

notre époque y retrouve ses problèmes. Le grand mérite du livre de Jan Kott est de nous montrer que cela est — souvent — possible. Pour ceux qui estiment, avec Brecht, que le théâtre doit avoir en vue les besoins de son temps, *Shakespeare notre Contemporain* est un livre précieux.

(Aspirant du F.N.R.S.)

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MORALITY AND WORLD ORDER  
IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

A paradoxical effect of Shakespearean criticism is that it widens and at the same time limits our potential understanding of Shakespeare's plays. On the one hand it may extend the possible range of interpretations and help us to discover unsuspected meanings, or to clarify the background of his drama ; on the other hand it tends to narrow down the bearing of the plays by uncompromising attempts to substitute one kind of explanation for its exact opposite, or by too strict a limitation of the possible implications of a play. Two books<sup>(1)</sup> by Professor Harbage are an example of this paradox. They are based on two different methods of interpretation, character-study and the historical approach. The second study, which is meant as a complement to the first, is a scholarly work of considerable merit, but it lacks the subtlety of the earlier work. For example, in *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* Professor Harbage contrasts Shakespeare's conception of order with the 'coterie' dramatists' lack of belief in order to prove the superiority of Shakespeare, whereas in *As They Liked It* he had observed discerningly that the encouragements to 'order' in *King Henry V*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus* were delivered by unscrupulous politicians facing an immediate problem and proposing a solution of questionable merit.

Professor Harbage considers Shakespeare as a popular writer whose work was shaped by the tastes of a large and representative audience, 'people like ourselves'. In *As They Liked It*, his frame of reference is 'Human Nature as it still appears'. He emphasizes the moral homogeneity of the plays and gives a brief

(1) Alfred HARBAGE, *As They Liked It, An Essay on Shakespeare and Morality*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1947, 238 pp.

*Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1952, 393 pp.

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historical account of Shakespearean criticism in order to prove that the response of most readers to his plays is primarily moral. Because the characters are the *foci* of moral interest, he favours the study of characters, which has been discredited in the 20th century. By analysing the reactions of critics to Shakespeare's men and women, he points to the moral stimulus aroused by the plays. The main source of excitement is derived from the conflicts between good and evil, and from the necessity to choose between right and wrong. The distinction between the two is always obvious, but moral complexity arises from the need to choose between two goods or two evils. Moreover, the characters are not clearly cut out ; they are human, i.e. uncertain. Professor Harbage stresses the shrewdness of Shakespeare's psychology, who juxtaposes good and evil in a play, a situation, or a person. His characters may lack the complexity of living men but they excite the spectator or the reader in a way which involves him constantly in their predicament because they appeal to his understanding, his 'advice' or his sympathy.

Shakespeare is moral without being a moralist. His plays exist within a moral framework but they are not didactic. Professor Harbage contends that Shakespeare expresses clear allegiance to no philosophical or religious system — an opinion which he recants in the later book. The absence of moralizing in Shakespeare is considered by many critics as a grave shortcoming ; it is Professor Harbage's belief that his drama, though consonant with prevailing moral convictions, is intended as an entertainment, and that though their moral bearing will vary with each individual, the plays certainly intensify our moral convictions. Shakespeare is often enigmatic and he constantly uses the moral dilemma in an experimental and provocative way. Yet, choice between two courses of action isn't the central issue in his drama ; he is more concerned with what man does than with what he should do, and man's actions are more often the result of the pressure of circumstances than of deliberate choice. Taking *Hamlet* as an example of the most typical Shakespearean situation, and quoting twelve interpretations of Hamlet's dilemma, Professor Harbage shows that Shakespeare does not commit himself to any particular interpretation of Hamlet's problem.

Although Shakespeare 'offers questions rather than statements, doubts rather than certainties, the heterogeneous rather than the homogeneous', he does not shake the stability of his audience's beliefs. They were not ready to have their truths and principles destroyed and to be left with loneliness and fear, and Professor Harbage finds in the plays a satisfying scheme of moral justice. Shakespeare does not punish evil persons and reward virtuous ones ; he condemns evil and praises

virtue by showing their contrasted effects. In the comedies, the happy endings are the result of the triumph of virtue over vice ; evil is a manifestation of earthly sin, which in the tragedies defeats the victims, but the enemy is not God, it is human unkindness, which can be avoided. The tragedies do not offend our sense of justice because they make us look at evil, hate it and pity its victims. As to the history plays, they are only 'segments of existence', 'single acts in the larger drama of history in which good and evil bring in their train mingled joy and sorrow': that is why their outcome is not an end but rather a stage in history. The important thing is that 'unhappiness is never the product of good, and happiness is never the product of evil'. Professor Harbage further insists on the compassion to be found in Shakespeare's drama particularly among the lower characters, on the virtues he exemplifies, the vices he abhors, all of which illustrates his high conception of humanity. At the end of his essay, Professor Harbage presents Shakespeare's drama as a mirror of the kind of living which must have been attainable for the spectators, and in which neither fame, nor wealth, nor power, nor position, but decent human relationships were the final good.

For Professor Harbage the moral scheme in Shakespeare's plays denotes the poet's optimism. The emphasis in his study is on Shakespeare's compassionate understanding of humanity. The assertion that he was primarily an artist whose purpose was to entertain, not to teach, but who could use the moral nature of his audience to gratify their desire for pleasure, denotes a perceptive evaluation of the part played by morality in Shakespeare's drama. By stressing its moral complexity, Professor Harbage points to its richness, and the variety of possible meanings is an indication of its universality. But in his determination to prove Shakespeare's moral orthodoxy and his optimism, Professor Harbage offers statistics which show that the majority of Shakespeare's characters are good. His figures, whether they concern all the plays, the three types of plays viewed separately, or the characters grouped as high, middle and low class, indicate that "Shakespeare's is indeed a 'Brave New World'" ! These statistics are purely arbitrary and reduce rather than enhance the moral significance of Shakespeare. It is not so much the number of good or bad characters which matters as the way they serve the author's purpose. How does *Titus Andronicus*, for instance, fit into such an optimistic frame ? There is a limit beyond which our moral being cannot respond to horror ; whether owing to his pessimism or to his heavy-handed treatment of the subject in this play, Shakespeare goes beyond that limit. Yet, Professor Harbage finds that even this tragedy is 'brushed up with Shakespeare's ethical and

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imaginative colors'. However, the essay as a whole demonstrates successfully Shakespeare's aesthetic use of moral substance as a means to arouse pleasure and excitement, by presenting issues which he doesn't solve while at the same time reassuring his audience.

In *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions*, Professor Harbage describes the moral substance of the plays and contrasts it with the moral code of the dramatists who wrote for the private theatres. His purpose is to define the attitude to life of the Elizabethans as it is reflected in their theatre. He does so by assuming the duality of Elizabethan drama: Shakespeare's moral outlook is discussed as the outcome of a tradition which he opposes to the tradition of the scholars and the 'University wits', hoping that the distinction between the 'rival traditions' will be kept in mind in discussions of Elizabethan drama. Professor Harbage draws a parallel between the main elements in the popular and in the private theatres, the substance of their plays, the principles to which they subscribed and the audience-artist relationship, and thus demonstrates the greatness and the representativeness of the tradition to which Shakespeare belonged. The first part of the book is very convincing and makes good the distinction assumed by Professor Harbage on the basis of precise social and economic data: by surveying the development of the two types of theatre, describing their audiences in terms of numbers and social class, and assessing the frequency of the performances and the prices paid to attend them, he shows that the private theatres were intended for a select audience, a 'coterie'. Their actors were boys belonging to chorister companies gradually transformed into theatrical companies. The difference between the two kinds of publics was not that between plebeians and patricians, indeed the popular companies performed more often at court than the private, but between a general public and a restricted one.

Having established the distinction between the two kinds of drama, Professor Harbage compares the moral attitude of the popular and the 'coterie' dramatists in their treatment of similar themes, and he argues that two different ethical systems underlay the popular and the select drama. The audience of the private theatres was fashionable and academic, socially and intellectually self-conscious, sophisticated, 'avant-garde' and interested in art as art. Their repertory did not address itself to a community; it reflected the preoccupations of a clique. Under the influence of the classics and the Renaissance courtesy works, the dominant themes were love and satire, which later evolved towards eroticism and cynicism, a development which made the plays morally ambiguous. Professor Harbage doesn't suggest that the 'coterie' playwrights were consciously im-

moral, but he attributes the cynicism and the destructiveness of the scholars, whether self-made or 'University wits', to their personal discontent and disillusion. Because of their learning they were severed from their own class but not fully accredited in any higher circle. Moreover, they resented having to write for actors without even being well paid for it; they were the more contemptuous of popular literature as they longed to be securely established in a high position. Of course social insecurity and disillusion can lead to 'a contempt for the world and those who infest it'; it can to a certain extent explain the compulsion to degrade which characterized many of the plays performed at the private theatres. Delight in scenes of cruel punishment and humiliation, the suggestion of perversion in sexual behaviour, or the emphasis on the squalor of marriage, may indeed denote a willingness to wound man in his dignity as a way of taking revenge for one's own humiliation. It can also explain class animosity. But is it so certain that only personal dissatisfaction and bitterness inspired the 'modern' attitude to life of these playwrights? This assertion weakens Professor Harbage's argument. He gives no other explanation for the 'coterie' writers' challenging of established beliefs and makes their insecure position responsible for the virulence of their satire. In *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, Professor Knights<sup>(2)</sup> makes the same statement but he shows that the discontent of the playwrights was part of a general movement of dissatisfaction, due to the new social and economic conditions of the time to which the Jacobean were not yet adapted. Professor Harbage never uses the word 'Jacobean' in his discussion of the 'coterie' dramatists; yet most of the dramatists he compares with Shakespeare wrote most of their works under James I, and they were not strictly contemporary with Shakespeare. These writers are described as intellectually more assertive than the popular dramatists, lacking in religious sentiments and familiar with the writings of Machiavel and Montaigne. Professor Harbage admits evidence of stoicism in the select drama of Jonson and Chapman, but he thinks that on the whole the 'coterie' dramatists tended to reject all codes and leaned towards the naturalistic and libertine ideas rejected by both Christians and Stoics. He denies that they expressed a new spirit which was becoming more general as the living conditions changed. It is difficult to reconcile this position with the assertion that the 'coterie' dramatists were 'moderns', for if they were, their modernism implies that a new order was challenging the old or at least that the old order was being questioned, even if scepticism was not yet widespread. More-

(2) L.C. KNIGHTS, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*, first published in 1937, Peregrine Books, 1962.

over, he hardly discriminates between the moral outlook of the many 'coterie' dramatists, and excludes the possibility that, being dissatisfied with the old ideals, they were attempting to find a new moral basis. Yet, if they were satirists, their attitude was not merely negative, for satire usually implies a desire for social improvement.

The chapter on 'The War of the Theatres' suggests that the sharp distinction drawn by Professor Harbage between the ethical import of the 'rival traditions' is somewhat arbitrary. His theory on the *Poetomachia* is that it was not merely a spite-combat between Jonson, Marston and Dekker but an ideological conflict between the 'common players' and the 'little eyases' to whom Shakespeare alludes in *Hamlet*, involving rival philosophies and even the issue of ancients *vs* moderns. Yet, if the main issue of the 'war' was indeed a reaction of the select dramatists against the popular drama and its audience, how does one account for the fact that both private and public theatres acted the plays of the two groups? *Every Man Out of his Humour*, the first satire contributed by Jonson to the controversy, was performed by Shakespeare's company, while *Cynthia's Revels* and *Poetaster* were acted by the children of the Chapel. True, the plays of Marston were performed at private theatres, but Dekker's *Satiromastix*, 'the rejoinder of Shakespeare's company to Jonson's attack' was performed not only by Shakespeare's company but by the Paul's boys as well. This would suggest that personal attacks were as important as ideologies or the kind of theatres in which the plays were performed. Moreover, Jonson, 'consistent in his antipopular pronouncements except in the prologue of *Epicoene*', wrote as much for the public as for the private theatres. Although any playwright would take into account the audience he is writing for, it is hard to believe that a dramatist would use two different ethical systems according as he was writing for one kind of theatre or for the other. It therefore seems that the difference in attitude towards life, literature and morality which, according to Professor Harbage, forms the basic contrast between public and private theatres, cannot be taken as literally as he would like us to. Professor Harbage writes that "viewing the drama in the large, it would be impossible to demonstrate from the plays of the popular theatres that in the 17th century Elizabethan optimism yielded to Jacobean pessimism... The impression of a new era of disillusion is conveyed by the increasing prominence of the rival repertories" (p. 65-6). Yet, doesn't this very prominence indicate a change in the character of Elizabethan drama? The repertories of the theatres presented at the end of the book show that from 1609 to 1613 the plays of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, Chapman, and Jonson,

were performed by popular and select companies alike, which may evidence a blurring of distinctions or a growing predominance of the satirical drama over what was traditionally popular. And one may wonder to what extent Shakespeare's superiority in treating his subject-matter is responsible for the greatness of the tradition to which he belonged.

Professor Harbage is at his best when he deals with the substance of Shakespeare's plays. He believes in a 'rock-bottom agreement' between the artist and his audience because the latter was national in the most literal sense, and each performance was part of a long tradition, a projection of their life. The popular drama was familiar with the idea that man was a central figure in an orderly, beautiful, and divinely planned universe. It subscribed to the current notion that the universe was made for man and that man epitomized the universe, presided over by God, while a corresponding authority allowed princes to govern states and fathers families. Another analogy entailed the subordination of the passions to 'Godlike' reason in the microcosm of man. The basic set of principles underlying the popular drama combined the message of the Gospels, the conception of the 'laws and their several kinds' as codified in Hooker, the humane spirit of More and Erasmus, and the moral emphasis of the Homilies. Professor Harbage finds the religious infusion in Shakespeare the more impressive as it is less explicit. He insists that in spite of evidence of paganism intermingled with Christian faith in the popular drama, neither Shakespeare nor the other popular dramatists departed from Christian humanism, although Shakespeare sometimes made his characters debate natural *vs* supernatural causes or made them express scruples about their Christian faith. Moreover, the fundamental social assumption was that all classes were to serve all other classes, everyone was servant to someone else and even the monarch, in spite of his divine right and absolute authority, had to serve and obey the law as well as enforce it. Professor Harbage denies that Shakespeare's belief in order is an indication of conservatism since there was no other way of avoiding chaos but the continuance of the established order and the repression of rebellion.

In a last chapter devoted exclusively to Shakespeare, Professor Harbage describes Shakespeare's values as a synthesis of philosophic beliefs inherited from a Judeo-Hellenistic tradition. Shakespeare is a 'participant' identifying himself with his public, 'the voice of a culture in growth'. Professor Harbage is aware that by insisting that Shakespeare was an optimist, he runs counter to the main trend in contemporary criticism, but it is a pity that, in his determination to prove the superiority of Shakespeare's tradition, he bases his argu-

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ment on the negativism of the select drama. He disregards the fact that the 'coterie' playwrights could have been the representatives of a transitional period while Shakespeare may have represented an order which was coming to an end. He argues that Shakespeare is an optimist because of his faith in man and in values inspired by Christian humanism, and contrasts this attitude with the lack of belief among the 'coterie' writers. This insistence on their negative outlook, combined with the explicit assertion that they did not express a mood that was gaining ground in the early 17th century, gives the impression that Professor Harbage simplifies the issues, and also overlooks the possibility of a twofold influence of popular and scholarly elements on the drama. However, his distinction between the two kinds of drama and their audience is extremely valuable and throws light on the significance of Elizabethan drama as a mirror of life.

In *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature*<sup>(3)</sup>, Professor Danby views Shakespeare as a dramatist conscious of the conflicting philosophies of his time, who explores their value by opposing the one to the other in the same play. Shakespeare remains attached to the traditional and orthodox conception of man's place in the universe, but he is himself a 'New Man', and he wants to investigate the effects of the ideology of the 'moderns' on society. While acknowledging the importance of character-study and of the historical approach, Professor Danby considers the play as a poem in which the characters and their motives are subordinate to the 'idea which ensures the organic coherence of the whole'. *King Lear* is a drama of ideas, the *Novum Organum* of Elizabethan thought. Professor Danby believes that the play is the culmination of Shakespeare's experimentation with the philosophical and political attitudes of the time: it dramatizes different conceptions of Nature. Lear, Edgar and above all Cordelia stand for the 'Benignant Nature' of Hooker and Bacon: for them Nature is an ideal pattern, a benevolent and rational arrangement in which man's logical order is in direct connection with the order of the physical universe. As nature is bound to God, so man is bound to nature, and the individual pattern can only be preserved by a man maintaining his right position in regard to the grand universal pattern. But for Edmund, Nature is a dead mechanism with which he has no connection except as an animal body; as a mind he is free of Nature and superior to it. In the same way, he feels separated from the community of men and superior to his fellow beings. He represents the 'Malignant Nature' later defined by Hobbes but already apprehended earlier in the century, and the source

(3) JOHN F. DANBY, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature, A Study of 'King Lear'*, Faber and Faber, London, 1949, 234 pp.



of a fissure in Elizabethan society. Man, Nature and God fall apart. Reason, which was man's guide in the exercise of his own nature, becomes rationality. Man is no longer a cooperative member in a grand community, he is isolated and opposed to every other individual. In such a society, the symbol of the king is superseded by the influence of the 'politician', the Machiavel who can play on human nature. Professor Danby traces Edmund's ancestry through characters in the history plays which illustrate Shakespeare's attitude towards the shift from the absolute of God and Society to the absolute of the Individual. At one stage in his development, Shakespeare sympathized with the precepts of Machiavel because they might serve a just cause — witness Falconbridge in *King John*. In *King Lear*, Edmund is the Renaissance Individualist revolting against a mediaeval vision of the world, represented by an old king doting and falling into error, but he is also the man who makes it possible to turn Lear out and to blind Gloucester. Professor Danby makes an interesting point when he remarks that Shakespeare does not condemn the nature of Edmund's claims and that he is scrupulously fair to his qualities, but he condemns the kind of man Edmund is and with him the corrupt society he represents, although he knows that it is historically inevitable.

Beside Edmund, who represents the New Age but who with Goneril and Regan also embodies disintegration, and beside Lear, who stands for the feudal state in decomposition, Cordelia appears as Nature itself, Shakespeare's 'vision of singleness and integration', the 'personification of the mediaeval tradition preserved intact'. She stands by her father, whose world at least contained humaneness, truth, justice and charity, but she is also the symbol of an ideal of perfection in the individual and in the community. Through her, Shakespeare reasserts the value of the mediaeval vision of the world, of the old order which must be regenerated. According to Professor Danby, *killing the king* is the theme which underlies the chronicle plays. It is treated differently in *Hamlet*, for instance, where the king is murdered for private reasons. The history plays illustrate Shakespeare's successive attitudes towards the problem: rebellion against the legitimate king is wrong, rebellion even against a wrongful usurper is never justified because order must be preserved at any price. Then comes a period when Shakespeare justifies tyrannicide because it is right to rebel against a usurper or a tyrant. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare urges obedience to the king, but the king in fact must also be a king in nature, for titular kingship in itself is meaningless. The king is representative man, and the state is an extension of man's inner nature. Order in man's individual world and in the

state can only be restored if the king is restored to sanity, which is made possible in the play by Cordelia. Thus Shakespeare's artistic exploration and thematic development throughout the historical plays and the tragedies culminate in a renovation of the mediaeval order through the fusion of the public and the private world of man. The central truth in *King Lear* is that "the good man needs a community of goodness". Professor Danby defines goodness as a kind of wholeness which distinguishes the poet and the good man alike. Poetry and ethics converge, but since 'art is the criticism of politics' poetry looks towards the future and points the direction which politics must take. That is why Professor Danby can write that 'the poet is the Good Man in the Bad Society', a universal theme of which *King Lear* is the fullest statement.

This conclusion illustrates most clearly the fact that, for Professor Danby, Shakespeare's criticism of society in *King Lear* also implies the hope that it can be regenerated. The combination of pessimism and optimism in the play is yet another proof of Shakespeare's crowning achievement. Professor Danby exemplifies here Dr. Tillyard's description of the Elizabethan double vision of the world order which combined extremes of optimism and pessimism and could make the same person simultaneously aware of the pressure of both <sup>(4)</sup>. This position can perhaps be best appreciated in the light of recent Shakespearean criticism. In a recent article in the *Critical Quarterly* <sup>(5)</sup>, Miss Barbara Everett severely criticized Professor Danby's interpretation of *King Lear* as a Christian play, and wrote that he and other critics had turned it into a morality play, although he states clearly in his book that it is not. In fact, most critics agree that the setting of the play is Pagan but that the values involved are Christian. Yet, he is perhaps not entirely blameless in this matter, for he suggests that when Lear is told

Thou hast one daughter  
who redeems nature from the general curse  
Which twain have brought her to. (IV, 6)

'twain' refers not to Goneril and Regan but to Adam and Eve; the logical next step is to conclude that Cordelia is a Christ-like figure. Moreover, he makes much of Cordelia as the symbol of an ideal of perfection without sufficiently stressing the regenerating value of Lear's suffering. On the other hand, he is certainly right in his claim that *King Lear* is 'the presentation of choices only a Christian in a Christian tradition

(4) E.M.W. TILLYARD, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1952, p. 20.

(5) Barbara EVERETT, *The New King Lear*, in *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. II, No 4, 1960, pp. 325-339.

would regard as real' (6), and he makes it clear that with Lear one has a very strong sense of 'man holding the key to his own destiny, for good or ill'.

Miss Everett's own interpretation is based on the assertion that what is metaphysical in *King Lear* is the antithesis between life as 'extreme power and vitality' and death. Lear apprehends the absolute of silence and cessation, and the only certainty is death. Professor Kott (7) is even more pessimistic, adding bitterness to despair when he says that in *King Lear* the tragical is replaced by the grotesque, which is even more cruel. To him, the Absolute has ceased to exist and is replaced by the absurdity of the human predicament. For both Professor Danby and Professor Kott, *King Lear* is a parable of 'the times'; for Professor Kott, it is also a parable of the human condition: like Gloucester when he tries to commit suicide, Man is precipitated on an empty stage; the only truth he is aware of is that of the disintegration and the decay of the world. For Professor Danby, on the contrary, the parable of 'the Good Man in the Bad Society' carries in its very awareness of disintegration the impulse towards renewal. *King Lear* is not an *Endgame*. Edgar is not a 'ruined piece of nature' like Lear, as Professor Kott suggests. It is true that he does not ascend the throne with the same innocence as the young kings in the history plays, but they have learned no lesson whereas one may at least feel that Edgar will not repeat Lear's mistakes. The merit of Professor Danby's book is that while it emphasizes the philosophical structure of the play, inspired by the Elizabethan vision of the world, it leaves ample room for other meanings at other levels of interpretation. It stresses one aspect of the play, but by relating it to the poetry, the thought, and the contemporary scene, it suggests the other elements which contribute to its fullness.

(Liège)

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(6) John F. DANBY, Correspondence on *King Lear*, in *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. III, N° 1, 1961, p. 71.

(7) Jean KOTT, *Shakespeare notre contemporain*, Julliard, Paris, 1962.