create, but rather pours out [his own feelings] from the bounty of his anointed nature. The poet's soul has an intimate knowledge of all these feelings and their expressions, which the slightest impulse of his imagination is able to set in motion. Moved himself by what is intended to move others, Shakespeare wins the trust of his audience. [...] He portrays the most universal and warmest feelings in a dramatic way, but is able to terrify and evoke horror with extreme simplicity. [pp. 16–17]

[...] Shakespeare's concept of comedy is based entirely on the principle that comedy ought to be the antithesis of tragedy. Given, therefore, that the latter is the real truth, the former can only be an illusion of truth. [p. 224]

[...] Shakespearean comedy is a fanciful Romantic delusion. It is a parody on stage of human destinies and the fates of communities – a reflection of the real-life parody played out by individuals in their flimsy, deluded fancies and by Society itself in its warped ideas. [p. 226]

[...] An examination of the five plays which we have set apart from other comedies written by Shakespeare [...] will show that his approach to comedy was by no means uniform. [...] [These plays] do not belong to [the realm of] delusion. Their subjects are not drawn from pastoral romances. [p. 227]

[...] The form and content of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is quite original. The structure of *Timon of Athens* owes nothing to Plutarch's passage about this misanthropist. *Troilus and Cressida* bears hardly any resemblance to Chaucer's work of the same name. *The Merchant of Venice* straddles the borderline between comedy and tragedy and might well have been Shakespeare's last word on the nature of comedy and on its form. *The Tempest* in its entirety is an outpouring of the poet's soul – and there is no harder reality than that. [...] Although *The Tempest* is full of Sylphs, spirits and enchantment, the unity of the characters, the logic of the sequence of events and the absence of exaggerated or constantly fluctuating feelings [...] permeate this comedy with reality. [p. 228]

[...] *The Merchant of Venice* is a fairy tale which brings Shakespeare into a world [...] of which he is sole lord and master. The background and content of the work present him with the comic sphere of delusion. The character of Shylock brings Shakespeare homage from the realm of tragic reality. [...] The comic flows from the tragic. [...] Shakespeare catches a glimpse of the essence of modern comedy in the full meaning of the word. This illusory reality of the existence of the truth about humanity, compounded with the truth of delusions [caused by] warped ideas and warped social relations, was a reflection of the state of Elizabethan Society [...] In this [particular] situation Shakespeare saw the principles of real comedy and created one play in this mould for the benefit of future generations [...] *The Merchant of Venice* stands out as a model of high comedy [...] When, in the court scene, Shylock terrifies the spectators by threatening to take [...] Antonio's life and later, when – seeing all of a sudden that the exactitude and severity of the law has [now] been turned against himself – Shylock wakes up to a situation that is at once perilous and comic, the feelings of outrage and horror in the souls of the spectators – mingled with joyous gaiety and hilarity – come as a revelation. The particular structure of the play reflects Shakespeare's principle of conveying delusion without the slightest hint of the comic, while the comic element

– made up of derision and gaiety – is confined to Shylock, who is the tragic personification of Man's destiny in a Society which is ordered in a way that is at once serious and comic. [pp. 229–30]

[...] The translations of Shakespeare's works are a great acquisition for [Polish] literature. [...] Not that [...] I would like to encourage Polish writers to imitate Shakespeare – God forbid. Imitation is lethal. [...] Rather, we must ask Shakespeare how a great dramatic poet goes about his work. We can hear the answer in all the plays that Shakespeare has left us: "Have your own idea. Look at the Society in which you live. Look at your own [local] Man. Get the measure of him and show him reflected in the mirror of your own spirit and the spirit of Mankind. If you cannot find a better and more communicative form for your portrait, then you can take mine. Do your own creating. Use my way of expressing your creation if you wish." [p. 232]

Translated by R.E.P.

