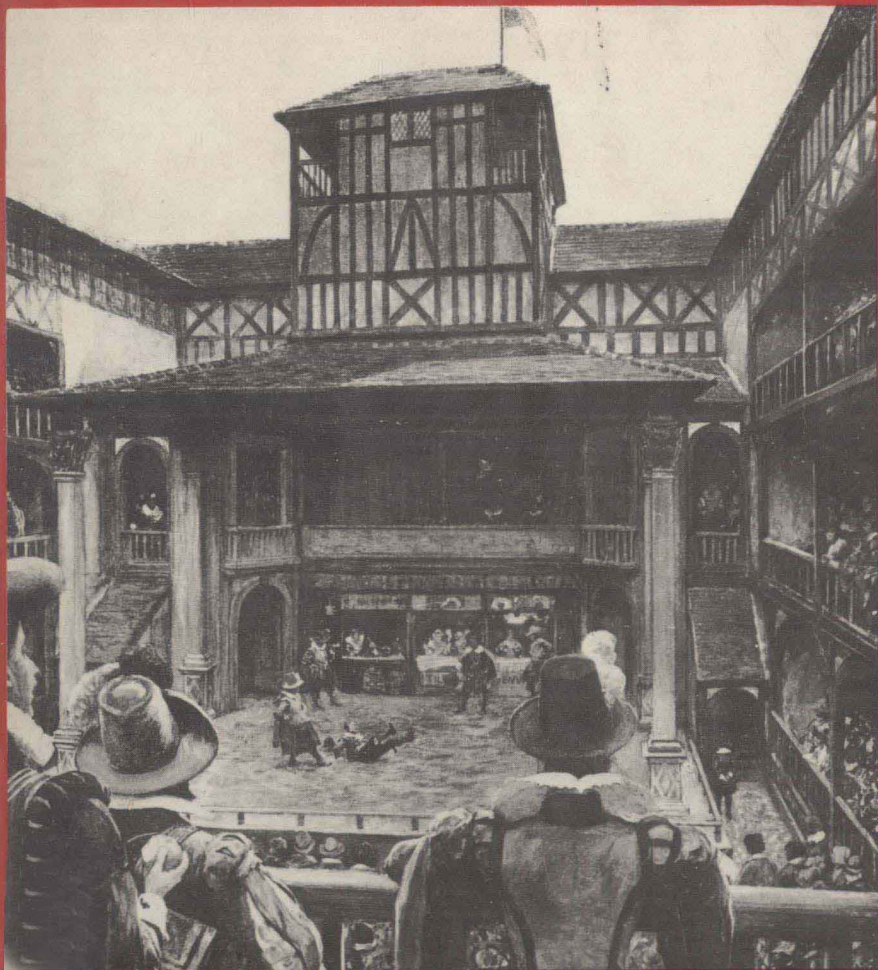


Background To Shakespeare



M. M. BADAWI

BACKGROUND TO SHAKESPEARE

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Preface

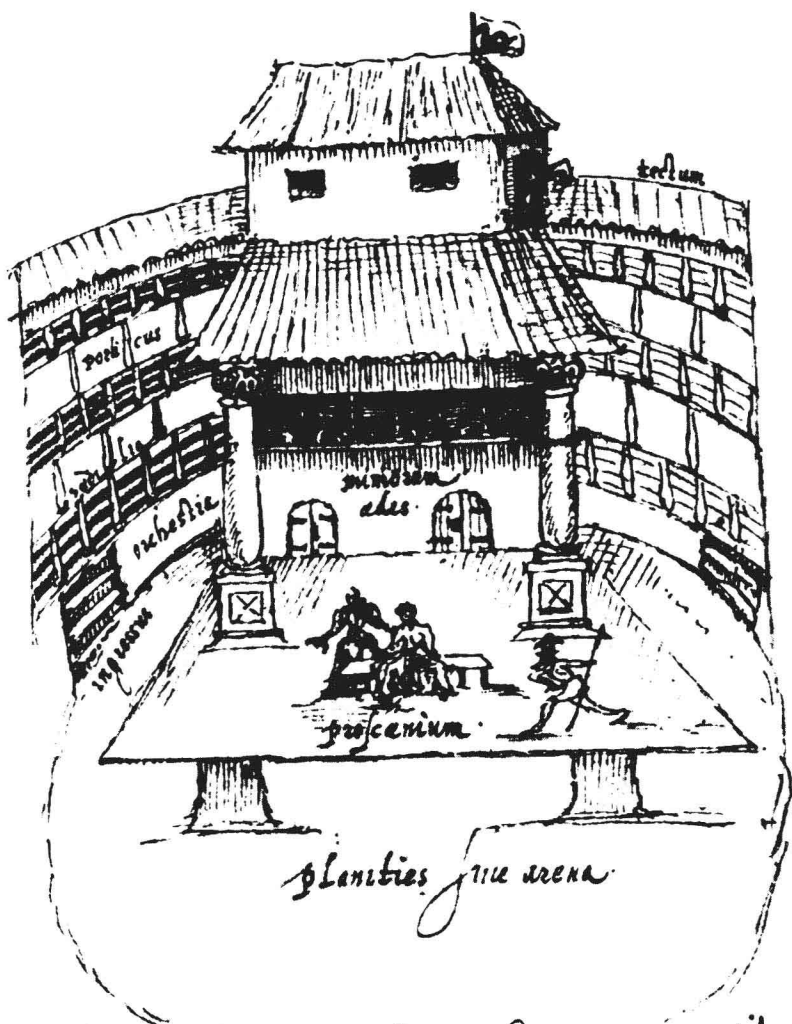
This book is designed primarily for the overseas student of Shakespeare, especially for the Afro-Asian student with no classical and little or no Christian background. That is why it attempts to take very little for granted. The assumptions which lie behind the works of Shakespeare, and for that matter behind the whole body of Western literature, and that are tacitly accepted by the English and the European reader are here explicitly stated in order to provide the reader with the frame of reference necessary for the understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare's plays. Similarly, the language of exposition is deliberately made straightforward and complex issues are presented in a manner which may at times border on simplification. However, I have endeavoured not to lose sight of my specific reader, and if by the end of the book he feels that he has been helped in understanding Shakespearean drama or that at least some obstacles have been removed from his path, my labour will not have been in vain. In short, I have tried to write the kind of book which I wished I had read on my first introduction to English literature.

It is hoped that, beside being a useful introduction when it is read straight through from beginning to end, the book may prove to be of some value to the student as a work of reference. With this latter end in mind I have provided a comprehensive index.

Finally, I should like to express my gratitude to my friend Professor Mahmoud Manzalaoui, of the University of British Columbia, who kindly read the first draft of this book and made many valuable suggestions.

St Antony's College, Oxford

M. M. Badawi



quantum ad speciem et formam, bestiarum coniectati-
oni destinatum, in quo multi vesp. Tauri, et Augusti
magnitudinis canes, distinctis cantibus et ipsis aluntur, qui

The Swan Theatre: a sketch made in 1596.

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1 The Study of Shakespeare

At the outset an attempt should be made to define what is meant by the study of Shakespeare. Surely, we could imagine some one saying, a Shakespearean play, like any other work of art, is simply something to be read and enjoyed. Why then, our imaginary person might go on, do we need to 'study' Shakespeare? Our answer to such a question would be something like this: indeed a Shakespearean play is to be read, acted and enjoyed; however, for proper enjoyment it must first be understood, since it is only too easy to enjoy a work of art for the wrong reasons.

A number of things stand in the way of understanding Shakespeare. In the first place we are not always sure that what we are reading is Shakespeare himself. I do not mean that we do not know for certain the identity of the author, whether it was William Shakespeare or some one else, say the Earl of Oxford or Francis Bacon, who wrote the plays generally ascribed to Shakespeare. I do not think it matters much who wrote them provided we know that they were all written by the same man. I say 'all' because, although each play is a separate and individual work of art, they all generally illuminate one another, and taken together they form an impressive achievement in which each individual play acquires more weight and dignity when placed against the background of the whole corpus. Each play is more or less a landmark in the road along which Shakespeare the artist travelled, or, to change the metaphor, each play is a variation on a number of themes that recur in the poet's work. It is a good idea to settle this question of the authorship of the plays here and to point out its exact significance or rather insignificance, because much ink has been spilled over it. Besides, at first the overseas student often tends to busy himself with such biographical irrelevancies. This is because of the difficulties he encounters in understanding the text of a poet who, he is told time and again, is perhaps the greatest single figure in modern literature. In this connection we

may do well to remember the words of T. S. Eliot in his famous essay 'Tradition and individual talent', 'To divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim'.

It is not, therefore, the uncertainty as to the authorship of the Shakespearean canon that is meant, but our uncertainty as regards the authenticity of the complete text of the individual plays, which we know, or at least assume, to be the work of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's plays, like many old texts, present peculiar problems which do not arise in the case of the works of a modern dramatist. Shakespeare did not prepare his plays for the press himself. Unlike his contemporary Ben Jonson, Shakespeare did not publish his complete works in his life time. The first collected edition of his works, which contained all the plays except *Pericles* but none of the poems, appeared in 1623 seven years after his death. This is the book known as the First Folio, and it was prepared for the press by his sometime fellow actors John Heminges and Henry Condell. Because Shakespeare did not supervise its printing it was natural to believe that it contained many errors, especially when we remember the printing methods of the time, and even assuming that the Folio was printed from the author's own manuscript. If you compare the First Folio with any of the modern standard editions of Shakespeare, for example, the Globe Edition, you will find a number of textual differences ranging from variation in the reading of a single word to the presence or absence of whole scenes.

How then, did this situation arise? No edition of Shakespeare's complete works appeared in his life time, and it would therefore seem reasonable to regard the First Folio as the authoritative text of the plays. Unfortunately the matter is slightly complicated because a number of individual plays were published many years before the First Folio. These individual plays are known as the Quartos. It soon became clear to scholars that the text of a play in the Folio differs, considerably at times, from that of the Quarto. Since the Quartos as a rule are older than the First Folio, scholars who wanted to arrive as near as possible to a perfect text felt the need to collate or compare the various Quartos with the Folio, especially when they came across an obscure passage which did not easily make sense. A further complication arose as a result of the discovery that not all the Quartos are equally 'good' or reliable. Although such scholars, known as editors, have been work-

ing on Shakespeare's text since the beginning of the eighteenth century, there are still certain passages in which it cannot be said that we have Shakespeare's own words. In a handbook of this size, which attempts to cover such a wide field, it is clearly impossible to relate the story of the text of the plays or to trace, however briefly, the various stages through which it passed before it reached its present, generally accepted form. But we have to include a word about the text here, since if we want to understand Shakespeare we must make sure that we have his own words and nobody else's. Therefore, it matters a great deal which particular edition of his plays we read—a fact which tends to puzzle many students. However, when a student is reminded that Shakespeare was primarily a dramatist writing in verse, a medium in which the individual word or image sometimes counts (as close verbal analysis can often show us) and when he is given an idea of the background against which the text of the plays originated, the source of bewilderment often disappears. Luckily the task of editing Shakespeare, that is, of preparing a reliable text for the reader, is so highly specialised and needs such a severe technical training in Elizabethan orthography (spelling) and calligraphy (handwriting) as well as such a vast amount of reading in contemporary literature, that no beginner need, or even can, concern himself with it. It is enough for him to realise that this constitutes one branch of the study of Shakespeare, in many ways the most indispensable, and we must be grateful that there are people who spend many years of their lives labouring to provide us with a reasonably perfect text of Shakespeare's plays.

Another source of difficulty in understanding Shakespeare is the different background of the plays, their social, political, but more especially intellectual and artistic background. It is true that Shakespeare is one of the most universal of all writers. Still he is a poet and poetry, especially great poetry, is at once most local and most universal. When a poet is as great as Shakespeare he uses language at its highest potency and, unlike other artistic media, words are the storehouse of the experiences of a whole people. It is only through the transmutation of what is local and national that a poet attains universality. Poetic language is never an abstract language. On the contrary, it is often, and in Shakespeare's case it is nearly always, full of concrete imagery. Quite often the full force of an image can only be felt in its natural and

immediate context, sometimes in the purely physical or geographical sense of the word. A student familiar with the geography of England will get more out of Shakespeare's nature imagery than one whose experience does not go beyond a desert landscape, or who has only seen evergreen trees. This is platitudinous, but needs to be affirmed. What may be less obvious is that the context of what seems to be a familiar image may vary from one age to another. Take a simple example, like the word 'hangman'. In *Macbeth* after murdering King Duncan Macbeth, almost demented, staggers back to his wife to tell her, among other things, of the prayers he has just heard the king's two sons utter in their sleep:

One cried, 'God bless us!' and, 'Amen', the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
(II ii 26-27)

The full force of the image here would certainly be missed even by a modern Englishman unless he was told that often the job of a hangman in Shakespeare's time did not end at hanging criminals, but he also had to draw (disembowel) and quarter them. Seen in this context the image reveals how drenched in blood Macbeth's imagination was. It is no wonder then that he thought that his hands would turn the colour of the whole ocean red.

Related to this is the obvious need to know Elizabethan English. It is a well known fact that like all living things language is subject to the law of change. In Elizabethan times some words had certain meanings or shades of meaning which they subsequently lost. For instance, in *Hamlet* the full implication of the Prince's words to Ophelia 'Get thee to a nunnery' (III i) would not be appreciated unless we knew that the word 'nunnery' was also Elizabethan cant for 'brothel'. Likewise, when Hamlet tells Polonius (II ii) that he knows that he is a 'fishmonger' he is not simply talking nonsense in an attempt to lead Polonius to believe that he is mad, or hinting at the fact that Polonius is trying to 'fish out' his secret from him. He is also alluding to the disgraceful way Polonius is using his daughter as a bait for Hamlet, for to an Elizabethan audience 'fishmonger' suggested 'a procurer of women'. Needless to say this multiplicity of meaning which contributes to the rich texture

of Shakespeare's verse could not be seen without a thorough knowledge of the Elizabethan idiom.

What is even more relevant is that Shakespeare was a dramatist, and drama, perhaps more than any other art form, has to have an immediate appeal. Again the question of Shakespeare's universality has to be explained here. Shakespeare's plays are not moral or philosophical treatises on man, but are works originally written to be produced on a particular stage to satisfy the taste of a particular audience. Shakespeare was a successful dramatist and no dramatist could possibly succeed unless he spoke the same language as his audience, unless he presented matters in terms they could understand. Shakespeare's universality is expressed in terms of his time and place. His heroes, it has been claimed, are not Roman or Greek or Italian, but are essentially human beings. In his *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765) Dr Johnson says, 'His story requires Romans or kings, but he thinks only on men'. True enough, but they are men behaving and thinking like Elizabethan Englishmen. It is, therefore, imperative to know something about the ways the Elizabethans behaved and what they thought about matters of life and death in order to be able to see the problems Shakespeare posed in his plays in their true proportions. The slightest shift of emphasis can lead to distortions and false interpretations. Examples of such false interpretations are numerous, even within the Western tradition itself. The problem of Hamlet was distorted by the German poet Goethe. In Victorian England Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well* was falsely accused of immodestly chasing an unwilling young man, and in twentieth century England Isabella in *Measure for Measure* was equally falsely accused of being cold and unfeeling. We have even been told by a modern English critic that Shakespeare meant us to believe that Romeo's duty was clearly not to avenge Mercutio's death, and that Hamlet was wrong in listening to the ghost and in trying to avenge his father's murder. This is to attribute to Shakespeare ideas which do not reasonably seem to be his own and consequently to miss his universality in the long run. To be able to see this universality in its proper perspective one has first to see the problems of his heroes and heroines in their true nature and proportions. In order to perceive what in his works belongs to all time one must first detect what belongs to his time.

Shakespeare's time had a set of assumptions about man, his

psychological make up, his relation to other men, to the state and the ruler and to God. This we must try to understand, and by a process of sympathetic imagination endeavour to relive the experience of his characters, try to see what life looked like through their eyes and then relate their experiences and problems to our own. For instance, nothing seems more remote from our modern life than the politics of Shakespeare's history plays. Yet when we understand the Elizabethan conception of human history and their own recent history we shall see that the concern of the Elizabethans with history and politics, as is reflected in Shakespeare's plays, was no more passionate or less justifiable than our present concern with problems of communism and capitalism and the question of the relation between the individual and the state. But to perceive this universal relevance of Shakespeare we must first relate him to his time. Hence we have another branch of the study of Shakespeare, which consists of attempts to find out the truth about the social and intellectual life of Shakespeare's England. Such attempts are motivated not so much by historical or archaeological curiosity as by a desire to arrive at a fuller understanding of the poet's works. We must also be careful not to apply our knowledge of the background in a mechanical or simplistic fashion. *The Elizabethan World Picture* made famous by the scholar E. M. W. Tillyard (Chatto and Windus, London, 1943) is not necessarily and in all its details the world picture of Shakespeare or even of all his characters.

One particular aspect of this background deserves to be mentioned separately because of its crucial importance, namely the Elizabethan stage conditions. Shakespeare, we have said, was primarily a dramatist writing for a particular stage. It is, therefore, vitally important to know something about that stage, since this may shed light on the form and structure of his plays. All drama is based upon a set of conventions, so we must ask, 'What are the conventions of Elizabethan drama which Shakespeare had to follow?' If our own stage conditions happen to be different from those of the Elizabethans our task then will be, first, to try not to think in their terms while perusing or acting Shakespeare's plays and, secondly, to reconstruct in our imagination the conditions for which they were written. If, on the other hand, drama is not one of our traditional art forms, since, as T. S. Eliot says, 'the theatre is a gift which has not been vouchsafed to every race, even of the

highest culture', the problem is at once made simpler and more difficult. We shall be spared the first task of relinquishing our dramatic habits, but then our second task becomes doubly difficult. We shall have to imagine these plays performed on a stage the best way we can. The task is exceedingly difficult, but by no means impossible. There are few human beings in whom the sense of drama, the tragic or comic sense, cannot be developed. One of the worst things we could do to Shakespeare's plays, however, is to treat them as mere literary exercises, or to read them as if they were novels.

Beside the study of the text and the study of the social, political, intellectual and artistic background there is another branch of Shakespearean study which aims at a fuller understanding and hence greater enjoyment of the plays. This is the study of the plays. But here someone may ask, 'What is the value of such a study? Is it not enough to study the plays themselves?' This is indeed a valid question, since in the plays themselves we have all that Shakespeare intended to say. However, the study of the source of a Shakespearean play often sheds a good deal of light on Shakespeare's intention. It is true that whatever he borrows from his sources is nearly always transmuted by him in such a way that it becomes an integral part of the general fabric of his plays, it never remains quite the same. However, Shakespeare does not always follow his source and quite often he deliberately deviates from it. Sometimes he even rejects some probability in it in favour of some apparently gross improbability of his own as, for instance, in the case of *Othello*. Now Shakespeare with his celebrated insight into human nature is no fool. He would not commit such an apparent error of judgment without some good reason. It is our duty to ask ourselves whenever Shakespeare seems on purpose to depart from his source why he does so. In trying to find reasonable

answers to our questions we obtain more insight into his art.

This brings us to the aesthetic study of the plays themselves. The plays should always be our final destination, all other studies being only tributaries to this. We must never allow ourselves to be tempted to lose sight of the plays while pursuing such studies, any more than we should let A. C. Bradley's book *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Macmillan, London, 1904) replace Shakespeare's plays, a thing which a student is often tempted to do, because reading and understanding the plays themselves is a much more difficult and exacting task. However, once the background of the plays has been explained half the difficulty is removed and we must now concentrate on the study of each individual play. There are various angles from which we can undertake such a study, the most common of which is to approach the play by way of character. Shakespeare's amazing power of characterisation has been the subject of critical commentary ever since the beginning of Shakespearean criticism and it is perhaps his insight into human nature and his ability to create life-like and convincing individuals that first strike a beginner. Since this aspect of Shakespearean drama is the one that can most easily be appreciated let the reader then start by studying it, provided he does not forget that, however life-like it may be, a Shakespearean dramatic character is not to be equated with, or treated as, a real flesh and blood human being. A Shakespearean character is ultimately part of a work of art, it is only a part of a significant pattern from which alone it derives its life and meaning. The reality of Hamlet's predicament, of his fears and doubts, sorrows and ruthless self exploration should indeed be appreciated, but Hamlet himself ought not to be taken out of Shakespeare's Denmark to be psycho-analysed. As a dramatic creation Hamlet is one of Shakespeare's most eloquent characters, but he is a dumb patient, alas!

Since a Shakespearean character is only one part of a total pattern, the rest of this pattern has an equal claim on our attention. It includes plot or structure, poetry, comprising imagery and rhythm as well as the general 'meaning' or significance of the whole pattern, the vision of life expressed in it, the main theme or themes of which each play is an embodiment.

The plot of a play, the arrangement of incidents, their parallelism or juxtaposition, the tempo of their movement and all the other aspects of structure have to be studied, but not in isolation

from character and the other constituent parts of the play. Taken in isolation the plot of *Hamlet*, for instance, seems a sprawling, slow and chaotic sequence of events, but, when related to the character of Hamlet and his mode of treating the problem he was forced to face, it becomes clearly a reflection of his inaction. Criticism of a plot which does not attempt to relate it to the other constituent elements of drama can only be superficial and sterile. In the history of Shakespearean criticism there are many examples of such criticism. One of these examples is the type of criticism of plot, so common in the late seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century, which relied upon the mechanical application to Shakespeare's plays of the so-called Aristotelian unities: the unity of place (that is, the action of a play should occur only in one locality); the unity of time (that is, the time of the action represented should not exceed a single revolution of the sun) and the unity of action (that is, a play should deal only with one action). It was a common practice then to analyse the events of Shakespeare's plays with reference to these unities and to show how grossly Shakespeare violates them. Such criticism is as futile as it is childish; it does not tell us much about the plays. On the other hand, a student would learn a lot if he asked himself the reason why Shakespeare changes his scenes so often in a play like *Antony and Cleopatra* or why there are remarkably few changes of scenes in *Othello* once the action has been moved to Cyprus. He would then find that in the former play such changes help expand the setting of the action and contribute towards the global or universal effect of the events and that such changes secure the same effect as that of the dominant type of imagery peculiar to this play. In *Othello*, on the other hand, the dominant effect is one of confinement rather than of liberation. To this effect the infrequent changes of scenes contribute no small part. Again this accords with the obvious theme of the play, which is the trapping of one human being by another, and with the imagery of animals ensnaring one another. Likewise, instead of complaining that there is more than one action in, for instance, *King Lear* the student should more profitably try to see if there is any relation between the main plot (the story of Lear and his daughters) and the sub-plot (the story of Gloucester and his sons). Quite often in Shakespeare the sub-plot is an echo of, or runs parallel to, the main plot thus both enhancing and universalising its effect (as in

the case of *King Lear*). In some cases by means of contrast it sets off the main plot (as in the case of *Much Ado About Nothing* where the story of Hero and Claudio is sharply contrasted with that of Benedick and Beatrice). In the comedies realism and romance are not indiscriminately mixed together, but usually scenes of realism and scenes of romance act and react upon one another. The student then should ask himself about the precise nature of the relationship, if there is any, between them. Similarly if in a tragedy a comic scene follows close upon a tragic one the student should try to find out if there is any valid dramatic reason for this, other than the mere desire of the dramatist to provide comic relief. Here the famous example of the porter scene in *Macbeth* comes readily to our minds. Critics have pointed out the subtle and grim ironic relation which this scene bears to the preceding scene of the murder of Duncan, to say nothing of the purely practical purpose it serves in giving Macbeth and Lady Macbeth time to wash and change into their night gowns. Another important part of plot or structure which the student should study in detail is the first scenes of a Shakespearean play. Coleridge was one of the first critics to show us how important they generally are for the purpose of understanding the rest of the play. These are only a few aspects, chosen at random, of useful criticism of plot.

Shakespearean drama is poetic drama. This is a fact to be kept in mind constantly. Now the difference between poetic and prose drama is not simply that the former is written in verse. Great poetic drama, like Shakespeare's, expresses an experience beyond the reach of prose, an experience that touches the deeper layers of the mind. This it does by means of the rich resources of poetry, by means of rhythm, music, semantic complexities and imagery. Hence the importance of the study of Shakespearean music and imagery. A study of one of Shakespeare's great tragedies which deals exclusively with character and plot leaving out the poetry, however penetrating and admirable it may be, is of necessity incomplete. Rhythm affects us in strange ways which are by no means easy to account for, or even to be aware of. And for the overseas student this unfortunately constitutes the most difficult aspect of Shakespearean drama to appreciate. However, we must try and we can, by a conscious effort, train our ears to catch at least something of the subtleties of Shakespearean music. Let me mention here one or two obvious examples. Othello tells

Iago after the latter has robbed him of his peace of mind by sowing the seeds of jealousy in his soul:

By the world,
I think my wife be honest, and think she is not;
I think that thou art just, and think thou art not;
(*Othello* III iii 383-385)

Surely the see-saw rhythm of these two lines expresses most eloquently the state of utter bewilderment and confusion in which Othello's mind is labouring at this moment, not knowing what to believe and what not to believe, whom to trust and whom not to trust. An equally obvious example of a masterly use of rhythm can be found in Macbeth's famous soliloquy in which he utters his thoughts on receiving the news of his wife's death.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
(*Macbeth* V v 19-21)

Here also it is clear that the first line, broken three times by a short pause following the falling rhythm of 'to-morrow' in each case, magnificently expresses Macbeth's despair and broken spirit. To see this the student only has to compare the broken rhythm here with the easy flowing rhythm of the opening line of the scene, addressed to the soldiers:

Hang out our banners on the outward walls;

which has the obvious imprint of a sure and confident command.

The study of imagery presents fewer difficulties. A cursory reading of Shakespeare will show us how strikingly figurative his language is. But the student must realise how 'peculiarly organic and vital' his style is, as Coleridge once said. In it one metaphor is developed 'by unmarked influences of association from some preceding metaphor' with the result that his imagery seems to be closely tied together by the most subtle bonds. The soliloquy of Macbeth, from which we have just quoted, is a good enough example to illustrate Shakespeare's amazing power of thinking in