1/16/1996

"PARDON'S THE WORD TO ALL":
Shakespeare's Last Plays

Last summer I asked our good colleague Dick Campbell if this club might be interested in an essay on Shakespeare. He thought so. So here I am. Of course he's not responsible for anything dull or dumb in my talk. You perhaps saw that Shakespeare made the front page of THE TIMES on Sunday.

Let me say straightaway that I am saying nothing novel or sensational, unlike those Hollywood types you perhaps read about in THE NEW YORKER recently on their alleged new Lutheran influence on HAMLET. What is important in Shakespeare, I think, is precisely the old and received, the classical. A teacher of mine liked to say that the task of the humanities was always to renew the classics. That is true: renew, not review, and certainly not merely rehash.

Now almost everybody knows something about Shakespeare, but nobody really knows enough. Let me say at once too that I believe Shakespeare wrote all those plays and poems, not a committee or a conspiracy, but William Shakespeare himself, and not even, as Mark Twain quipped, another fellow with the same name.

This past year I have been rereading Shakespeare, in English literature our classic of classics, and noted again and again in his last plays how he emphasized themes of forgiveness and pardon, of reunion and regeneration of family and fortune after separation and loss, and of the quest in old age for peace and serenity and wisdom.

At the end in CYMBELINE thus, the old king of Britain recovers his longlost sons and heirs who had been kidnapped as children, he regains the love of his daughter Imogen whom he had banished from the court. He makes peace with imperial Rome whom he had insulted. And he asks for forgiveness from all for his abuse of power and kinship. "Pardon's the word to all," he says humbly in their presence, then praises the gods for the new harmony and peace in the land.

CYMBELINE was written in 1610 (probably). THE TEMPEST followed in 1611, the year also that Shakespeare retired from London to live in Stratford his birthplace, where he had already bought a large house (the second largest in town, it was said). In returning to Stratford Shakespeare was now 47 years old, a famous playwright and poet and a rich man. His wealth was from his investments in property and from his shares in his theatrical company, as writer and actor, a company under Royal patent to Queen Elizabeth and then King James I, before both of whom several of Shakespeare's plays were acted.

His great contemporary reputation is evident from the number of his plays acted and published during his own life, and from the appearance, only seven years after his death, of that great collection of his comedies, histories, and tragedies. In the preface to it, Ben Jonson his greatest living contemporary wrote prophetically: "He was not of an age, but for all time!" This is the so-called First Folio, published in 1623. It is wondrous to reflect that the two greatest books in the cultural history of English-speaking peoples, the KING JAMES BIBLE in 1611, and Shakespeare's FIRST FOLIO in 1623, appeared thus within a few years of each other.

When Shakespeare left London in 1610 or 1611, he had written about thirty-five of his known thirty-eight plays, several of which were published in several editions. He had published his sequence of 154 sonnets, and the two long narrative poems VENUS AND ADONIS and THE RAPE OF LUCRECE. In the five or so years of retirement before his death he apparently tended mainly to business and family matters, having two grown daughters, Susannah and Judith. His only son, Hamnet, Judith's twin, died as a boy. Susannah was married to a distinguished Stratford physician, John Hall, and Judith would marry the year of her father's death.

Shakespeare died in 1616, age 54, apparently of a fever, and was buried in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. As modern biographers have noted, we know a good deal about Shakespeare's life from legal and other public records. His will is pretty elaborate. The problem is that those records are not very revealing: no letters, diaries, no laundry or liquor bills or the like personal revelations.

But perhaps it's just as well for Shakespeare, seeing what sober scholars and critics have sometimes concocted out of, or in spite of, the documentary evidence, not to mention various zanies who looking into the mirror of Shakespeare's life and works see only reflections of themselves.

You may have heard of the man who, in 1920, published a book called "SHAKESPEARE" IDENTIFIED, claiming that all those plays and poems were written by neither Shakespeare nor Francis Bacon, but by the Earl of Oxford. The author's name was J. Thomas Looney, originator of the Looney School of Shakespeare studies. It is still very much alive: I saw on TV just a couple of weeks ago a young British scholar strenuously declaring, in effect, that it was impossible for the son of a mere wool merchant in Stratford to have written so familiarly and well about nobility and the court.)

But because Shakespeare has written so well about so many things-- women, soldiers, kings, murderers, ghosts, fairies-- he must have been been one of those incarnations,

is an argument that was exploded long ago. Someone observed to Dr. Johnson that Shakespeare wrote so powerfully, so realistically, of the murderous hunchback Richard III that he veritably was, in the conception of the character, Richard III. Then, retorted Johnson, Shakespeare should have been hanged. Art is not life.

In dramatic imagination, of course, Shakespeare was each and all those characters and worlds more, as the poet Keats saw brilliantly nearly 200 years ago. Said Keats, the great poetic imagination has no personality, character, or self per se. "It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago, as an Imogen." Shakespeare was the selfless, camelion poet without peer.

As background to my remarks on forgiveness in the last plays, let me survey briefly Shakespeare's dramatic career before 1607-8, a date commonly accepted as marking the last phase of his dramatic production. Nothing to be sure is accepted in Shakespeare without argument. The editors of the First Folio, themselves actors and longtime colleagues of the playwright, lumped the works together simply as COMEDIES, HISTORIES & TRAGEDIES, without worrying about labels and chronology, but mindful clearly that THE TEMPEST, which is first in the book but was written among the last, is more than a comedy, and HAMLET not merely a tragedy. Labels are often libels, and especially so for works of genius.

The first ten years upon his arrival in London were Shakespeare's most productive years for the Elizabethan stage. Between 1589 and 1599, he wrote twenty or so plays, about two a year, mainly comedies and history plays. Some of the earliest comedies (e.g. TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA, THE TAMING OF THE SHREW, THE COMEDY OF ERRORS), for historical reasons of language and style, now task the reader of the page more than the viewer of the plays on the stage. But then we need to remember that Shakespeare's first business was the successful stage production-- and reproduction of the play-- and he didn't give a damn about future English professors who might find the style too artificial and the puns intolerable. Like young artists generally Shakespeare was showing off his talents and showing up his competitor playwrights.

His craft mastered very soon, he wrote the magical A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM, showing that love, like a dream, is creative illusion. It can separate but above all unite. Creativity itself is a wonderful mystery. The lunatic, lover, and poet are "of imagination all compact..."

> Such tricks hath strong imagination,
> That if it would but apprehend some joy,
> It comprehends some bringer of that joy;

Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush suppos'd a bear.! (5.1.18-22)

And in the same year as this play (1594-95), Shakespeare shows in romantic Verona how passionate love, and family hate, can separate, or unite only in death, the two young lovers in THE MOST EXCELLENT AND LAMENTABLE TRAGEDY OF ROMEO AND JULIET (to give its full title). Who has never heard of the "the star-crossed lovers"? How many operas, symphonies, stories, scripts, have they inspired? What young actor has not imagined himself Romeo beneath the balcony of Juliet:

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.
(2.1. 44-8)

But the most ambitious achievement for Shakespeare in this decade of the 1590s was his English history plays. In scope and achievement they are vast, national, epic, like the Norse sagas, or THE ILIAD and THE AENEID. Interlinked, though sometimes with considerable historical licence, there are two sequences of four plays each. The first sequence deals with the reign of Henry VI, the war of the roses, and ends climactically with RICHARD THE THIRD. The second sequence, much better known because they are better plays and have Falstaff in three of them, is RICHARD THE SECOND, HENRY IV, PART ONE and PART TWO, and ends climactically with HENRY THE FIFTH. This sequence dramatizes the period of history directly before the Henry VI plays.

In effect, nine plays (including KING JOHN) dramatize the reigns of seven kings in English history right up to the birth of Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, Henry VII. These are the chronicles of strong kings and weak kings, of usurpers and tyrants, of foreign and civil war, and of political power rightly used and abused. All these history plays look toward an ideal king, and a healthy commonwealth. HENRY IV, Parts I and II show with high comedy how princes can be corrupted and led into sordid sins by that "stuff'd cloak-bag of guts", that "old white-bearded Satan" Falstaff. Henry IV scolds his son the prince: "thou hast lost thy princely privilege/ With vile participation." (3.2.86-7) (Probably pretty much what the present Queen has been saying to the prince of Wales these days.)

But Prince Hal shapes up, and becomes that king of kings, Henry V. If in the Kenneth Branagh movie of the play you sometimes couldn't tell whether Henry was strictly a good or a bad guy, that's because as a warrior for England's glory he had to be both. And that's the marvel in so many of Shakespeare's creations in their mixture of qualities good

and bad, noble and ignoble, wise and foolish, petty and proud, in short, their humanity. The high point of the play is Henry's rousing speech to his outnumbered and fearful troops before the battle of Agincourt. It is one of the jewels of orations:

> From this day to the ending of the world,
> But we in it shall be remembered--
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
> For he today who sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
> This day shall gentle his condition;
> And gentlemen in England, now a-bed,
> Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here;
> And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
> That fought with us upon St. Crispin's day.
> (4.3.55-67)

Having defeated the great Armada of Spain only a few years before this was written, the English, one imagines, would have thrilled especially to this high patriotism. All the history plays are large-scale celebrations of England and the English.

The years 1600-1607 are Shakespeare at the height of his powers, writing a dozen or so plays, among them the great tragedies of HAMLET, OTHELLO, KING LEAR, MACBETH, and ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA. It doesn't really tell us anything to say this was his "tragic period", for that kind of play was very popular at the turn of the 17th century, and anyway he also wrote at the same time some festive comedies, TWELFTH NIGHT, and some Greek and Roman history plays that are more satirical than tragic. TROILUS AND CRESSIDA thus is a cutting critique of braggart and lecherous men and women: "Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery! Nothing else holds fashion," snarls Thersites. Was that what the glory of Troy was all about, Shakespeare seems to make us reconsider. The tragedy of Antony and Cleopatra could be subtitled "All for Sex."

To say anything in a sentence or two about the great tragedies is impudent. (However that will not deter me here.) HAMLET, OTHELLO, LEAR, and MACBETH are tragedies about power and the abuse of kinship--fathers or stepfathers and sons, husband and wife, fathers and daughters, subject and king. And since the principals are very highly placed in the state, as kings or as national heroes, the stakes are very high indeed. Ambitious power to gain a throne does in Claudius and the Macbeths and many innocents beside. Iago uses power solely for the hell of it, and Lear's pride in power comes to humiliate him most fearfully. All abuse kinship and come to desperate deaths.

Now the word "kin", etymologically, derives from the Old English "cynn", meaning kindred, one's own kind, people or race: hence the adjective "kind," "kindness," as of feelings, natural, favorable. The word "king" is a derivative of kin. What a tragic irony then in KING LEAR is that double plot of unkindness, cruelty, of fathers and daughters and fathers and sons. Few scenes in world literature have the pathos and power of Lear holding the dead Cordelia in his arms, trying to persuade himself there is breath and life there on her lips. But no, no breath there at all, he knows:

> Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never. (5.3.308-9)

For the 19th century HAMLET was the play that seemed to speak most to the doubts and disquietudes of the times. For our century surely, KING LEAR, with its cruelties and betrayals within families and its unredeeming look into the heart of darkness, is the play most apt for us.

The last plays, four romances, were written between 1607-1611. These are PERICLES, CYMBELINE, THE WINTER'S TALE, and THE TEMPEST. They are inter-related both in theme and form. All are at once comedy and tragedy, and history too. Like the tragedies, their themes are about the violation of kinship and abuse of power. But they end happily, with the weddings of new generations. The plays are also about change and the inevitability of death. They are crucially about forgiveness. Forgiveness is redemptive. It is liberating. It is crucial not for promises of heaven but as our duty here on earth.

These plays are "romances" or melodramas in the sense that they use the literary license of dream, magic, and the supernatural so imaginatively that we suspend our disbelief in these usual "unrealities". Prospero in THE TEMPEST is a great magician, Ariel his agent. And there are gods and goddesses, oracles, and auguries in each of the plays, which are set in the long ago and far away, in the ancient Mediterranean or Britain or on a deserted isle who knows where. (By the way, one gets some sense of Shakespeare's theatrical scope and genius by merely citing the settings of some of the plays: Verona, Padua, Ephesus, France, Athens, Venice, Elsinore, Elyria, Egypt, Vienna, Troy, and Rome (several times), aside from the British Isles).

Of the four plays PERICLES is the slightest, a play perhaps by somebody else Shakespeare may have revised but that his hand is in it one would know immediately from the characterization of Marina. Sweet, smart, resourceful, candid, creative, loyal and full of lovingkindness--all these traits she shares in some degree with Imogen of CYMBELINE, Perdita of THE WINTER'S TALE, Miranda of THE

TEMPEST. That Shakespeare could create the real in ideal womanhood even the fiercest feminist concedes. At the end of these plays all marry or reunite loving and beloved, a gift of great promise to all.

And the key to this gift of fulfillment is forgiveness, a virtue Shakespeare, like the Gospel itself, puts at the very heart of morality in these last plays. I have spoken briefly of Cymbeline's "Pardon's the word to all." The reconciliation scene of Pericles and Marina is like that of Lear and Cordelia. And in THE WINTER'S TALE, after false accusations of adultery against his wife and best friend, Leontes is reunited to them both in forgiveness and in the betrothal of Perdita and Florizel.

Of THE TEMPEST, finally, let me say a bit more. Because Prospero breaks his staff and abjures his "so potent art" people like to think this is Shakespeare's last play and farewell. That's appealing, but it is a biographical fallacy. Shakespeare in collaboration with John Fletcher wrote a couple more plays and one probably that is lost. But it is his last great play, second I think only to KING LEAR in range and power. It has many levels of meaning, with themes of nature versus nurture, self discovery and recovery, illusion and reality. And with song, dance, high poetry and low comedy it is magical theatre.

Usurped and banished from his kingdom, Prospero through his magic art shipwrecks the conspirators on his island (his court and stage) and brings them to justice, remorse, and self discovery. There is reconciliation in mutual foriveness and a new freedom for all. And there is the betrothal of the young lovers Ferdinand and Miranda.

Happy ending? Well, the play is about death too and the stripping away of our illusions. All of us are actors in fleeting dramas. Even what we take to be the solidest reality, our earth itself, may be an illusion. Says Prospero:

> Our revels now are ended. These our actors
> (As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air,
> And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And like this insubstantial pageant faded
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on; and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep. (4.1.148-58)

Why read and reread Shakespeare? Why have Shakespeare in the curriculum? Those seem to me to be the same question

as Why have a library? If we believe a standard of culture is the best that is thought and said in the world then, in English, Shakespeare is at the very core of that culture. In the popular culture of TV and cinema he remains so: a fact Shakespeare would have loved, and seemed to prophesy it in Cassius' speech about the murder of Caesar:

> How many ages hence
> Shall this our lofty scene be acted over
> In states unborn and accents yet unknown! (3.1.111-13)

I read in the Sunday TIMES (Dec. 17, 95) that 57 full length films of the plays have been released since 1899. How many harmonies and kinds of music from Purcell to the Beatles have the plays and songs inspired? And for writers, poets, dramatists, novelists, Shakespeare is still the polar star of inspired creative achievement. His cast of living characters is unmatchable. He is a great storyteller. He is natural, gentle, witty. As Dryden said long ago, he has a comprehensive imagination. And in ordinary speech we daily use his currency without being aware of it: brave new world, into thin air, reeling-ripe drunk, a sea-change rich and strange, misery makes strange bedfellows, what is past is prologue, these from THE TEMPEST.

I close with a quotation from Stanley Wells' fine recent book on Shakespeare. Wells is the editor of the new Oxford edition of Shakespeare. He sums up his book thus:

> More important still is the fact that [Shakespeare] often grapples with fundamental issues that never cease to concern us: with love and hate, with wit and folly, with the waywardness of the sexual instinct, with relations between generations, with violence and tenderness, with problems of self-government and of national government, with need to come to grips with the inevitability of death and of our yearning to find meaning in existence. He is finally the most humane of writers, the one who most poignantly convinces us of his compassion for his fellow human beings, and it is for this that we value him most.

A senior colleague of mine at the University, God rest his soul, used to twit general talks on Shakespeare such as I have just given. He said they were usually exercises in trophy-hunting, "wild treks through Shakespeare with gun and camera," he laughed. If mine has been wild, and unproductive, why then I ask pardon of you all.

A. J. Kuhn
for the Kit Kat Club
Columbus 16 January 1996

Some Recommended References:

Stanley Wells, SHAKESPEARE; A LIFE IN DRAMA, Norton, 1995. A well written scholarly uptodate survey of Shakespeare on the stage and page.

Stanley Wells & Gary Taylor, eds. SHAKESPEARE'S COMPLETE WORKS, Oxford, 1985.
The modern "standard" edition.

G. Blakemore Evans, ed. with others, THE RIVERSIDE SHAKE-PEARE, Houghton Mifflin, 1974.
In one big volume, the complete works, critical introductions, documents, chronologies: a wealth of information (and the textual editor was my teacher).

Samuel Schoenbaum, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE; A DOCUMENTARY LIFE. (Oxford, 1975).
The most authoritative account of what we really know about the life of Shakespeare.

Samuel Schoenbaum, SHAKESPEARE'S LIVES, Oxford, rev. 1991. An engaging (often hilarious) study of the whole history of efforts in Shakespearean biography (Baconians, Oxfordians,and the worst and very best Shakespeareans, up to 1991).

Robert Sandler, ed. NORTHROP FRYE ON SHAKESPEARE. Yale, 1986. One of the best 20th century critics on Shakespeare.