



SHAKESPEARE'S SELF-PORTRAIT

PASSAGES FROM HIS WORK

CHOSEN. WITH NOTES. BY

A. L. ROWSE

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*'In order to make a true estimate of the abilities and
merit of a writer, it is always necessary to examine
the genius of his age.'*—Dr Johnson

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To President Ronald Reagan
for his historic honour
to Shakespeare's profession

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Shakespeare's Self-Portrait



All writers write out of their own personal experience and of their experience of the world they know. William Shakespeare is no exception to this rule, in fact he is the greatest example of it – and the most obvious, though few people are aware of it. Ben Jonson, who knew him well and found him irresistible, tells us, ‘he was indeed honest [the Elizabethan word for honourable], and of an open and free nature’. That is to say that – though he was a very clever and subtle man – he was truthful and candid. He did not write any of his work to make a mystery of it. But he was writing four hundred years ago, so that one needs an intimate knowledge of the time he lived in to be able to interpret fully his many references to it and sometimes to catch the meaning and tone of his language, which became progressively more difficult, concentrated and elliptical.

Actually he is the most autobiographical of all Elizabethan dramatists, who reveals himself more fully and intimately in his works than any of them – as we should expect from ‘an open and free nature’. In fact we know more about him than about any other Elizabethan dramatist, with the single exception of Ben Jonson’s *later* career: we know far less about his early life than we do about Shakespeare, whose father the Alderman and his family were very well known in Stratford-upon-Avon.

William Shakespeare is the only one of the dramatists to have written his Autobiography, in the Sonnets, during the crucial and decisive years of his life, 1592 to 1594. Even here widespread confusion has been created, quite unnecessarily, by people not noticing the obvious fact that when they were published years later, in 1609, it was the publisher who dedicated them to Mr W.H. – not Shakespeare’s young man at all, but the publisher’s dedicatee. William Shakespeare wrote the Sonnets for the obvious person, his young lord and patron, Southampton, to whom he owed so much – and to whom he publicly dedicated his famous

poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* with his love and duty: 'the love I dedicate to your lordship is without end' – quite rightly, he owed so much to him. He had nothing whatever to do with the *publication* of the Sonnets: much too near the bone, too intimate and revealing of the private life of the three of them, the poet-actor-dramatist, his generous, rather spoiled young patron, and the remarkable character – now at last made plain to us – of the dark and equivocal young lady, Emilia Lanier *née* Bassano, musical and Italianate, discarded mistress of Lord Chamberlain Hunsdon, the patron of Shakespeare's Company.

My aim here is not to write Shakespeare's biography, but to let him write it for himself, in his own words, since no writer is more autobiographically revealing. In truth, he tells us everything about himself.

The rhythms of a man's speech are deeply personal, and correspond subtly – too subtly for abstract analysis – to the impulses of his heart's blood. And they are correspondingly recognisable, sometimes easily. Shakespeare's voice is most personal and recognisable. I remember hearing it one day unexpectedly, quoted in a slab of somebody's prose –

Thou hast nor youth nor age,
But, as it were, an after-dinner's sleep,
Dreaming on both –

and suddenly found myself in tears. It was his personal voice coming to one across the ages.

He is no less recognisable in hundreds of lines:

We, ignorant of ourselves,
Beg often our own harms, which the wise powers
Deny us for our good: so find we profit
By losing of our prayers.

Or,

Full oft 'tis seen,
Our means secure us, and our mere defects
Prove our commodities.

It is his unmistakable inflexion: it could only be he, and nobody else.

We border here on a great mystery in all modern art, which is

inextricably linked with, expresses the personality of, the artist, composer or painter. (So that nothing could be more obtuse, or obscurantist, than the exclusion of the personal in some academic criticism.) How is it that we hear a phrase of Beethoven or Schubert, Chopin, Tchaikovsky or Debussy, and can recognise who is speaking? Or can at once recognise a Gauguin or Van Gogh, Seurat or Utrillo, a Rembrandt or Tiepolo or Bronzino – or a hundred others – in a few strokes of the brush? Or a Rodin, a Maillol, a Houdon – or an Eric Gill?

It is surely very mysterious, and at the same time rather wonderful. It applies no less, perhaps even more, to the greatest artists – Michelangelo, Bach, Shakespeare. With them we can even register the progression in style, with the development of the man's mind, from early to middle to late Beethoven, say, or similarly with Shakespeare.

The development of the style goes along with the thought that it expresses. So that it is again a mistake to suppose that we cannot recognise what Shakespeare thought. (Naturally, stupid cannot recognise anything.) But already, in those brief passages of only a few lines, we can detect characteristic thoughts of Shakespeare. Sometimes he makes it easy for us by repeating several times over a thought that evidently appealed to him.

It is often said conventionally that one cannot tell what a dramatist thinks because he puts both sides of a question. How imperceptive! – as if one cannot tell what Bernard Shaw thought, or any other dramatist for that matter: Brecht, Sartre or Montherlant, Marlowe or Ben Jonson. Shakespeare is no exception: he is a writer like any other, only subtler, more *ondoyant* like Montaigne. However, we know what Montaigne thought, and at one point Shakespeare flatly contradicts him – on the subject of primitive communism in *The Tempest*.

Moreover, it is superficial to object that, because both points of view are fairly put, there is no telling what a man thinks; for both points may be relevant and valid, and a man may well hold both in perspective, two sides of the diptych. We may take the two views of death in *Measure for Measure* – one as an extinction of the joys of life, the other as an end of our troubles: at one time the one view may prevail with a man, at another time the other. It does not prevent one from discerning a writer's values and choices, especially when – as a perceptive writer, Logan Pearsall Smith, diagnosed – one can hear the tone of voice. One can even hear it enforced in Shakespeare's repeated reflections on ingratitude, or on honour or reputation; on seeming and being, on what people really are and what they seem – an actor would be particularly conscious of that. When he writes,

'Tis not so above:
 There is no shuffling, there the action lies
 In his true nature, and we ourselves compelled
 Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
 To give in evidence –

need we doubt that this is what he thought? It is utterly in keeping with what we know of him.

Or again, when he writes:

Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once;
 And He that might the vantage best have took
 Found out the remedy. How would you be
 If He, which is the top of judgement, should
 But judge you as you are?

Here we have the foundation of his Christian belief, again in keeping with expressions of it elsewhere.

And this is apart from his constant and continual enforcement of his obvious and positive views about society: the hatred of disorder, civil war, anarchy; the insistence upon the necessity of order and degree according to function; upon authority and obedience, a two-way relationship, for, if rulers fall down on their duty, their failure is brought home to them, as well as the fell consequences of the populace undermining social order. A humane man, who clearly hated cruelty, he saw that the breakdown of order led to even worse suffering than before. He saw how thin is the crust of civilisation, and – once broken up – what dark waters men are plunged into. Our own time has seen that dreadful lesson brought home to us on a wider scale than ever before. Since he had a deeper and more dependable knowledge of human nature than any other writer, he had no illusions. On a quite simple and positive plane, it is remarkable that he had a far more responsible understanding of politics and society than any of the Elizabethan dramatists.

Not the least remarkable thing about him – though no one has remarked it – is that he seems to have thought no nonsense at all, unlike Milton, at the opposite pole in our literature.

To come to the man, in the environment of his time, the approach of the historian of the age is indispensable. My own discoveries and findings –

in the firm dating of Sonnets and plays, thus providing the proper foundation for the chronological development of the work; the unanswerable solutions to the old vexed questions of the dedication of the Sonnets, to and for whom written; the identity of the Rival Poet and the Dark Lady, with the new light thrown on a number of the plays, in particular, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *All's Well That Ends Well* – all this adds a dimension to our knowledge and will, given time, effect a revolution in Shakespeare studies, at present all too obviously scraping the barrel and much in need of a new impulse.

But revolutions have a conservative side to them, and all my findings, though definitive, are completely in accordance with tradition and all that we have hitherto known of him. Here I do not wish to interpose for long between the reader and Shakespeare himself: the whole point of this book is that the reader should see him in his own words. But it is necessary here to explain a few points.

Again and again I have noticed editors neglecting to explain references to contemporary persons and events, while going into endless irrelevant details about 'sources' from which Shakespeare did or did not derive his plots, excruciating bibliographical minutiae, the compositors who printed his work, their methods of punctuation, or lack of it, etc. Imagine the ineptitude, while neglecting the facts of the writer's personal experience and his reaction to what was going on around him at the time! Some editors, like E. K. Chambers or the editors of the New Oxford Shakespeare, obstinately refuse to recognise obvious contemporary references.

Everybody recognises the well-known references to Elizabeth I and James I, whom Shakespeare would have seen frequently enough, with their courtiers, from regular performances at Court. Everybody recognises the hopeful tribute in *Henry V* to Essex – Southampton's leader – on his leaving London for the Irish campaign in 1599. Then why not see that old Polonius in *Hamlet* is in part a caricature of old Burghley, as Dover Wilson realised? While Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost* is a skit on himself, put in the mouth of his mistress, Rosaline, who herself is described in practically the same words as the Dark Lady in the Sonnets. Everybody knows that *Hamlet* has an extended reference to the rivalry of 1600–1 between the Boys' Companies and the Men's, the so-called War of the Theatres. Yet a recent edition of *Hamlet* goes out of its way to deny the obvious reference to the siege of Ostend of this very time, recognised again by Dover Wilson:

I see

This is exactly as it was around Ostend in 1600–1, as an Elizabethan historian knows. To be able to decipher the contemporary references is a great help to the dating of the plays as of the Sonnets. And it is idiotic to throw away, or refuse to acknowledge, any information that can throw light on the life and work of our greatest writer.

Let us come to what he tells us about himself. A man's will sums up what he has arrived at in the course of his life, nothing better or more revealing. William Shakespeare's is that of a Stratford man, leaving property in and around his native town, who has made a modest fortune in the theatre in London. His success has confirmed the status he has won as 'gentleman', along with the best house in the town which it had enabled him to buy. His devotion to his native town is marked, and exceptional. Other theatre people – like Heming, Condell or Alleyn – put their winnings into property in or near London. Not so Shakespeare: he was bent on making a show in his home town, and recovering his father's losses (he did not succeed in getting back the property alienated to Uncle and Aunt Lambert out at Barton-on-the-Heath). He had recently bought half the gatehouse into the Blackfriars in London, a convenient *pied-à-terre*, and he leaves money for mourning rings to his three 'fellows', leaders along with him in the Company, Richard Burbage, its star, Heming and Condell. So – there we have the man: a Stratford townsman who has made good in the London theatre.

He is very much a family man. A good deal of his will is concerned with providing for his second daughter Judith and for various contingencies therewith. The bulk of the property was naturally to come to the elder daughter, the intelligent Susanna, and her doctor husband, John Hall. (He treated Shakespeare's fellow Warwickshireman, the poet Drayton.) Susanna, we know, ran the household; she and her husband would occupy the best double-bed. It was thoughtful of her father to allocate the next best bed for his widow; so – away with the rubbish written on that subject by people who do not qualify to write on it.

Shakespeare's only boy Hamnet – Hamlet is another form of the name, observe – had died in 1596, his name coming from his godparent, Hamnet Sadler, an old neighbour from early days in Henley Street. He received a bequest of money for a ring to remember him by. Shakespeare's residual heiress was Susanna's only child, little Elizabeth. For her second husband she was to marry a knight, Sir John Barnard – so she ended up a titled lady. She left the old home for her husband's country house; in her will she left money to her poor relations, the Hathaways, while her husband's consigned the lumber in the house at Stratford to be destroyed – no doubt papers and books among it, no-one left to be interested!

The will is a neighbourly one: the usual conventional bequest of a gentleman to the poor of the parish; the old home in Henley Street to his sister for life, with bequests of clothes – a valuable item in those days – and money to her and her three sons. His sword went to neighbour Thomas Combe, other bequests to several old friends; his godson, William Walker, was remembered with 20s in gold.

The invocation at the head of the will makes it clear that William Shakespeare was a conforming member of the Church: it recites the regular Protestant formula, where the Catholic formula invoking the Blessed Virgin and the saints is quite otherwise – and that disposes of the nonsense written on that subject. Everything shows that Shakespeare was a regular conforming Anglican, with an old-fashioned Catholic flavouring, though he read latterly in the Geneva Bible. One thing is quite clear: he was no Puritan.

A few family references are discernible in his work, in particular the touching lines expressing grief for his dead boy, written into *King John* in that year 1596. Nothing of the sort in Marlowe, for obvious reasons: he was a devoted, aggressive homosexual; nor is there any family feeling in Ben Jonson. Remarkably, there is far more about schooling and grammar-school education than in any other Elizabethan dramatist, or several of them together. Not only frequent tags from grammar school text books, but quotations from Latin texts used in school, notably the favourite Ovid. (He was himself to be hailed later as an English Ovid, i.e. essentially a poet of love.) Not only this, but we have specimens of school-teaching, how it was done, from the pedant Holofernes, and a regular Latin lesson for a young William in *The Merry Wives*. And schoolmasters are made regular fun of.

An early tradition, going right back to a member of the Globe Company, tells us that for a time Shakespeare was an usher at school in the country. His marked concern here is corroborated by the fact that his

earliest plays are school plays. In an Elizabethan school comedy was represented by Plautus – grammar-school teaching was based on Latin; tragedy was represented by the stories from Ovid or Seneca. Well, the earliest comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*, comes out of Plautus; the earliest tragedy from Ovid, with Senecan horrors.

Shakespeare's schooling was, like Jonson's and Marlowe's, a grammar-school one, evidently at the local school, like theirs. It is clear that, though he did not go on to the university (no particular advantage to a playwright), he continued his education on his own. All real education is self-education; it oddly needs emphasising that he was a singularly clever man, read avidly and quickly, picking up tips from everybody, everywhere. When these things came together to bear fruit, they did so with an intense energy that gives the impression of having been dammed up, and the work burst upon the world with astonishing speed and success, which a senior in the field – and a university man to boot – Robert Greene bitterly resented. The actor turned dramatist proved well able to compete with the university men on their terms.

Before this turn came about there was a hiatus. The countryman was addicted to sport. A sonnet confesses his 'sportive blood', though this refers to his enthusiasm for women and sex. Sex had early trapped him into marriage with a woman considerably older than himself; a father at nineteen, by twenty-one he had a wife and three children to support. (*Very* unlike Marlowe, who could concentrate on his writing.)

Marlowe and Jonson were both urban types, by birth, rearing and career. Shakespeare was a countryman from first to last, and this shows all through his work. But also it shows how addicted he was to sport. His early work reveals a perfect obsession with deer-hunting, an easy familiarity with horse and hounds. Also we have hare-coursing, hawking, bowls – a rather gentlemanly game then – archery; we know where the butts were at Stratford, in the meads between the bridge and the present theatre. No time for sport in his later busy life – he must have devoted a good deal of time to it in those earlier youthful years.

However, he had a young family to support; his father's affairs – the Alderman and Bailiff (i.e. Mayor) neglected them for the town's business – had gone downhill; there was the family's standing to rehabilitate – after all, his mother was an Arden. He took to acting and the theatre; though the apprenticeship was harsh and distasteful – he tells us so, and how much, with his grand ideas, he resented it – he was on a moving escalator, it bore him upwards and eventually (after what a career!) home.

Anyone who cannot see that the author of his work, Sonnets as well as

Plays, was a man of the theatre ought – in Harry Truman's phrase – to have his head examined: sheer lunacy. There are scores of references to his profession, to the theatre and actors and acting – and from the inside point of view and experience of the professional, from the beginning to the end. What he has to say on these matters forms two of the bulkiest sections of this book.

No writer, not even Molière, was more a man of the theatre: not only an actor – and we are told that he was a good one – but dramatist and producer; a trustworthy business man, who sometimes received the cash for performances; a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Company on its formation; eventually part-owner of the Blackfriars theatre.

No dramatic criticism in the age is so revealingly incisive as the instructions given to the touring actors in *Hamlet*. No need to go into detail here – read what he says. The whole emphasis is on naturalness in acting, as in life. This is what he stood for as against the prating and rampaging about the stage of earlier Elizabethan drama – *Tamburlane*, for example.

In that age it was thought more highly of to be a poet – poetry was never at a higher estimation in a society than in the Renaissance. To be an actor was distinctly lower in status, touring actors were apt to be classed as mere vagabonds. We find Shakespeare several times expressing bitter resentment at having to earn his living this way and his sensitiveness at his name being exposed to shame, even his nature receiving an impress as at a dyer's hand. He need not have feared. Several indications show that he had a grand idea of himself – Robert Greene's description of the genteel actor with the provincial accent and good conceit of himself corroborates this. Again, it is another indication of people's extraordinary (yet normal enough) imperception that they fail to notice the immense and challenging literary ambition that bore him up and accomplished such work. Observe closely what he writes in the section 'On Himself', while catching the tone of polite self-deprecation proper to a gentleman.

It is no less important to have an intimate knowledge of Elizabethan society for even an elementary understanding of his relations with his patron, young Southampton. He was an earl, a rising star in the firmament of Court and society, a devoted adherent of Essex. Shakespeare's insistence was always on being regarded as a gentleman – and his behaviour was in accordance: one of the few denizens of the stage to