

## **LECTURE 6. Peculiarities of his creative methods. Shakespeare's immortality**

William Shakespeare, by universal consent the greatest author of England, if not of the world, occupies chronologically a central position in the Elizabethan drama. He was born in 1564 in the good-sized village of Stratford-on-Avon in Warwickshire, near the middle of England, where the level but beautiful country furnished full external stimulus for a poet's eye and heart. His father, John Shakespeare, who was a general dealer in agricultural products and other commodities, was one of the chief citizens of the village, and during his son's childhood was chosen an alderman and shortly after mayor, as we should call it. But by 1577 his prosperity declined, apparently through his own shiftlessness, and for many years he was harassed with legal difficulties. In the village 'grammar' school William Shakespeare had acquired the rudiments of book-knowledge, consisting largely of Latin, but his chief education was from Nature and experience. As his father's troubles thickened he was very likely removed from school, but at the age of eighteen, under circumstances not altogether creditable to himself, he married Anne Hathaway, a woman eight years his senior, who lived in the neighboring village of Shottery. The suggestion that the marriage proved positively unhappy is supported by no real evidence, but what little is known of Shakespeare's later life implies that it was not exceptionally congenial. Two girls and a boy were born from it.

In his early manhood, apparently between 1586 and 1588, Shakespeare left Stratford to seek his fortune in London. As to the circumstances, there is reasonable plausibility in the later tradition that he had joined in poaching raids on the deerpark of Sir Thomas Lucy, a neighboring country gentleman, and found it desirable to get beyond the bounds of that gentleman's authority. It is also likely enough that Shakespeare had been fascinated by the performances of traveling dramatic companies at Stratford and by the Earl of Leicester's costly entertainment of Queen Elizabeth in 1575 at the castle of Kenilworth, not many miles away. At any rate, in London he evidently soon secured mechanical employment in a theatrical company, presumably the one then known as Lord Leicester's company, with which, in that case, he was always thereafter connected. His energy and interest must soon have won him the opportunity to show his skill as actor and also reviser and collaborator in play-writing, then as independent author; and after the first few years of slow progress his rise was rapid. He became one of the leading members, later one of the chief shareholders, of the company, and evidently enjoyed a substantial reputation as a playwright and a good, though not a great, actor.

This was both at Court (where, however, actors had no social standing) and in the London dramatic circle. Of his personal life only the most fragmentary record has been reserved, through occasional mentions in miscellaneous documents, but it is evident that his rich nature was partly appreciated and thoroughly loved by his associates. His business talent was marked and before the end of his dramatic career he seems to have been receiving as manager, shareholder, playwright and actor, a yearly income equivalent to \$25,000 in money of the present time. He early began to devote

attention to paying the debts of his father, who lived until 1601, and restoring the fortunes of his family in Stratford. The death of his only son, Hamnet, in 1596, must have been a severe blow to him, but he obtained from the Herald's College the grant of a family coat of arms, which secured the position of the family as gentlefolks; in 1597 he purchased New Place, the largest house in Stratford; and later on he acquired other large property rights there. How often he may have visited Stratford in the twenty-five years of his career in London we have no information; but however enjoyable London life and the society of the writers at the 'Mermaid' Tavern may have been to him, he probably always looked forward to ending his life as the chief country gentleman of his native village. Thither he retired about 1610 or 1612, and there he died prematurely in 1616, just as he was completing his fifty-second year.

Shakespeare's dramatic career falls naturally into four successive divisions of increasing maturity. To be sure, no definite record of the order of his plays has come down to us, and it can scarcely be said that we certainly know the exact date of a single one of them; but the evidence of the title-page dates of such of them as were hastily published during his lifetime, of allusions to them in other writings of the time, and other scattering facts of one sort or another, joined with the more important internal evidence of comparative maturity of mind and art which shows 'Macbeth' and 'The Winter's Tale,' for example, vastly superior to 'Love's Labour's Lost'--all this evidence together enables us to arrange the plays in a chronological order which is certainly approximately correct. The first of the four periods thus disclosed is that of experiment and preparation, from about 1588 to about 1593, when Shakespeare tried his hand at virtually every current kind of dramatic work. Its most important product is 'Richard III,' a melodramatic chronicle-history play, largely imitative of Marlowe and yet showing striking power. At the end of this period Shakespeare issued two rather long narrative poems on classical subjects, 'Venus and Adonis,' and 'The Rape of Lucrece,' dedicating them both to the young Earl of Southampton, who thus appears as his patron. Both display great fluency in the most luxuriant and sensuous Renaissance manner, and though they appeal little to the taste of the present day 'Venus and Adonis,' in particular, seems to have become at once the most popular poem of its own time. Shakespeare himself regarded them very seriously, publishing them with care, though he, like most Elizabethan dramatists, never thought it worth while to put his plays into print except to safeguard the property rights of his company in them. Probably at about the end of his first period, also, he began the composition of his sonnets, of which we have already spoken.

The second period of Shakespeare's work, extending from about 1594 to about 1601, is occupied chiefly with chronicle-history plays and happy comedies. The chronicle-history plays begin (probably) with the subtle and fascinating, though not yet absolutely masterful study of contrasting characters in 'Richard II'; continue through the two parts of 'Henry IV,' where the realistic comedy action of Falstaff and his group makes history familiarly vivid; and end with the epic glorification of a typical English hero-king in 'Henry V.' The comedies include the charmingly fantastic 'Midsummer

Night's Dream'; 'The Merchant of Venice,' where a story of tragic sternness is strikingly contrasted with the most poetical idealizing romance and yet is harmoniously blended into it; 'Much Ado About Nothing,' a magnificent example of high comedy of character and wit; 'As You Like It,' the supreme delightful achievement of Elizabethan and all English pastoral romance; and 'Twelfth Night,' where again charming romantic sentiment is made believable by combination with a story of comic realism. Even in the one, unique, tragedy of the period, 'Romeo and Juliet,' the main impression is not that of the predestined tragedy, but that of ideal youthful love, too gloriously radiant to be viewed with sorrow even in its fatal outcome.

The third period, extending from about 1601 to about 1609, includes Shakespeare's great tragedies and certain cynical plays, which formal classification mis-names comedies. In these plays as a group Shakespeare sets himself to grapple with the deepest and darkest problems of human character and life; but it is only very uncertain inference that he was himself passing at this time through a period of bitterness and disillusion.

'Julius Caesar' presents the material failure of an impractical idealist (Brutus); 'Hamlet' the struggle of a perplexed and divided soul; 'Othello' the ruin of a noble life by an evil one through the terrible power of jealousy; 'King Lear' unnatural ingratitude working its hateful will and yet thwarted at the end by its own excess and by faithful love; and 'Macbeth' the destruction of a large nature by material ambition. Without doubt this is the greatest continuous group of plays ever wrought out by a human mind, and they are followed by 'Antony and Cleopatra,' which magnificently portrays the emptiness of a sensual passion against the background of a decaying civilization.

Shakespeare did not solve the insoluble problems of life, but having presented them as powerfully, perhaps, as is possible for human intelligence, he turned in his last period, of only two or three years, to the expression of the serene philosophy of life in which he himself must have now taken refuge. The noble and beautiful romance-comedies, 'Cymbeline,' 'The Winter's Tale,' and 'The Tempest,' suggest that men do best to forget what is painful and center their attention on the pleasing and encouraging things in a world where there is at least an inexhaustible store of beauty and goodness and delight.

Shakespeare may now well have felt, as his retirement to Stratford suggests, that in his nearly forty plays he had fully expressed himself and had earned the right to a long and peaceful old age. The latter, as we have seen, was denied him; but seven years after his death two of his fellow-managers assured the preservation of the plays whose unique importance he himself did not suspect by collecting them in the first folio edition of his complete dramatic works.

Shakespeare's greatness rests on supreme achievement--the result of the highest genius matured by experience and by careful experiment and labor--in all phases of the work of a poetic dramatist. The surpassing charm of his rendering of the romantic beauty and joy of life and the profundity of his presentation of its tragic side we have already suggested. Equally sure and comprehensive is his portrayal of characters. With the certainty of absolute mastery he causes men and women to live for us, a vast

representative group, in all the actual variety of age and station, perfectly realized in all the subtle diversities and inconsistencies of protean human nature. Not less notable than his strong men are his delightful young heroines, romantic Elizabethan heroines, to be sure, with an unconventionality, many of them, which does not belong to such women in the more restricted world of reality, but pure embodiments of the finest womanly delicacy, keenness, and vivacity. Shakespeare, it is true, was a practical dramatist. His background characters are often present in the plays not in order to be entirely real but in order to furnish amusement; and even in the case of the chief ones, just as in the treatment of incidents, he is always perfectly ready to sacrifice literal truth to dramatic effect. But these things are only the corollaries of all successful playwriting and of all art.

To Shakespeare's mastery of poetic expression similarly strong superlatives must be applied. For his form he perfected Marlowe's blank verse, developing it to the farthest possible limits of fluency, variety, and melody; though he retained the riming couplet for occasional use (partly for the sake of variety) and frequently made use also of prose, both for the same reason and in realistic or commonplace scenes. As regards the spirit of poetry, it scarcely need be said that nowhere else in literature is there a like storehouse of the most delightful and the greatest ideas phrased with the utmost power of condensed expression and figurative beauty. In dramatic structure his greatness is on the whole less conspicuous. Writing for success on the Elizabethan stage, he seldom attempted to reduce its romantic licenses to the perfection of an absolute standard. 'Romeo and Juliet,' 'Hamlet,' and indeed most of his plays, contain unnecessary scenes, interesting to the Elizabethans, which Sophocles as well as Racine would have pruned away. Yet when Shakespeare chooses, as in 'Othello,' to develop a play with the sternest and most rapid directness, he proves essentially the equal even of the most rigid technician.

Shakespeare, indeed, although as Ben Jonson said, 'he was not for an age but for all time,' was in every respect a thorough Elizabethan also, and does not escape the superficial Elizabethan faults. Chief of these, perhaps, is his fondness for 'conceits,' with which he makes his plays, especially some of the earlier ones, sparkle, brilliantly, but often inappropriately. In his prose style, again, except in the talk of commonplace persons, he never outgrew, or wished to outgrow, a large measure of Elizabethan self-conscious elegance. Scarcely a fault is his other Elizabethan habit of seldom, perhaps never, inventing the whole of his stories, but drawing the outlines of them from previous works--English chronicles, poems, or plays, Italian 'novels,' or the biographies of Plutarch. But in the majority of cases these sources provided him only with bare or even crude sketches, and perhaps nothing furnishes clearer proof of his genius than the way in which he has seen the human significance in stories baldly and wretchedly told, where the figures are merely wooden types, and by the power of imagination has transformed them into the greatest literary masterpieces, profound revelations of the underlying forces of life.

Shakespeare, like every other great man, has been the object of much unintelligent, and misdirected adulation, but his greatness, so far from suffering diminution, grows more apparent with the passage of time and the increase of study.

## **References**

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## **Internet resources**

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