Shakespeare and the Modern Playwright

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When we consider the influence of Shakespeare on the modern playwright, it cannot mean merely the choice of plots, since Shakespeare borrowed them from other sources and from history itself. The lessons he teaches are not merely narrative or indeed those of architecture but, rather, the all-important ones of texture. Shakespeare was an actor—whether great or even good is of no consequence. Whether he would have won one of the ephemeral prizes awarded for the gratification of the few and the sorrow of many in this time of instant communication is neither here nor there. What is certain is that he had to have been at least a most interesting actor to have written works as divergent in aim as *King Lear* and *The Comedy of Errors.* He knew in the most subtle detail the possibilities of the actor's craft and elevated them to the level of great art.

Paradoxically, he lived at a time when the sophistication of audiences had not yet come to demand such refinements as directors and stage designers, so that far more had to be relegated to the realm of imagination. In this domain Shakespeare had no peer. When there are battles, we are shown isolated pockets of conflict, redolent of the prevailing chaos. A solitary king craves the solace of a horse; mortal enemies meet by chance, owing to an evident breakdown in their chains of command. What emerges from the paucity of the physical means at Shakespeare's disposal is an extraordinary insight into the grotesque inefficiency inherent in the very nature of human conflict: the rodomontade and pageantry that precede it, the arbitrary shift of fortunes that accompanies it, the utter desolation and disruption that follow in its wake.

The suggestive powers of the actor bore a far greater burden then than they do today, for time and space had to be peopled and decorated by the power of the word and gesture. The traditional Chinese theater has always relied as heavily on the performer's resources as did the theater of Shakespeare. A boatman rowing across an unseen river finds the way of suggesting not only water but also wind and current by the movements of his body. This is total acting, and the public understands every mimetic allusion and responds by an effort of reciprocal imagination.

Naturally enough, technical advances of three centuries have served to diminish the demands on the public imagination and to relegate the actors to the roles of mere instruments in an ever-growing orchestra. The upper and lower stage of the Elizabethan playhouse, which were certainly inherited from the medieval mystery play, and their need to dramatize celestial as well as mundane—and even, at times, infernal—activities, yielded in the seventeenth century to the proscenium stage that we know today. On the picture-frame stage, usually decorated with a predilection for elegance and equilibrium, perspective became all-important, distant temples in man-made parklands serving as a background to almost every dramatic manifestation that was not specifically comic in character. Shakespeare was performed under what must have been

extraordinarily ponderous conditions, with hooped and garlanded skirts abounding, to say nothing of headdresses heaped high with feathers. Gesture became as formal as the physical limitations imposed by the costumes demanded. Tragedy evolved into a rite performed to meticulously prescribed rules, rather than an expedition into the depths of the human spirit.

After the disturbing uncertainties of the Cromwellian revolution, this new order inevitably settled into a kind of genteel somnolence, once the roystering hedonism and cynicism of Restoration comedy had burned itself out and the happy ending became a social necessity.

The sharper edges of Shakespeare were honed away, and King Lear was allowed, in Nahum Tate's adaptation (1681), to survive his risky adventures on the heath in order to bestow his blessing, with rediscovered benignity, on the nuptials of Cordelia and Edgar. Thomas Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare* (1807) erased the saltier passages of the ancient texts. That Shakespeare's genius survived these incursions on its integrity is a mark of its unique power. The next hurdle was the seductive art of theatrical machinery. The playbills of the early nineteenth century reveal the enormous change of emphasis that the purely mechanical aspect of the theater had undergone, a change so great that the spectator was no longer enticed by the performers or the play but, rather, by the stage engineer's legerdemain, made manifest in such events as Vesuvius in full eruption, a brigantine sinking in a storm at sea, or the walls of Jericho tumbling down. As in the films of Cecil B. DeMille, the fury and majesty of nature silenced the human spirit. After all, what is there to talk about while crossing the Red Sea under a canopy of frozen breakers? And why speculate about being or not being in an accurately reproduced tempest, under scudding clouds and the sting of rain? Shakespeare needs calm for reflection and a launching pad of silence in order to ascend into his particular orbit. Introspection was out of style, to permit the theatrical designers to regale the public with exceptionally brilliant reproductions of natural disasters and other acts of God.

Only with the intellectualization of the theater and the introduction of the so-called fourth wall was the expansiveness of the epic finally forced into retreat, to be eliminated entirely by rising costs and the advent of films. With the newfound intimacy and the quieter tones of Chekhov and of Ibsen—to mention only two heralds of the rediscovery of human relations—the focus returned to the individual. Shakespeare, no more fitted to this atmosphere than he had been to the era of the engineer, was, on the whole, treated with perhaps excessive reverence, as befits a "classic," a definition that somehow suggests an inherent remoteness. The declamation of his verse was emphasized in dramatic academies, sometimes at the expense of content. With one or two notable exceptions, costumes and sets were still painfully accurate realizations of what it was deemed Shakespeare's intentions would have been, had he been able to envisage the evolution of dramatic art. It was a theater without surprises, as reverent as a ritual, and often duller than Shakespeare has any right to be.

The footnotes of the many editions for students shed a harsh light on the scholarship and, too often, on the pedantry of those who have loved the author unwisely and too well. Only recently has Shakespeare been liberated from the various constraints to which he has been subjected over the centuries. This is not to say that there were not extraordinary performances of his works, even during fallow times, which served to keep the torch aflame. Edmund Kean must have been an exceptional actor by any standards—a revolutionary temperament, tawny and bibulous, the victim of every passing temptation, wayward, disreputable, and probably intensely modern, collapsing on the stage during a performance as befitted his highly developed sense of occasion. Sometimes the words of detractors lend credence to the praise of admirers, and the critic of the ominously entitled London *Theatrical Inquisitor* wrote scathingly, "Either Mr. Kean is energetic, or he is nothing." This critic must have been a partisan of the Kembles, the noble tragedian and his sister, Mrs. Siddons, of the stately gesture and the measured phrase.

The history of the arts is replete with examples of purveyors of widely divergent styles, powerful enough to animate passionate followers and thereby to create public conflict. The battleground of this particular war was invariably Shakespeare, who, despite the Bowdlers and Tates, retained his universality and greatness to the extent that at all times his plays were yardsticks of achievement, the Everest on every ambitious actor's horizon.

What this genius has offered to actors is clearer perhaps than his well wrapped and discreet gifts to authors. When rehearsing Shakespeare, the actor is often compelled to use one of the many useful

scholarly editions, in which the footnotes at times occupy more space on the page than the text itself. Naturally the actor tends to pore over these bits of erudition, which are the residue of centuries of scholarship, as pointers toward his own interpretation. Frequently the notes are valuable, but at times they betray a pedantry that is the antithesis of the freedom required by any interpreter: the trees obscure the wood. As rehearsals progress, there is naturally less and less reference to the footnotes; after the first night they are forgotten altogether. However, it is a curious and salutary experience to look at them again after three or four weeks. One then has the odd impression of being at sea with the benevolent Bard as one's only companion, traveling ever further from the shore, with the footnotes, like seaside bungalows, solid and insensitive, receding gradually into the mist.

Why this impression? Perhaps because many are privileged to read Shakespeare as one would read any author. Some have it as a vocation to study the works in depth. A few have the ineffable joy of actually interpreting him and sharing his solitude. It is the latter, the actors, who approach him most closely and who are able, in moments of dramatic grace, to extract a few of his secrets from him. The authors watch from afar, from the shoreline. And how often have they been deceived, despite their appreciation—perhaps because of their appreciation?

Catherine the Great, a woman of notorious sensibility, both physical and mental, who corresponded as an equal with Voltaire, wrote a series of historical dramas "en imitation de Shakespeare." As a German and a newcomer to the grim vagaries of Russian history, she studied Shakespeare with myopic energy, bestowing on posterity some of the most inadequate imitations ever written. Her tragedies are mercifully short but require enormous casts, whose members address each other with a full regard for protocol before killing each other off for specious reasons without for a moment engaging the spectator's emotions. Had she not described her contribution as being in imitation of Shakespeare, these works would have passed unnoticed into the great limbo of literature, but her betrayal of the source of her inspiration renders her total inability to understand the nature of her model's genius a phenomenon of abiding interest.

Even the dramatists who followed Shakespeare, the Drydens, the Sothernes, and others, tended to smother single thoughts or actions under mountains of rhetoric, as though quantity were the hallmark of quality, and volume a guarantee of substance. This procedure may have satisfied the ambitious playwright, but it induced monotony and immobility in the actor, who could only express more and more of the same, instead of being able to dart from thought to thought with the alacrity of a dragonfly.

And here we come to perhaps the most outstanding and inimitable of Shakespeare's attributes, his astonishing capacity for fully engaging in the details of human behavior while being Olympian at the same time. Julius Caesar could be interpreted in Fascist Italy as confirmation of the need for dictatorship or, by Orson Welles, as a denunciation of its evils, with no alteration of the text but merely a change of emphasis.

Henry V, in the hands of the youthful Laurence Olivier, became a symbol of patriotism and courage in wartorn Britain; but some time later, in the hands of an even more youthful schoolboy, the king was played in a Youth Theatre Performance as an uncertain and devious monarch who spent his time tiptoeing around his encampment in order to overhear what simple soldiers were saying about him. When Olivier cried, "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more," it became a clarion call, an inspiration. When the schoolboy cried the phrase, it was merely well-phrased propaganda contrived to incite already weary men to further sacrifice in an uncertain and selfish cause.

And so, with the generous elbow room allowed by the author, unrestricted by the meticulous instructions of more recent dramatists, it is possible to play Macbeth as an uncouth, ferocious monarch or as a weakling under the thumb of an unscrupulous wife. And Lear can be played as a creature of intrinsic majesty or as a petulant, self-indulgent dotard, always without betraying the author's intentions. But today's authors and audiences are too intellectually developed and too politically aware to allow their characters such latitude.

Shakespeare and Bach, two titans of human achievement, have something in common in their modesty and in the functional austerity of their attitude toward their work. Shakespeare's prompt copies are certainly not devoid of error or misprint. Bach did leave a few instructions on his manuscripts, but they were almost invariably for his own use, since he foresaw no posterity for himself but only a thorough concentration of his talents at a given time and place.

Nowadays, attitudes have changed. In Bach's day composers were merely musicians who wrote music as part of their more immediate chores, such as conducting choirs and orchestras and teaching. At the celebrated Mermaid Tavern there was the same kind of blurred image, the same kind of wonderful negligence and pragmatism. Poets contributed to each other's works, and scenes were sketched on tables wet with overflowing ale. There was as yet no possessiveness about work in progress, and everyone borrowed shamelessly from one another; there were no literary guilds or protective associations for writers. The finder kept, but the thief stole. Thoughts, rhymes, scenes, motivations were common property. Only genius was inviolate, and it took time to manifest itself, with Bach as with Shakespeare.

This inevitability is entirely foreign to contemporary dramatists, who are on the whole notoriously devoid of self-reliance because of the precipitate advance of progress, the huge increase in the size of populations, and the ever-increasing hours of leisure to fill. In 1942 Henry A. Wallace proudly declared the coming century to be that of the common man. It is turning out to be largely the century of the middleman, as clever folk invent jobs for themselves as go-betweens, agents, managers, lawyers, and consultants. The Elizabethan hull plowed through pristine seas; the contemporary hull cuts through a polluted ocean, gathering barnacles as it makes heavy weather of what were once a calm sea and auspicious gales.

This and the advance in awareness of the theatergoing public have forced the playwright to come to grips with intellectual considerations that merely colored the instinct of great poets of the past. The most penetrating works of art that could be described as Freudian were invariably written well before Freud, by authors as diverse as Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Melville. Such men were so well versed in the appearances of existence that they delved with extraordinary perception into the depths of human motivation, extracting, refining, and distilling their works of art with a freedom that now eludes us. Just as it is impossible to disinvent nuclear weapons, so it is impossible to rediscover that original simplicity which gave the canvas its limitless dimension. We simply know too much. We know the moon is dust. And we know the world is small.

It is useless to complain about what is nothing but evolution. We live at a specific period in history and must find our own way, knowing that headlong advances in technique will only render the task of future generations even more difficult. Haydn wrote more than 100 symphonies, Mozart 626 compositions in a life span of thirty-five years, Schubert eight symphonies and nearly 1,000 other compositions in only thirty-one years. Artistic problems in those times were dictated by the size and capability of musical ensembles and by patrons addicted to circumscribed concepts of beauty, in their architecture and furniture, as in their dress and comportment.

Since then, there has been the romantic movement, its gradual disintegration into atonality, the dodecaphonic system, and now the opulent musical chaos of our times, with every possibility except perhaps that of shocking or surprising. The same is true in the theatrical arts. How much further can one go in sheer austerity than Samuel Beckett? How much further in spectacle than the average American musical, even when shirts are lost on them?

The question then arises, To what extent can Shakespeare influence a contemporary playwright? Had there been critics in his day other than the public barometer, he would no doubt have been castigated for certain inconsistencies and told to prune before opening night—not after. The erosion of time has hardened all of Shakespeare's vagaries into a mold as recognizable as the presidents' heads on Mount Rushmore. We no longer know what is great, what is merely fine, and what is less than fine. We no longer even ask if one head resembles the original more than the others. Shakespeare is Shakespeare, whether he is Bacon or indeed, as Mark Twain so perspicaciously alleged, someone else of the same name. His influence on us is his huge, cool shadow over the history of the theater, now as much as ever before.

We could, if it were possible, take heed of the continuous changes of texture, the amazing changes of direction in the middle of phrases, the arresting succinctness after moments of expansiveness, the extraordinary space accorded to those instruments of his orchestra, the actors, a latitude that gives the executant his head and enables him to extract the best of his talents.

But all of us, as was Shakespeare, are of our times. Our canvas is smaller than his because we know more and are therefore raddled with inhibitions. We are induced to have a point of view, to take a position. We are encouraged by the critical faculty to do what has never been done before while conforming to rules imposed by fashion.

Plays are written and rewritten, tried out and altered on the road under the pressure of producers, committees, and experts—either accredited or self-appointed—on what the public wants. Two hundred years ago playwrights wrote and wrote again; we write, rewrite, and rewrite again. And there is absolutely no guarantee that the results are better than they would have been in the past. To maintain such a presumption would be tantamount to believing that the telephone has improved the quality of conversation.

Had "To be, or not to be" been written today, the author would be upbraided both for an odious pretentiousness and for posing a question as obvious as it is infantile. To make such a speech palatable, three and a half centuries are needed, together with the knowledge that the author is safely on the celestial stock exchange—with some slight fluctuation in his value as fashions change, but amazingly stable, considering that he was once as mortal as we are.

Each author may see in Shakespeare what he will, as may each member of the public; but to speak of influence is dangerous. The contemporary author is far too close to the prejudices and practices of his own times to admit of any influence other than a private wonder at the diabolical cleverness of the technician, awe for the skill of the journeyman actor who knew how to write for the instruments of his choosing. As for Shakespeare's genius, one can only marvel at it. Genius cannot touch those of mere talent. And if there are a few writers of genius around today, it is too soon for us to realize it, and they have no need to be influenced in any case. They might even resent the supposition that such an absurdity is desirable. Did not George Bernard Shaw endlessly carp and cavil at Shakespeare? And was it not Tolstoy himself who said that Shakespeare was the antithesis of an artist, that his sense of character was rudimentary? Genius is an unreliable critic of genius. That is what ordinary folk are for.