

A Religious Approach in Shakespeare Criticism

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Since the publication of A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* in 1904, a mass of Shakespeare criticism based on various approaches from many different points of view has appeared. For example, Bradley's approach was mainly based on character analysis, but it became unpopular because of a new school of criticism much concerned with verbal analysis or criticism in the 1930s; such a scholar as H.B. Charlton, a strong supporter of Bradley's view, took a reactionary stand-point and wrote *Shakespearean Comedy* in 1938, in which he bitterly criticized verbal criticism for its uselessness in interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. Besides different approaches, historiographical, linguistic, or theatrical, have been employed by many Shakespearean critics. Of course, it cannot be denied that the various critical approaches by many critics simply based on their own points of view are by no means free from un-Shakespearean elements, for most of the critics are possessed with biased views just out of pedantic and curious speculations which are least valuable in understanding Shakespeare's plays. From this view point, it may be possible that the religious (Christian doctrinal) approach in Shakespeare criticism will inevitably bring forth a danger of committing such an error. But, on the other hand, such an approach may make it possible to discover new facts for a better understanding of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, in the final period of his active career as a playwright, wrote *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*—a group with certain distinguishing characteristics. They have been called "Tragi-comedies" because these plays come to bear comic fruit by changing the direction suddenly from their tragic climaxes, or "Reconciliation Plays" because a sundered family is finally blessed by reunion through forgiveness and reconciliation. The recurring themes of these plays are royalty lost and recovered, order destroyed and restored, family-ties broken and reunited through the blessing of God.

It is not clear why Shakespeare, suddenly changing direction, wrote these tragi-comedies after having written several tragedies in succession. Some scholars have tried to find out the cause of it in his illness, his spiritual change, the political problems of the time, the vogue of the court masque, or the influence of the indoor playhouses, but no single satisfactory factor has been discovered. However, the change from tragedy to come-

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dy is worthy of receiving attention.

In "Reconciliation plays," a soul cast into darkness is redeemed through penitence, and it is blessed with reconciliation and reunion. This signifies that the redeemed soul triumphs over death and enters a higher dimensional world of light. These souls in a sense correspond with Dante's *Divina Commedia*. Wilson Knight says in *The Crown of Life* "What is the sequence of the *Divina Commedia*, *L'Inferno*, *Il Purgatorio*, *II Paradiso*, but another manifestation of the essential qualities of the three groups of the greater plays of Shakespeare, the Problems, Tragedies and Romances? . . . We should center our attention on the spirit which burns through them and is eternal in its rhythm of pain, endurance, and joy."¹⁾ Wilson Knight, viewing the Problem Plays, Tragedy and Romance (Tragi-comedy) as an integrated whole, equates them with Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise, respectively. But the Tragicomedy itself is an integrated play which consists of Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise. It may be said that Shakespeare's tragi-comedy does not display to us the quality of paradise as Dante does in *The Divina Commedia*, nor does it display the eschatological quality in the strict sense. Nevertheless, Shakespeare's tragicomedies (Reconciliation plays) are plays moulded in a Christian atmosphere.

The tragedies are plays of death in which the castoff soul cannot triumph over death and finally succumbs to it, whereas the tragi-comedies show us the deliverance from death to new life and joy. Therefore, it may be said that the difference between them can be compared to that between the cave and the tunnel. So, *The Winter's Tale* is contrasted with *Othello*; *Cymbeline* with *Romeo and Juliet*; and *The Tempest* with *King Lear*. In other words, in the tragi-comedies, love, the cardinal Christian virtue, brings forth forgiveness, reconciliation, and reunion after the fury of the severances; this is an act of grace that delivers us from death to new life. The grace of God is Shakespeare's guiding star, and he, guided by it, presses beyond death and sees a luminous world beyond. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, the working of the grace of God is vividly manifested. In the play the two contrary worlds are treated; the first is a bitter world of jealousy, in which Leontes becomes an ignoble Othello. His causeless jealousy comes from the temptation of the devil, and it is unmistakably the origin of evil which causes the ruin of perfect happiness with the death of both Mamillius and Antigonus, the apparent death of Hermione, and the loss of Perdita, but the second world is a brave new world of love and grace which brings about the reunion of parents and children, the reconciliation of old friends, and the blessed union of innocents from worlds. These two opposed world—the bitter world and the blessed one—are joined by means of the grace of God, which is the guiding star to the blessed world beyond. And in the final scene of the blessed world in which the restoration of Hermione is made to appear a resurrection, there is much emphasis on grace and also there are suggestions of the Christian doctrine of resurrection and re-

1) *The Crown of Life*, pp. 30-31

demption. Here what draws our attention is the existence of Perdita as a guiding star. She is Grace incarnate.

Some scholars have attempted to expound *The Winter's Tale* allegorically by representing Hermione as Grace and her passion, death, and resurrection as Christ-like. Such a divine interpretation suggests that Shakespeare's mind was deeply imbued with Christian faith when he wrote the play. Frank Kermode admits that Shakespeare had his mind upon Christian doctrine even if only secondarily when the poet wrote about great subjects such as sin and death, repentance and love. He says:

Great subjects—sin and death, repentance and love—cannot be spoken of by a poet in the Christian tradition without awaking such reverberations; but the poet (Shakespeare) has his mind upon 'the impersonal laws of comic forms', in the first place, and only secondarily upon Christian doctrine.²⁾

Shakespeare's last plays (Tragi-comedies) can join Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Goethe's *Faust* as immortal works. Wilson Knight says, "The final plays of Shakespeare must be read as myths of immortality, that is only to bring his work into line with other great works of literature."³⁾

However, Christian virtue is not a theme restricted to Shakespeare's last plays; it can be found in many other plays—for example, the saintly king in *Henry VI*, who pardons even his murderer, Richard; Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, who is willing to plead for Angelo's life; Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen*, who forgives Proteus, his bosom friend who has betrayed him; Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*, who earnestly pleads with Shylock for Antonio's life; and Orlando in *As You Like It*, who willingly rescues his natural brother who has often contrived to kill him. All of these examples manifest that Shakespeare upheld the basic Christian tenets. And besides the reunion theme through repentance and reconciliation is not a new one even in his early play *The Two Gentlemen* or in *As You Like It*. They foreshadow a promise of more matured future works on the same theme. When we compare these two plays with the tragi-comedies, there are similarities between them in that the injurer and the injured are finally reconciled and reunited through repentance and forgiveness, but we can also find striking differences—in the former, everything goes well luckily tiding over difficulties toward the goal of happiness, whereas in the latter the happy reunion is possible through divine providence.

In *The Tempest* Shakespeare says through Gonzalo concerning the operation of the divine power that controls man:

Look down, You gods,
And on this couple drop a blessed crown,

2) F. Kermode, *Shakespeare: The Final Plays*, p. 37

3) Op. cit., p. 30

For it is you that have chalk'd forth the way
Which brought us hither. (V.i. 201-4)

just as in *The Winter's Tale* Leontes says to Hermione at the end of the play:

This' your son-in-law,
And son unto the king,—whom heavens directing,
is troth-plight to your daughter. (V. iii. 149-51)

What draws our attention in particular is that in the reconciliation plays, just as Dante is led to Paradise by Beatrice, a pure virgin whose beauty is doubled with divine love, so forgiveness and reconciliation are achieved only by such immaculate maidens as Marina, Imogen, Perdita and Miranda miraculously delivered from imminent death by divine providence.

Now there arises a question as to whether Shakespeare was a committed Christian. We have little authentic evidence, but presumably he was a firm upholder of the Christian faith and his home education was grounded upon the Bible; otherwise he would not have been able to produce work which reflects the profound philosophy of Christianity. E.K. Chambers speculates about Shakespeare's spiritual crisis he must have undergone about 1607-8 and his conversion to Christianity, and he says:

Shakespeare must have undergone some sort of spiritual crisis which in the psychology of religion bears the name of conversion; or perhaps some sickness of the brain which left him an old man, freed at last from the fever of speculation and well disposed to spend the afternoon of life in unexacting and agreeable dreams.⁴⁾

Dover Wilson also refers in his book to Richard Davies' assertion at the end of the seventeenth century that Shakespeare "died a papist".⁵⁾ But Davies' assertion does not belong to any factual record. We may also imagine that Shakespeare was a Christian who claimed "a right of interment in the chancel of Stratford Church as part owner of the tithes, and consequently one of the lay-rectors" as Sidney Lee says in *A Life of William Shakespeare*,⁶⁾ and moreover when we consider that his baptism, marriage and burial were all performed in the said church, he must have attended its services. Even though we have no clear idea of his denomination, we may imagine that Shakespeare as a well-known theatrical figure did try to ingratiate himself with the municipal authorities prejudiced against the drama on religious grounds by conforming to the rituals of the Church of England, though he felt strong sympathy for Catholic. However, our surmise that Shakespeare was a Christian is possible from the Christian ethic and faith rooted

4) *Shakespeare: A Survey* p. 293

5) *The Essential Shakespeare* p. 130

6) *A Life of William Shakespeare* p. 485

in some of his plays and particularly revealed in his last plays.

Some of his tragedies reflect Christian spirit or character; for example, in *Hamlet* King Claudius kneels down and pathetically prays for forgiveness for his unnatural offence:

O! my offence is rank, it smells to heavn;
 It hath the primal eldest curse upon't;
 A brother's murder! Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will:
 . . .
 My fault is past. But, O! what form of prayer
 Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
 . . .
 Try what repentence can: what can it not?
 Yet what can it, when one can not repent?

(III. iii. 36-39, 51-52, 65-66)

How many of us Christians can do more? In connection with the prayer scene, it may be supposed to have been motivated by the Christian doctrine that Hamlet spared the King at his prayers not to send him straight to heaven. And near the end of the same play, Horatio says, 'Now cracks a noble heart. Good-night, sweet prince And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!' (V. ii. 373-4) There is also the reference to the 'grace of Grace' at the end of *Macbeth* (V. vii. 100). And in *Macbeth*, the play's structure of Biblical ideas is worth our attention: Macbeth, tempted and duped by the witches, invited his inevitable self-destruction as the result of regicide just as Adam, tempted by a serpent, disobeyed God and brought death into the world by tasting the forbidden fruit.

Even in his happy comedy such as *The Merchant of Venice*, the theme of justice and love (Christian love) is well presented in the conflict between Shylock and Portia. Shylock who, insisting on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth demands a pound of flesh, is an Old Testament figure, whereas Portia, who brings at the critical moment of the play the Christian message of mercy and love is undeniably a New Testament figure. The well-known Portia speech in the trial scene also reflects Christian love:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 upon the place beneath: it is twice bless'd;
 . . .
 It (Mercy) is an attribute to God himself
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice . . .

(IV. i. 184-186, 195-197)

And in this comedy, Antonio represents a sacrificial figure of Christ, who willingly commits himself to the danger of shedding his blood in order that his friend may live. He also at the end of the trial scene displays the Christian love by rendering Shylock the half of his property confiscated by law to be given to him with the proviso that Shylock becomes a Christian. This manifests the power of the Christian love that can redeem the Jew.

Shakespeare must have believed that forgiveness and reconciliation bring "one mutual happiness," whereas retaliation and discord eventually invite destruction; God will be pleased to see us repent and be forgiven and we shall be blessed with peace and happiness as Hymen says in *As You Like It*:

Then is there mirth in Heaven,
When earthly things made even
Atone together.

(V. iv. 115-117)

The following words of Prospero in *The Tempest* clearly refers to Shakespeare's faith in God:

And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer.

(Epilogue 15-16)

Besides, Shakespeare's last words in his will manifest his new hope of life everlasting:

I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour, to be made partaker of life everlasting; and my body to the earth whereof it is made.

This is the confession of his faith, which is also reflected in Queen Katharine's words after her dream of Spirits of peace in *Henry VIII*:

Saw you not, even now, a blessed troop
Invite me to a banquet; whose bright faces
Cast thousand beams upon me, like the Sun?
They promised me eternal happiness;
And brought me garlands.

(IV. ii. 86-90)

Shakespeare's sonnets also reveal to us his religious mind that adores God. Christians can hardly read his sonnets without discovering the great truths of God which the poet reproduces. Charles Ellis has attempted to scripturally interpret Shakespeare's sonnets with an idea of bringing the spiritual mind of the poet to light by the light of the Holy

Scripture. A few examples of his "divine interpretation" will be enough to prove this:

Sonnet XLIII

When most I wink, then do mine eyes best see,
 For all the day they view things unrespected;
 But when I sleep, in dreams they look on thee,
 And darkly bright, are bright in dark directed.
 Then thou, whose shadow shadows doth make bright,
 How would thy shadows' form happy show
 To the clear day with thy much clearer light,
 When to unseeing eyes thy shade shines so!
 How would, I say, mine eyes be blessed made
 By looking on thee in the living day.
 When in dead night thy fair imperfect shade
 Through heavy sleep on sightless eyes doth stay!
 All days are nights to see till I see thee,
 And nights bright days when dreams do show thee me.

(Ellis' interpretation)

He (Shakespeare) meditates on spiritual blindness—at the very shadow of Christ, earthly shadows flee away; but when He reveals Himself in secret there is no darkness at all—on night, and yet he anticipates and longs for the brightness when he shall "see Him as He is"⁷⁾

Sonnet CXLVI

Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth,
 Fool'd by these rebel powers that thee array,
 Why dost thou pine within and suffer dearth,
 Painting thy outward walls so costly gay?
 Why so large cost, having so short a lease,
 Dost thou upon thy fading mansion spend?
 Shall worms, inheritors of this excess,
 Eat up thy charge? Is this thy body's end?
 Then, Soul, live thou upon thy servant's loss,
 And let that pine to aggravate thy store;
 Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross;
 Within be fed, without be rich no more:
 So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men,
 And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.

(Ellis' interpretation)

He (Shakespeare) reflects that in his spiritual warfare, this earthly tabernacle, the body—"my sinful earth"—troubles him, and makes him weak in the spirit. The fast decay on

⁷⁾ *The Christ in Shakespeare* p. 211

that grosser part of him fosters the increase of the nobler to his soul's prosperity. Growth and health is promoted, as the removal of weeds from the tilled soil, or wild shoots from engrafted trees, affords vigour to the appointed head.⁸⁾

As mentioned above, I have so far attempted to expound Shakespeare's plays in the light of Christian doctrine. We easily understand that Shakespeare's plays abound in allusions to biblical episodes and parables, and moreover he often employs a biblical idea as an underlying theme for a play. This may be due partly to the fact that in his time there was so deep an interest in religion as to see the relation between human events and divine providence, but mainly to his Christian faith which is, as already remarked, explicitly revealed in his writings.

It may be assumed that Shakespeare's Christian faith must have come from his extensive knowledge of the Bible he read and that of the homilies and sermons he heard in church, and without his Christian faith, even if he had knowledge of the Bible, it would be impossible that he had written his plays which reflect Christian spirit.

From this point of view, an attempt of a religious approach in the criticism of Shakespeare's plays will make the scholar discover an emotional effect created by biblical allusions and echoes which would otherwise be lost on him.

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8) Ibid, p. 283