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The Romantics' Shakespeare

John Russell Brown

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SOCIETE FRANCAISE SHAKESPEARE

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THEATRE ET IDEOLOGIES :

Marlowe, Shakespeare

DIRECTEUR DE LA PUBLICATION

M.T. Jones - Davies

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AVANT-PROPOS

L'opposition soulignée par Horace entre éthique et esthétique — *Aut prodesse volunt aut delectare poetae* — que les Elisabéthains aiment à évoquer, pourrait être le lien qui rattache les unes aux autres les communications, rencontres et table ronde de notre troisième congrès (1981) sur le thème : « Théâtre et Idéologies : Marlowe, Shakespeare. » Toutefois, le résultat de nos échanges montre un dépassement possible de l'alternative éthique / esthétique, puisqu'il met en valeur l'insertion d'idéologies susceptibles de transformer la fonction même de la littérature.

Les pièces analysées dans le contexte de leur temps révèlent de multiples aspects de la vision du monde et de la place que l'homme y occupe, tels que les projette le théâtre anglais au tournant du XVI^e et au début du XVII^e siècle.

Une exploration du langage et de la pensée des deux grands dramaturges aboutit à un commentaire sur les courants philosophiques ou religieux, sur les idées parfois contradictoires et sur la curiosité intellectuelle jamais assouvie qui se font jour à travers la rhétorique de la scène et le jeu dramatique, du *Faust* de Marlowe à *La Tempête* de Shakespeare.

M. T. Jones-Davies

Présidente de la Société Française Shakespeare

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THE ROMANTICS' SHAKESPEARE

William Wordsworth believed that no one before his own generation had appreciated Shakespeare's works «justly»¹, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge made the same point even more vehemently :

Providence has given England the greatest man that ever put on and put off mortality, and has thrown a sop to the envy of other nations by inflicting upon his native country the most incompetent critics ... His critics among us during the whole of the last century have neither understood nor appreciated him; for how could they appreciate what they could not understand ?²

When de Quincey wrote the entry for Shakespeare in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1838, the letter he sent with his manuscript warned the editor that

You will not complain of want of novelty, which luckily was in this case quite reconcilable with truth — so deep is the mass of error which has gathered about Shakespeare.³

Shakespeare, then, was rediscovered in the romantic period. Both poets and critics believed that they were entering a new domain, where all was at their command. They wrote about Shakespeare as if they owned him, and often with zest and recklessness. At the conclusion to the preface of his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), William Hazlitt acknowledged that his new-found enthusiasm would have been thought absurd some twenty or thirty years earlier :

If Dr. Johnson's opinion was right, the following observations on Shakespeare's plays must be greatly exaggerated, if not ridiculous.

Such a wholesale revaluation is a rare occurrence and deserves special study, both for itself and as an indication of how we might seek to reinterpret and appreciate the plays.

The most noticeable difference between Hazlitt and Dr. Johnson, and between other critics of their two generations, is that the romantics seldom found fault : they lay back, and basked in Shakespeare's radiant imagery, splend

rhetoric and dramatic invention. Earlier critics had been careful to demonstrate their own discrimination at all times : in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesie* (1668), Dryden explained that Shakespeare, for all his natural talent, was :

many times flat, insipid : his Comick wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into Bombast.

In his *Preface to Shakespeare's Plays* (1725), Alexander Pope mixed praise and blame in a single sentence :

as he has certainly written better, so he has perhaps written worse, than any other.

Dr. Johnson, in his preface to the plays, nominated Shakespeare's stylistic faults as «tumour, meannes, tediousness and obscurity» : «in narration he affects a disproportionate pomp of diction and a wearisome train of circumlocation»; his «declamations or set speeches are commonly cold and weak». The romantics, in bold contrast, were ready to accept everything because they responded to more than sense; they allowed Shakespeare's words to play in their minds and were so entranced by the associations the text awakened that they had no leisure to account for those passages which had not disclosed comparable riches. Commenting on some ornate passages in *Romeo and Juliet*, Hazlitt responded with open sensibility :

The feelings of youth and of the spring are here blended together like the breath of opening flowers. Images of vernal beauty appear to have floated before the author's mind, in writing this poem, in profusion.

The next moment he enthused about another «exquisite beauty», that seems to have been «brought in more by accident than by necessity». Montague is speaking of his son :

But he, his own affections' counsellor,
Is to himself ... so secret and so close,
So far from sounding and discovery,
As is the bud bit with an envious worm.
Ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air,
Or dedicate his beauty to the sun.

(*Romeo and Juliet*, I. i. 145-151)

According to Hazlitt, «this casual description» is as full of passionate beauty as when Romeo dwells in frantic

fondness on «the white wonder of his Juliet's hand.» He finished by saying that to demonstrate the «genius and beauty» of this early play, which to earlier critics had been full of dark and ineffectual passages, he might well quote every word of the text.

The most thorough and best-known appreciation of Shakespeare's style by a romantic — a justification of its elaboration, wit and abundance — is Coleridge's in *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XV, where the poet examines the artifice of the first narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*. «Here», Coleridge declared :

we find undoubted proof in [Shakespeare's] mind of imagination, or the power by which one image or feeling is made to modify many others, and by a sort of *fusion to force many into one* ... combining many circumstances into one moment of thought to produce that ultimate end of human thought and human feeling, unity, and thereby the reduction of the spirit to its principle and fountain, who alone is truly *One*.

Coleridge quoted the couplet :

Look ! how a bright star shooteth from the sky;
So glides he in the night from Venus' eye !

(ll. 815-6)

and commented :

How many images and feeling are here brought together without effort and without discord, in the beauty of Adonis, the rapidity of his flight, the yearning, yet hopelessness, of the enamoured gazer, and a shadowy ideal character is thrown over the whole.

To explain the effect of another passage, Coleridge turned to Wordsworth for the appropriate words :

... it acts by so carrying on the eye of the reader as to make him almost lose the consciousness of words, — to make him *see* every thing, as

Wordsworth has grandly and appropriately said, —

Flashed upon that inward eye

Which is the bliss of solitude.

Coleridge did not wish to reduce Shakespeare to the delineation of understandable thoughts and feelings :

There is an endless activity of thought in all the

possible associations of thought with thought,
 thought with feelings, or with words, or of
 feelings with feelings, and words with words.

In his notes to the text of the plays themselves, this open and unconfined response was able to identify specifically dramatic associations, leading Coleridge to a lively sense of characters in action and of the complicated, half-conscious activity of their minds. When Banquo says

That trusted home,
 Might yet enkindle you unto the crown.

(*Macbeth*, I. iii. 120-1)

Coleridge paused, characteristically, to note :

I doubt whether «enkindle» has not another sense than that of «stimulating», whether that of the «kind» and «kin», as in the phrase, «rabbits kindle». (i. e. «rabbits bring forth young.»)⁴

Coleridge had opened a treasure trove, an endless source of speculation and delight; and he was well aware of this, devoting many years to the exploration and exploitation of its riches.

In some notes for a lecture on *The Tempest*, Coleridge insisted that reverence was the first requirement for an understanding of Shakespeare, rather than critical discrimination and nicety of taste : without reverence, a critic :

will discourse at best but as a blind man, while the whole harmonious creation of light and shade with all its subtle interchange of deepening and dissolving colors rises in silence to the silent *fiat* of the uprising Apollo ...

I am proud that I was the first in time who publicly demonstrated to the full extent of the position that the supposed irregularity and extravagances of Shakespeare were the mere dreams of a pedantry that arraigned the eagle because it had not the dimensions of the swan.⁵

A second notable change of critical attitude effected by the romantics was concerned with the form and structure of the plays. Pope in his *Preface* of 1725 had explained that many faults in Shakespeare were due to his ignorance of those «rules» of dramatic construction which had been developed by neo-classical critics and which required the action of a play to be restricted to a single time and place.

Dr. Johnson also looked for neo-classical virtues and did his best to excuse Shakespeare's neglect of the basic unities by arguing that this was the result of historical conditioning and an untutored attempt to picture natural happenings. But Coleridge neither blamed nor excused: he claimed that the structure of Shakespeare's plays, invoking frequent changes of time and place and the mixture of comic and tragic episodes, was in keeping with the form and practice of Elizabethan theatres and provided the most appropriate kind of unity for any drama, a unity of conception. Coleridge looked for connections between the parts of a play and not for a simple plan to which some of its elements had been forced to conform:

the works of Shakespeare are romantic poetry revealing itself in the drama. If the tragedies of Sophocles are in the strict sense of the word tragedies, and the comedies of Aristophanes comedies, we must emancipate ourselves of a false association from misapplied names, and find a new word for the plays of Shakespeare ...

He did not argue that Shakespeare was following life rather than art, but that he had found the appropriate form of drama for an imaginative and romantic poet:

if only the poet have such power of exciting our internal emotions as to make us present to the scene in imagination chiefly, he acquires the right and privilege of using time and space as they exist in the imagination, obedient only to the laws which the imagination acts by.⁶

Coleridge had no doubt which form of drama he preferred: «the advantage is vastly in favour of our own early stage: the dramatic poet there relies upon the imagination; ... he shakes off the iron bondage of space and time.»⁷

There has been much debate about Coleridge's indebtedness to A.W. Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (XII), delivered in Vienna in 1808 and published in 1810. He himself acknowledged that he had read the German critic but cites him as collaborator and supporter, rather than instigator. While some verbal parallels argue for direct plagiarism, Coleridge's defence of Shakespeare's «organic» dramatic structure is so consistent, and so much at one with his reading of all literature and

with his own writing of poetry, that he is totally in control of his own argument and has all the vigour of an originator in his own right. Besides, as early as December 1801, Coleridge had made a note about Shakespeare's «complex» and «multiform» mind, that could make unity out of variety⁸ and in October of the next year he had noted the error of supposing that Shakespeare's «imagination» was incompatible with good «judgement».⁹

Coleridge's reassessment of Shakespeare was founded upon the same freedom from prescriptive form as he claimed for himself as a practising poet. Romantic poetry and Shakespeare's plays relied equally upon the recognition of the «truth» – the unity and revelatory power – of an imaginary experience that Coleridge likened to a waking dream. A few years later, in the *Essay, Supplementary to «The Preface» [to the Lyrical Ballads]* (1815), William Wordsworth made the same association, in a similar defence of Shakespeare's dramaturgy :

the judgment of Shakespeare in the selection of his materials, and in the manner in which he has made them, heterogeneous as they often are, constitute a unity of their own, and contribute all to one great end, is not less admirable than his imagination, his invention, and his intuitive knowledge of Human nature.

When they praised Shakespeare's characters, his understanding of «Human nature», the romantics were more in tune with earlier criticism. But they stressed new and different qualities in their appraisals of his «life-like» characters. Dr. Johnson had seen them, in his «Preface», as :

the genuine progeny of common humanity ... [which] act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated.

On the contrary, for the romantics they were «visionary», «imaginary», «unprecedented». Here is Coleridge on the subject :

It is a mistake to say that any of Shakespeare's characters strike us as portraits; they have the union of reason perceiving, of judgement recording, and of imagination diffusing over all a

magic glory. While the poet registers what is past, he projects the future in a wonderful degree and makes us feel, however slightly, and see, however dimly, that state of being in which there is neither past nor future but all is permanent in the very energy of nature.¹⁰

Dr. Johnson had said that characters in drama were too often individual, and that the greatness of Shakespeare was that he represented «a species». But for the romantics, «just representations of general nature» were not a guarantee of great art, and they hurried on to praise what was exceptional and irresistibly emphatic. De Quincey contrasted Shakespeare's characters with those of the Greek masters :

The possible beauty of the female character had not been seen as in a dream before Shakespeare called into perfect life the radiant spheres of Desdemona, of Imogen, of Hermione, of Miranda, and many others.

The heroines of Greek tragedy, Antigone, Electra, Iphigenia were

fine marble groups, but they are not the warm breathing realities of Shakespeare; there is «no speculation» in their cold marble eyes; the breath of life is not in their nostrils; the fine pulses of womanly sensibilities are not throbbing in their bosoms ... In Shakespeare's characters is felt for ever a real organic life, where each [element] is for the whole, and in the whole, and where the whole is for each and in each.¹¹

De Quincey seems to be echoing Coleridge here; he, too, spoke of the «organic» life of Shakespeare's characters (Hawkes, *op. cit.* pp. 208-9); and it is possible that both had been influenced by Maurice Morgan's *Essay on the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff* (1777) which thirty years earlier had argued that in Shakespeare's characterisation :

all the incidents, all the parts, look like chance, whilst we feel and are sensible that the whole is design; ... it is really astonishing that a mere human being, a part of humanity only, should so perfectly comprehend the whole.¹²

Morgan's was, however, a lonely voice in an age that was usually content to praise general truths and clear delineations; only with the Romantics was the varied, puzzling and minutely realized individuality of Shakespeare's characters widely praised, together with other visionary qualities.

In the same way as Shakespeare's involvement in language was redefined, and the critics' judgement based on a new response to it, so a new relationship was discussed between Shakespeare and his invented characters and between the critics and Shakespeare's characters. Here again Coleridge spoke with the clearest voice :

Of Shakespeare he had often heard it said that he was a close copier of nature. [But] in the meanest characters, it was still Shakespeare; it was not the mere Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the Dogberry in *Much Ado about Nothing*, ... but it was this great and mighty being changing himself into the Nurse or the blundering Constable, that gave delight. We know that no Nurse talked in that way, tho' particular sentences might be to that purpose. He might compare it to Proteus, who now flowed, a river; now raged, a fire; now roared, a lion — he assumed all changes, but still in the stream, in the fire, in the beast, it was not only the resemblance, but it was the divinity that appeared in it, and assumed the character.¹³

Coleridge said elsewhere that the writer, «in a moment, transports himself into the very being of each personage and instead of cutting out artificial puppets, he brings before us the men themselves».¹⁴ A few years later, John Keats was writing in much the same vein :

a Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity — he is continually [informing] and filling some other Body —

This follows a more famous passage :

the poetical Character itself ... has no self — it is every thing and nothing — It has no character — it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated — It has as much delight in conceiving an

Iago as an Imogen.¹⁵

Once this impersonating imagination has been recognised, it is an easy step to see that the critic imitates the poet's imaginative action and projects *himself* into the characters.

«In the plays of Shakespeare», said Coleridge :

every man sees himself, without knowing that he does so, as in some of the phenomena of nature, in the mist of the mountain, the traveller beholds his own figure, ...

Even an «ordinary reader» may be «touched by the vibration he experiences»:

a thrill which tells us that, by becoming better acquainted with the poet, we have become better acquainted with ourselves.¹⁶

When Leigh Hunt was praising Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, he noted just this element of impersonation :

the very striking susceptibility with which he changes his own humour and manner according to the nature of the play he comes upon: like a spectator in a theatre who accompanies the turns of the actor's face with his own, now looking eager, now withdrawn, now staring, now

subsided, ... (*The Examiner*, 26 Oct., 1817)

Charles Lamb wrote that when we read *King Lear*, « we see not Lear, but we are Lear, — we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur ...»¹⁷

*

* *

The imaginative identification of the poet in the words, action and characters of the plays, and the answering identification of critic, reader and audience, are both cause and effect of the revolutionary shift in our understanding of Shakespeare that was brought about in the romantic period. Faults vanished from view, barbarities became refinements, instructive portraits of general nature were now viewed as creatures of a magic world, and the poet had turned into a prophet — all within ten or twenty years.

Previously Shakespeare had been a lucky intruder into the enclosures of a careful and civilised art : «he seems to

have known the world by Intuition, to have look'd thro' humane nature at one glance» said Pope in his *Preface* to the plays, with undisguised envy, spiced with a touch of superiority. Shakespeare's success could be explained only as a fluke; and the critic acknowledged this with some embarrassment :

Shakespear, (whom you and ev'ry Play-house bill
Style the divine, the matchless, what you will)
For gain, not glory, wing'd his roving flight,
And grew Immortal in his own despoight.

(*Imitations of Horace*, II. i. 69-72)

He drew upon all the images of nature, said Dryden, «not laboriously, but luckily» (*of Dramatic Poesie*, 1668). Dr. Johnson repeated Pope's suspicion that Shakespeare would have been well content simply to take the money – not knowing how little Elizabethan dramatists were paid for their labours : the «later part» of Shakespeare's plays were often neglected, was Johnson's judgement, because the poet «shortened the labour to snatch the profit» (*Preface*).

A long, resilient, careful, inventive and imaginative involvement, free from any constraints of critical rules or ulterior purposes and costing not less than everything, was what the romantic poets and critics saw as the creative force behind the writing of the plays – nothing less. They identified their own most hopeful aspirations with Shakespeare's achievement, and responded with admiration to his teeming fecundity and his provision of wonder after wonder, like the successive revelation of mountain tops to a traveller through the Alps.

Their praise was limited only by their own ability to respond; and in their praise of Shakespeare they revealed themselves. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth affirmed that his own imagination was not touched :

Save when realities of act and mien,
The incarnation of the spirits that move
In harmony amid the Poet's world,
Rose to ideal grandeur, or, called forth
By power of contrast, made me recognize,
As at a glance, the things that I had shaped,
And yet not shaped, had seen and scarcely seen,
When, having closed the mighty Shakespeare's
page,

I mused, and thought, and felt in solitude.

(vii. 477-85)

Characteristically, he enjoyed the quiet solitary moment *after* he had read Shakespeare and shut the book.

Coleridge's praise is implicit in almost everything he wrote or spoke about Shakespeare : he began to identify and treat the plays as substitutes for his own writing and he lectured on Shakespeare only when his own creative period was past. Keats returned several times in his letters to Shakespeare's «poetical character», and contrasted it with the «Egotistical Sublime» of Wordsworth's solitary and ideal grandeur :

We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us — and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself, but with its subject.

In this respect, Keats contrasted «modern poets» with the Elizabethans, and goes on to ask «why should we be owls, when we can be Eagles ? ... Why with Wordsworth's «Matthew with a bough of wilding in his hand» when we can have [Shakespeare's] Jacques «under an oak etc ? » After examining the three parts of the early Henry VI plays, Keats was convinced that «Shakespeare was the only lonely and perfectly happy creature God ever formed» : ¹⁹ only so could he account for the riches and enjoyment of such poetic invention.

Both Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt saw *King Lear* as the play in which Shakespeare had shown his greatest powers, at the risk of his own peace of mind. «I can easily conceive», wrote Hunt :

that a poet rises from fancies like these ... with a pulse disordered from imagination. The imagination looks out into other worlds with an eagerness stretched beyond its natural tension, and it returns back in languor and irritability. In fact, one could almost be persuaded, sometimes, that a true poet in his enthusiasm enjoys nothing but an admirable insanity.

(*The Examiner*, 28 May 1808)

Hazlitt wished that he «could pass this play over, and say nothing about it» : but he resorted to exceptionally long quotations as a substitute for supererogatory criticism and gave his opinion that this is :

the best of all Shakespeare's plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest. He was here fairly caught in the web of his own imagination.

In their individual responses to the plays, the romantics were also active and personal. Lord Byron was not given to measured critical judgements, but his journals and letters show that Shakespeare was constantly in his thoughts, from year to year. The words of the plays come repeatedly into his most intimate writings, so that the index of almost every volume of Leslie Marchand's splendid edition of the *Letters* has a longer entry for Shakespeare than for any other writer, living or dead, except Byron himself. John Keats wrote, in a letter full of bad news about money, health and work, that :

I never quite despair and I read Shakespeare — indeed I shall I think never read any other book much — I am very near agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakespeare is enough for us.²⁰

His sonnet «On sitting down to read *King Lear* once again» shows a personal and awed approach to the play :

..... once again, the fierce dispute
Betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit.

And his letters, like Byron's, show how the words of this play and others entered into the work of his own mind.

When walking down a passage on his way to a furnished room in a lodging house, Keats saw a portrait of Shakespeare that answered to his idea of the poet more than any other he had seen. Such was its effect upon him, that the engraving was moved into his room and placed over the three books of poetry he had brought with him. When he left these lodgings rather hurriedly only a few weeks later, his landlady gave the picture to him as a present. His sister-in-law before she left England to emigrate, made tassels to hang around the frame of this picture, in order to give Keats a good-bye present that was sure to please. It

is clear from this story that Keats's attachment to Shakespeare was evident to those who knew him.

The romantic critics all tended to personalise Shakespeare. De Quincey wrote that his article on Shakespeare for the *Britannica* «cost me more intense labour than any I ever wrote in my life». Hazlitt wrote that :

Hamlet is the name : his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet's brain. What then, are they not real ? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader's mind. It is *we* who are Hamlet... We have been so used to this tragedy that we hardly know how to criticize it any more than we should know to describe our own faces.²¹

One consequence of discovering both oneself and Shakespeare in the imaginative reality of the plays is that ordinary judgements may seem inappropriate. Hazlitt wanted to write nothing about *King Lear*; Keats needed to «burn through» the same play. Of *Macbeth*, Hazlitt wrote that «the gusts of passion come and go like sounds of music borne on the wind» — the play seems written in another language than words, and may scarcely be judged by independent rational thought. Of *Hamlet*, he wrote that the «moral perfection» of the prince had been called in question only «by those who did not understand it» : Hamlet he believed was «amenable only to the tribunal of his own thoughts».

This special dispensation is claimed still more boldly by Charles Lamb, who argued that the poetic sensibility of a character alone should be valued, and not the morality of his acts or the wisdom of his thoughts. Horror at the crimes of Richard III is qualified :

by the rich intellect which he displays, his resources, his wit, his buoyant spirits, his vast knowledge and insight into characters, *the poetry of his part* ...

Writing of *Macbeth* and *Iago* as well, he added that :

we think not so much of the crimes they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap those moral fences ...

The inner mind in all its perverted greatness, solely seems real : ... the crime is comparatively nothing ...

The sublime images, *the poetry alone*, is that which is present to our minds in the reading²².

Coleridge resisted such a conclusion and insisted that for Shakespeare :

there were no innocent adulteries; he never rendered that amiable which religion and reason taught us to detest; he never clothed vice in the garb of virtue.²³

But he seldom argued this point very particularly. It was probably Keats who examined the morality of the plays with greatest sensitivity, and for him a «sense of beauty» did, in the end, overcome, or «rather obliterate», all other considerations. He looked for a «Negative Capability» in a great poet :

that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

The poetical character

enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated ...

What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one ...²⁴

The negative capability of a poet is the other side of his intensity and «gusto» : to all he gives an intensity, and that intensity, in closest relation to Beauty and Truth, is the centre of Shakespeare's art, not the «design» of the plays, their moral meaning or instruction characterisation. He went to see Benjamin West's painting *Death on the Pale Horse* :

it is a wonderful picture [he wrote] ... but there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality — the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth — Examine *King Lear* and you will

find this exemplified throughout.²⁵

Here is a judgement on Shakespearian tragedy which has no reference at all to a «tragic flaw» or catharsis, or to medieval notions of the fall of a great man, punishment for vice or folly, ritual, purgation, folk ceremonies or the inevitable turning of the wheel of Fortune. The intensity of a shared vision of nature and of man is the crux of *King Lear*, and the finest achievement of Shakespeare.

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So far I have quoted only poets and critics, and considered only the appreciation of readers. The romantic poets did not always remember that Shakespeare wrote for the theatre, and often they did not recognise its importance. In 1805, in a letter to Beaumont, Wordsworth confessed that he had never seen Hamlet acted : «nor do I know what kind of play they make of it.»²⁶ Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt were theatre critics, but they were more securely happy as readers of Shakespeare's text. Hunt was certain that the :

union of such a variety of tones of feeling as prevails in the great humanities of Shakespeare seems as impossible to be found in an actor, as the finest musical instrument is insufficient to supply all the effect of a great writer for a band.

(*The Examiner*, 31 Oct., 1819)

Hazlitt confessed that :

we do not like to see our author's plays acted, and least of all *Hamlet*.²⁷

Perhaps part of the trouble was that *Hamlet* was the play in which this critic saw most clearly his own features.

The romantics so possessed the principal characters of the plays in their imaginations, so enjoyed the imaginative linguistic vitality throughout the texts, that their own imaginary recreations of Shakespeare's characters were in conflict with anything that the theatre could present tangibly on a stage. Again Hazlitt can be spokesman :

we can conceive no one to play Macbeth properly or to look like a man that had encountered the Weird Sisters. All the actors that we have ever

seen, appear as if they had encountered them on the boards of Covent Garden or Drury Lane, but not on the heath at Fores, and as if they did not believe what they had seen.²⁸

Charles Lamb wrote an entire essay to establish that Shakespeare's tragedies were not suitable for stage representation.

The problem was not they read the plays as if they were poems : most of the romantic poets were theatre-goers and several of the critics were professional theatre-goers. They were responsive to theatre, but they were also very demanding in their expectations. They had such lively personal and complete ideas of the roles in speech and action that they could not be content with substitutions. When one exceptional actor did appear in the theatre, they were all quick to mark the exception and hail the theatrical viability of the texts. That actor was Edmund Kean who first performed in London in the role of Shylock, on 26 January, 1814. Hunt, Hazlitt, Lamb, Keats, Byron, Coleridge, all responded to his spell, and it is instructive to see how this power was experienced. Here is the romantic revolution in theatre-terms.

Byron was constant in praise of Kean. His letters show how frequently he sent tickets to friends for Drury Lane for the «Kean nights», as if performances of this actor were the only reason for visiting the theatre. At first Coleridge was doubtful of Kean's judgement, but in February 1823 he wrote in a letter that Edmund Kean is :

a man, whose genial originality, whose unique and multiform energy is the evolution of Thought, Passion, and Character, in one word whose intense genius in re-creating the creations of the World's first Genius, are granted — I had almost said *conclaimed* — even by those whose Preconceptions of Tragedy are at variance with his.²⁹

Coleridge had been won over, and he praised Kean in the same terms as he had used previously to praise Shakespeare.

Keats published two articles about the actor in *The Champion* of December 21 and 28, 1817. He saw «Thought» and «Passion» in his performances, as Coleridge did; but he was struck most forcibly by the impression Kean gave of sensations existing outside ordinary time. His

mind seemed to comprehend both past and future in an instant :

The sensual life of verse springs warm from the lips of Kean ...

There is an indescribable *gusto* in his voice, by which we feel that the utterer is thinking of the past and future while speaking of the instant. When he says in *Othello* «Put up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them», we feel that his throat had commanded where swords were as thick as reeds. From eternal risk he speaks as though his body were unassailable.

For Keats, at least, Kean's performances could «spring warm» into sensuous life : «for ever warm and still to be enjoyed», opening a casement on to enchanted fields of conquest and of passion. It is easy to hear the sensibility of Keats's *Odes*, working in excitement and wonder, beneath the words of his dramatic criticism. There are echoes, too, of «Sleep and Poetry» and other earlier verses : in Kean, the poet could see :

a relict of romance; a posthumous ray of chivalry, and always just arrived from the camp of Charlemagne.

Kean was a prophetic actor, too : as Othello, his exclamation of «blood, blood, blood !» is direful and slaughterous to the deepest degree; the very words appear stained and gory. His nature hangs over them, making a prophetic repast. The voice is loosed on them, like the wild dog on the savage relics of an eastern conflict; and we can distinctly hear it «gorging and growling o'er carcass and limb».

In Richard [III], «Be stirring with the lark tomorrow, gentle Norfolk !» comes from him, as through the morning atmosphere, towards which he yearns.

Edmund Kean was prepared to yield himself to the moment, without any irritable reaching after a general or more comprehensive effect. Here is more of Keats's testimony :

Other actors are continually thinking of their sum-total effect throughout a play. Kean delivers

himself up to the instant feeling without a shadow of a thought about anything else. He feels his being as deeply as Wordsworth, or any other of our intellectual monopolists. From all his comrades he stands alone.³⁰

Most critics were agreed that Kean's voice was like music, that in his performances Shakespeare's words had an eloquence that went beyond meaning and communicated a mysterious attraction. Hazlitt testified that his «Farewell the plumed troop ...» in *Othello* :

struck on the heart like the swelling notes of some divine music, like the sound of years of departed happiness.³¹

Keats said, in the published appreciation from which I have quoted already :

to one learned in Shakespearian hieroglyphics — learned in the spiritual portion of those lines to which Kean adds a sensual grandeur his tongue must seem to have robbed the Hybla bees and left them honeyless :

Keats was echoed by many other admirers : Kean could make Shakespeare's characters live by giving to their words a quality that went beyond the power of words to describe. William Gardiner, in his *Music of Nature* (1838), used regular musical notation to record the sounds of Kean's speech, and he added :

His tones of furious passion are deep-seated in the chest, like those of the lion and tiger [Gardiner had also recorded those in musical notation]; and it is his mastery over these instinctive tones by which he so powerfully moves his audience. At times he vomits a torrent of words in a breath, yet avails himself of all the advantages of deliberation. (p. 58)

George Vandenhoff, an actor who went repeatedly to study Kean, spoke of the music of his performances, carefully prepared and executed. His delivery, Vandenhoff recorded :

ran on the same tones and semi-tones, had the same rests and breaks, the same *forte* and *piano*, the same *crescendo* and *diminuendo*, night after night, as if he spoke it from a musical score³².

Of course, there was no score : Kean was creating his own

music, in response to his sense of Shakespeare's words, and his sense of character, action and situation; he was communicating the more-than-verbal excitement of great Shakespearian roles. «What beautiful, what thrilling music it was !» commented Vandenhoff, «the music of a broken heart -- the cry of a despairing soul !»

Characteristically, Kean excelled in portrayals of loss, defeat, and isolation. His great Shakespearian roles were Shylock, Richard III, Othello, Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Iago. All his spirit, energy, dynamism and music, triumphed in portraying a consciousness of power and deprivation.

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The romantics in Britain responded to Shakespeare's play in ways that raise questions about our present ability to enjoy them fully. Today we have a «new» Shakespeare. We used to look for the «pattern in the carpet», discovered through the study of images and repeated words. From this we were able to gain a sense of the «meaning» of the plays. We also researched into the historical and ideological background of the plays so that we could recover what «meanings» they might have had for Elizabethan audiences. Today that is changed, and we look somewhat more narrowly and curiously for the ways in which Shakespeare broke traditional structures of thought, and of personal and social relations. We are interested particularly in the outsiders of his plays, the revolutionaries, the unaccommodated men, and the commonly misvalued women whose power is progressively and dangerously revealed. We also look for ritual moments in the plays, where a sense of individual character is lost -- the celebration of a commonly accessible affirmation, a celebration for an audience. We also pay particular attention to the theatrical qualities of the text, the multiple possibilities of each new enactment in actual performances.

It may be useful in this busy pursuit of a contemporary Shakespeare to pause and consider another revolution, a different contemporary Shakespeare that once upon a time obliterated all others. What use to us is the passionate, personal and imaginative exploration of the

romantics ? Does it help our understanding of Shakespeare's plays to suppose that they might be wholly organic, a product of the poet's imaginative exploration rather than a conformation to any pre-existent notion of form or decorum or to any distinct view of the world, either traditional, humanistic or revolutionary ? Is each Shakespeare play not only without a «meaning» or palpable design, but also to be valued for an «intensity» which each one of us is invited to share, in an individual, empathetic and unreflective way ?

And when critics and teachers are all the time impressing upon us the importance of considering the plays in performance in the theatre, it is useful to remember that the very personal and active exploration of the plays which the best romantic critics enjoyed led them, not to forget theatrical values, but to move through and beyond performance to perceptions that could not be fed wholly from the theatre, nor wholly from solitary study.

A study of what the Romantics said about Shakespeare is a reminder that an imaginative identification with passages and characters in his plays can hold our attention almost endlessly, not least because we seem to see our own thoughts and feelings developed and transformed in the process. However urgent, among our present concerns, a less egotistical or subjective study of the plays may be, we should not deny ourselves those modes of response that engaged quite exceptionally gifted and experienced men and strengthened their individual creativities.

Of course, the Romantics were interested, for the most part, in a limited number of Shakespeare's plays and were fascinated mainly by his doomed or villainous characters. But they believed that the imaginative exploration of Shakespeare was only beginning with their generation and that it is an endless pursuit.

John RUSSELL BROWN

NOTES

1. «To Robert Peel», *Letters*, ed. E. de Selincourt (1938), V, 3.
2. From a lecture reported by J.P. Collier, 1811-12; quoted from *Coleridge's Writings on Shakespeare*, ed. Terence Hawkes (New York, 1959) pp. 88-9.
3. *Works*, ed. D. Masson (Edinburgh, 1890), iv, 17n.
4. See Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 191.
5. See Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 199.
6. Notes for a lecture on Classical and Romantic Drama, 1810; Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.
7. Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 85.
8. *Notebooks*, ed. K. Coburn, I (1957), 1070.
9. *Op. cit.*, 1255 and n.
10. Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 91.
11. *Op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.
12. Quoted from D. Nichol Smith, *Shakespeare Criticism* (Oxford, 1916), pp. 174-175.
13. Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 69.
14. Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 209.
15. *Letters*, ed. M.B. Forman (ed. 1952), pp. 226-227.
16. Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 87.
17. «On the Tragedies of Shakespeare» (1812), *Works*, ed. F.V. Lucas (1903), i, 107.
18. *Op. cit.*, p. 95.
19. *Works*, ed. H.B. Forman (1883), iii, 12.
20. *Op. cit.*, p. 31.
21. *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1817 (ed. Oxford 1916), pp. 85-6.
22. *Op. cit.*,
23. Hawkes, *Op. cit.*, p. 97.

24. *Op. cit.*, pp. 71 and 227.
25. *Op. cit.*, p. 70.
26. *Letters, Op. cit.*, V. i, 1805.
27. *Op. cit.*, p. 92.
28. *Op. cit.*, p. 24.
29. *Letters*, ed. E.L. Griggs, V, 1820-1825 (Oxford, 1971), p. 269.
30. *Works*, ed. H.B. Forman (1883), iii, 3-5.
31. *Works*, ed. P.P. Howe (1930), xviii, 278.
32. *Leaves from an Actor's Notebook* (NY, 1860), pp. 22-3.