

Shakespeare's Greatness As A Dramatist

Introduction:

..... Soul of the age!
The applause! delight! the wonder of our stage!

.....
Triumph, my Britain! thou hast one to show,
To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe,
He was not of an age, but for all time.

This was the glowing tribute which Ben Jonson, Shakespeare's worthy rival and sometimes harsh critic, paid to him. Since Ben Jonson's age an unbroken line of critics ranging over four centuries has done the same. It will be tedious to recount the glowing panegyrics which have gone to the bard of Stratford. If one were to believe all of them, one would be led to understand that Shakespeare was not a man but a phenomenon unamenable to any critical test whatever. Thus Pope, for instance, asserted that Shakespeare was not an imitator but an instrument of Nature. He did not speak for Nature, rather it was Nature who spoke through him.

Nature herself was proud of his designs,
And joy 'd to wear the dressing of his lines.

That is subscribing to the claim made in the inscription under Shakespeare's bust in Stratford church which reads : "Shakespeare, with whom quick Nature died." Otherwise quite sane a critic as Matthew Arnold sentimentally and quite simply wrote:

Others abide our question, Thou art free,
We ask and ask—Thou smilest and art still,
Out-topping knowledge.....

.....
And thou, who didst the stars and sunbeams know, Self-schooled, self-scann'd. self-honour'd, self-secure.

Did tread on earth unguess 'd at...

In the Victorian age the vogue of the "family Shakespeare" helped in nurturing a sentimental approach to Shakespeare. Fortunately, the critics of today have come to dissociate themselves from such lachrymotic panegyrisation, and much of the cloud of incense which collects around a deity has been laid, enabling us to approach the real Shakespeare clearly and correctly. Shakespeare did out-top his contemporaries, but he did not "out-top knowledge".-as Matthew Arnold would have it. This is in no way degrading Shakespeare who is ever fresh, and will surely last as long as books last. Dr. Johnson's words are very true: "The stream of time, which is continually washing dissoluble fabrics of other poets, passes without injury by' the adamant of Shakespeare." Shakespeare, in his perpetual charm, does answer well the words of Enobarbus about Cleopatra:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety: other women cloy
The appetites they feed; but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies.

Shakespeare's Comprehensiveness:

What primarily distinguishes Shakespeare from the host of his contemporaries is that, unlike them, he does not have only a narrow, limited range within which his genius

operates. What Shakespeare deals with is the entire length and breadth of human life and character in all its complexity and variety. Which element of human experience and which segment of human sensibility has Shakespeare left untouched? "He", as a critic avers, "sweeps with the hand of a master the varied experiences of human life, from the lowest note to the very top of its compass, from the sportive childish treble of Mimilius and the pleading boyish tones of Prince Arthur up to the sceptre-haunted terrors of Macbeth, the tropical passion of Othello, the agonised sense and tortured spirit of Hamlet, the sustaining and sustained titanic force and tragical pathos of King Lear." With a rare critical acumen Dryden pointed out that Shakespeare "was the man, who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul." Shakespeare's comprehensiveness has another manifestation too-his possession of varied dramatic gifts which we do not find concentrated in any of his contemporary dramatists many of whom are indeed masters of one or other of them, and perhaps better masters than Shakespeare. What is there in Shakespeare to match the architectonic skill displayed by Ben Jonson in *The Alchemist*, the heart-wringing, terrifying pathos of the last scene of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, the starkly touching quality of death-scene of the King in Marlowe's *Edward II* or that of The Duchess in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the skilful virtuosity of Beaumont and Fletcher's comedy *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* or the ecstatic utterance of Dr. Faustus on his vision of Helen? Even then we have to admit that Shakespeare is superior to any of his contemporaries in that he combines all the gifts. Therein lies "comprehensiveness" and, consequently, the secret of his continued appeal.

Shakespeare's Plot-construction:

Shakespeare's plot-construction is more often mentioned to be condemned than commended. As regards the "three unities," he was a serious offender. Even the most important of the unities-the unity of action-was very often altogether disregarded by him, much to the chagrin of Ben Jonson. However, in his violation of the unities Shakespeare was one with his most contemporaries. Shakespeare seems to have bothered more about the artistic unity of effect than any mechanical observance of any one of the three unities, or even that of all of them put together. Speaking strictly from the architectonic point of view alone, Shakespeare's plays suffer in comparison with those of Ben Jonson who made much fuss about classical rules. We are told in the Prologue to his *Volpone* (about Ben Jonson himself)

The rules of time, place, persons he observeth:

From no needful rule he swerveth.

Correspondingly, in the-Prologue to *Everyman in His Humour*, Ben Jonson's first comedy, there is a caustic attack on those (like Shakespeare) who violate the basic rules of dramatic construction. We have to admit that Shakespeare has a rather poor skill of architectonics (though it is less disappointing than that of Marlowe and some others), but his mastery of individual scenes is beyond question. We have a much larger number of memorable scenes in the plays of Shakespeare than in those of any other dramatist. Some of the scenes of this nature are the storm scene in *King Lear*, the sleep walking scene in *Macbeth*, the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice*, the scene in *Othello* showing the last encounter between Othello and Desdemona, the deposition scene in *Richard II*, the Falstaff scenes in *Henry IV, Part I*. Furthermore, Shakespeare's exploitation of the technique of suspense is also remarkable.

Shakespeare's Characterisation:

According to Compton-Rickett, one of the two qualities which establish Shakespeare's superiority over his contemporaries is his "insight into human nature." Now, without this quality the work of a dramatist can neither be interesting nor great. And this is the quality in which Shakespeare is far richer than his contemporaries. It gives his characters an abundance of psychological realism making them very convincing. We know his characters better than we do our aunts and uncles. They are all intensely human, not the wooden personified "humours" of Ben Jonson's comedies or the superhuman heroes of Marlowe's tragedies. Shakespeare was, to use the words of Shelley in the description of Coleridge, "a subtle-souled psychologist". "Shakespeare", writes a critic, "was above all a master of human psychology although the word itself was not known in his day....It is his universal humanity, his all-embracing understanding of every human emotion and instinct, which has made Shakespeare what he is-the greatest philosopher of the human heart ever known. He is famous all time because the scholar, equally with the man in the street, realizes at a glance his true valuation and faithful portrayal of the deep springs of human action to be found in the subtle workings of the mind. His power of piercing to the hidden centres of character, of touching the issues of life and of evolving these issues dramatically with flawless strength subtlety and truth, is superb." Goethe compares Shakespeare's characters to watches with transparent dials-you can see the time, that is what is on the surface, but you can also see the working of their mind too. What Compton-Rickett calls Shakespeare's "profound and searching knowledge of human nature" comes to the fore when you study any of his characters. Macbeth's ambition, Falstaff's light-hearted villainy, Lear's simplicity, Desdemona's naive devotion, Shylock's greed and revengefulness, Portia's intellectuality, Imogen's fidelity, and Iago's malignity have all a ring of superb veracity. But these characters are by no means simple or endowed with single-track minds. They are complex-as complex as living individuals whose conduct cannot always be so easily explained. According to Legouis, one of the "most important" characteristics which distinguish Shakespeare "from his English rivals" is "the complexity of his characters, which as a rule are not represented only within the short span of a crisis. Shakespeare took advantage of the wide allowance of space under his dramatic system, the twenty or so scenes into which each of his plays is, on the average, divided, and showed his heroes at various moments of their lives, in changing situations and in colloquy with different persons. They are not obliged to sustain one attitude, but have time to move and alter. No simple principle accounts for them. They have life and life's indefiniteness, and therefore they are not always fully intelligible but are mysteries." Shakespeare exhibits stage by stage the organic development of his characters from the beginning to the end. The senile Lear of the end of King Lear is much different from the tempestuous Lear of the first scene. He has undergone a transformation amounting to redemption. What a change! But it is entirely convincing. Shakespeare's characters are, to adopt the distinction drawn by E. M. Forster, "round" rather than "flat"-they are "capable of surprising us in a convincing way". On the other hand, Ben Jonson's humours and Marlowe's characters such as Tamburlaine, Barabas, and Mortimer do not change much if they do change at all. A word about Shakespeare's mastery of the female psychology in which we find his contemporaries so deficient. As Compton-Rickett observes, "Portia, Rosalind, Beatrice, Cleopatra, Juliet are startlingly modern. Placed

beside the women of Sheridan or Goldsmith, and you realise how the latter are dated and how alive and fresh are the former. Beside them even the women of Dickens and Thackeray seem old-fashioned. And the reason is that Shakespeare's women have the primal qualities of womanhood common to every age, and therefore can never be dated. And there is subtlety no less than actuality."

Shakespeare's Philosophy and Humanity:

Let us now come to a point on which Shakespeare has provoked a lot of criticism-his alleged philosophy of life or the message intended to be delivered by him. What is his philosophy of life? This question as Compton-Rickett humorously suggests, could be tackled after the manner of the person who on the subject of "Snakes in Iceland" only wrote : "There are no snakes in Iceland." We could say likewise : "There is no philosophy of life in Shakespeare." And we would be right too. Many have strained their intellect to extract an intelligible code out of the chaos of dramatic utterances in the dramas of Shakespeare. As Compton-Rickett rightly says, "Shakespeare was an artist and concerned primarily not with postulating theories of life, but with the stuff of life itself. You have a dozen different points of view, but no definite conclusion. "What are these attitudes? We have to quote Compton-Rickett again, "the fatalism of Kent, the meliorism of Edmund, the despairing cry of Macbeth where life is, 'atale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing'; the serene melancholy of Prospero to whom 'we are such stuff as dreams are made of, cynical Jaques and idealistic Brutus; each has his value as a human document, each perhaps falls in with some mood of its creator, but none are to be taken as other than the expression of one content to live life to the full, in place of weaving theories about life." The rich complexity of views and points of view which we often find crisscrossing each other in Shakespeare's plays will frustrate the working of any codifying intelligence. Nor can we think of Shakespeare as a moral preacher. He egregiously lacks the didactic and satiric fervour of Ben Jonson. He has a prodigious fund of human sympathy and tolerance which sometimes makes his attitude look almost amoral. F. W. Robertson maintains : "I believe this to be one of Shakespeare's most wondrous qualities-the humanity of his nature and heart. There is a spirit of sunny endeavour about him and acquiescence in the things as they are..."

Shakespeare's Poetic Power:

Compton-Rickett considers Shakespeare's "incomparable poetry" as one of the two characteristics which have rendered his work of universal interest. Shakespeare was a richer and more imaginative poet than any of his contemporaries. "He is", says Compton-Rickett, "the supreme poet in an age of great poetry, because his poetry is wider in range and deeper in feeling than that of his contemporaries. He touches every mood of graceful sentiment, as in the romantic comedies; of delicate fantasy, as in the fairy plays; of philosophic meditation, as in the tragedies of the mid-period; and of poignant passion, as in the later tragedies. In the verse that bodies forth such primal things as love, hate, hope, despair, courage, endurance, Shakespeare towers above his fellows. When we think of Lear in his desolation, of Othello in his last anguish, Macbeth in his soul's agony, and the despair of Cleopatra-we think of English literature at its grandest. "Hazlitt talks about Shakespeare's "magic power over words." They indeed come at his bidding and occupy the right places. Shakespeare has an almost instinctive knowledge of all the nuances of meaning and the art of their most effective arrangement. His interchanging of verse and prose for dramatic utterance too bespeaks

his wonderful artistry and a kind of fidelity to nature. Romeo, a romantic lover, talks invariably in verse; Falstaff, an anti-romantic fellow, always talks in prose. The same character may talk sometimes in Verse and sometimes in prose, depending upon the mood. Othello, when moved by bestial thoughts, talks in prose even though normally he does in verse. Rosalind talks in prose when she is talking light-heartedly in a holiday humour.

Conclusion:

Shakespeare's plays are of universal significance and highly superior to those of his contemporaries on account of his wonderful poetry. -his sympathetic humanity and broad-mindedness, his superb mastery of his medium, and his masterful insight into human nature which ever remains the same. Human beings come and go but human nature remains the same. "A poet", said Ralph Waldo Emerson, "speaks from a heart in unison with his time and country." Shakespeare's heart beats in unison with all times and all countries. Ben Jonson said that Shakespeare "was not of an age but for all time." We could also say, as Legouis suggests, that he was not of a land but of all lands. Let us conclude by referring to an actual incident. A Japanese student, on being asked if he could understand and sympathise with the characters in As You Like It, replied, "Why not? They are all Japanese!"