



**CHARACTER PROBLEMS  
IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS**



# CHARACTER PROBLEMS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

A GUIDE TO THE BETTER UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE DRAMATIST

BY

LEVIN L. SCHÜCKING

PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF BREŚLAU

GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.  
LONDON      CALCUTTA      SYDNEY

*First published July 1922*  
by GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.  
2 & 3 Portsmouth Street, Kingsway, London, W.C.2

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*Printed in Great Britain at THE BALLANTYNE PRESS by*  
SPOTTISWOODE, BALLANTYNE & CO. LTD.  
*Colchester, London & Eton*

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# CHARACTER PROBLEMS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

## INTRODUCTION

### THE INFLUENCE OF CONTEMPORARY CONDITIONS ON SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

**W**ITH the exception of Dante, no poet in the whole of European literature has called forth so vast a bulk of explanatory comment as Shakespeare. Innumerable are the diverse views that have been put forward of the characters, the action, the purpose of his plays. Irreconcilable, too, are the differences of opinion that have arisen as to the true interpretation of his characters. Many have sought in vain to wrest his secret from him—many a one, like Schiller, has contented himself, after ardent toil, with the conclusion that he is hidden behind his works as God is hidden behind His creation; not a few have fashioned for themselves a god after their own image. This subjective interpretation has triumphed; even those who regarded its conclusions with misgiving were incapable of finding any other point of view. In his masterly book on Shakespeare (1909) Sir Walter Raleigh says that even good critics often permit themselves the dangerous assumption that Shakespeare's meaning is not easily recognized, and must be ascertained by a subtle process of digging out all sorts of hidden significations. Yet, he says, each play makes a distinct and immediate impression by which it should be judged; "the impression is the play." Unfortunately, however, the essential point is overlooked here, that the impression itself varies according to the peculiar character of each reader. The question arises whether it is not possible



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to stem, to a certain extent, this subjective current in the contemplation of Shakespeare. This is certainly feasible as soon as we have abandoned an obviously false point of view such as appears in the effort, peculiar to the exegesis of Shakespeare since the Romantic movement, to make his art as palatable as may be by reading into it as much of modern thought and feeling as possible. In this way the interpretation of Shakespeare has strayed into hopelessly wrong paths; for the point is not to find the most beautiful—i.e. the most modern—interpretation, but the one which is most probably true. We can arrive at that only by asking ourselves: What was the probable attitude of Shakespeare's contemporaries to such questions?

Looked at from this standpoint, things seem to change their aspect. At first sight, it is true, the ambiguity of his art appears more wonderful than ever. This is not what we usually find in the dramatic art of earlier centuries. What disturbs us in a play like Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm* or Sheridan's *Rivals* is rather their extreme obviousness. We are almost inclined to be annoyed at the low estimate of our intelligence implied by the perpetual explanatory 'asides' in old plays like these. What, then, is the cause of the difficulties existing in Shakespeare's still older art? We might imagine that they originate in the fact that their author was an individualist working only for a small circle, a poet of absolute mental independence, who refused to consider the demands of the time and was not compelled to embody his thoughts in the most transparent form. We might regard him as a writer who, certain of not being rejected if he became obscure and unintelligible, addressed himself to a small and select audience who were accustomed to intellectual exercises, familiar with all kinds of subtle disquisitions, trained to read between the lines, and quick to catch the faintest undercurrent of thought—rejoicing, like an Ibsen audience of our own day, whenever "the Master offered them another nut to crack." But though almost nine-tenths of the interpretations of Shakespeare are based on the assumption of such a poet and such an audience, conscientious historical research shows

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us that a view of this kind is in direct contradiction to the real facts. In the first place, the individuality of the poet in that time was allowed far less free play than in later centuries.

I. CHOICE OF PLOT.—Until quite recently the generally accepted point of view has been that Shakespeare conceived and created his plays in the same manner as modern playwrights do theirs. Even Brandes seems to imagine that his choice of certain subjects was principally conditioned by personal experience or by the suggestions derived from stories he had read. It is true that we are by no means acquainted with the genesis of all Shakespeare's dramas, and there is good reason to think that it was not the same in every case; still, we may take it for granted that our modern demand that the inspiration of the artist's work must be looked for in his own innermost experience was almost unknown in the Elizabethan era.

The truth seems rather to be that there existed keen competition between the different theatres for the favour of the public, whose interest is always chiefly centred in the plot of a play, so that a piece which 'draws' in one theatre is sure to be imitated by others. The situation was not very different from that of the cinemas of our day, for when a 'Cleopatra' film is produced in one picture-house of a town the others are sure to follow suit, and each brings out its own 'Cleopatra.' Shakespeare's theatrical company was no exception to the others, except that "the Lord Chamberlain's servants"—later, King James's own company—as being the most respectable, after the manner of royal theatres showed themselves somewhat more conservative and cautious than the others. It is, however, perfectly evident that a drama like *Richard III* was only one among many which treated of that great criminal, while the Merchant of Venice was clearly meant to compete with his near relative, Marlowe's Jew of Malta. The story of *Troilus and Cressida*, at the time when Shakespeare used it (1601-2), had already proved very popular, and *Hamlet* was surely intended to meet the taste of a public whose interest in a new form of the

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'revenge-tragedy' had just been revived. In these matters we can discern a franker endeavour to make concessions to the public than is customary to-day. The little stress laid on the individuality of an author may be seen in another sign of the times, the habit of collaboration.

2. COLLABORATION.—It was quite common at that time for authors to collaborate in a play, much as to-day men collaborate on a newspaper. The extant manuscript of the play of *Sir Thomas More*, which originated in the beginning of the seventeenth century, when a change had already begun to take place in the state of things just described, yet shows the handwriting of at least five clearly distinct collaborators. I have later on endeavoured to make clear how this must affect the technique of the composition. But more than the mere technical side of drama is involved here. Where more than half a dozen are employed in creating a dramatic work, not much elbow-room remains to the individual worker. We should therefore be inclined to wonder that this tradition could continue so long did we not perceive how nearly connected this art is with the art of the Middle Ages, which was so often the result of the united efforts of many anonymous workers. Strangely enough, the reformers and individualists of the time who set their backs against tradition submitted to this custom. Even Ben Jonson, the dramatist, altered the printed edition of his chief work, *Sejanus*, by omitting in it several passages written by another hand in the stage version. It is, we must confess, difficult to conceive why the system of collaboration was so long retained in that very field where, according to our idea, "the strong man is mightiest alone." As is well known, the great Dutch painters often worked together on the same picture, one who had specialized in landscape putting in the background, while the figure-painter contributed the figures of men or animals. A similar theory has been put forward to explain certain collaborations in Shakespeare's time,<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. L. Wann, *The Collaboration of Beaumont, Fletcher, and Massinger* (Univ. of Wisconsin Shakespeare Studies), Madison, 1916. For the whole question see Creizenach, *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*, vol. iv, p. 76 seq.

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but it is certain that the difficulties of this problem are not to be solved by a single formula of this kind.

It is true people have sought to exclude Shakespeare from a practice which, as may be proved, was almost universally employed by his contemporaries. German research, in particular, has refused to accept the results of a criticism based to a large extent on the dictates of artistic judgment and a feeling for style instead of on strict tests. But in a field of research like this it is very difficult to discover any safer guide, and, considering the facts of the case, fairly good external evidence has been found to support the observations which it will never be possible to free from every trace of subjectivity. Thus we are enabled to say that Shakespeare's collaboration with others in the three parts of *Henry VI*, if not also in *Titus Andronicus*, may be looked upon as highly probable.

But also in later dramas we seem to observe here and there in the texture of dramatic speech the rich stuff of Shakespeare's metaphors woven into the simpler home-made linen of other workshops. Undoubtedly we must in many cases allow for the possible use of older dramatic versions, for it was characteristic more especially of the earlier period of the Elizabethan drama that a work became remoulded, added to, and completed in its passage from one hand to another.

3. ANONYMITY.—This work of collaboration was rendered easier and more practicable by the literary anonymity customary at the time. In attempting to interpret Shakespeare rightly, we must make it clear to ourselves that his art, unlike Goethe's or Ibsen's, does not follow a course prescribed by its own limits, but is merely one mighty wave forming part of a great river. The popular theatre, for which he wrote, arises out of an anonymous obscurity, like the cinematograph of our days. It is born of the people and suffers from the want of curiosity on the part of the uneducated and the children as to the question of authorship. The most valuable parts of the mystery-plays have been handed down to us as anonymous. We are unacquainted with the name of the man ~~who~~ in his splendid

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delineation of Cain as a surly miser, in the "Towneley Mysteries," displays more talent than almost all the contemporary poets who essayed to put Pegasus through his paces amid the general applause of the Court patrons in the arena of recognized literature. We do not know who the poet was who in the deeply moving mystery of *Abraham and Isaac* displays such depth and fineness of feeling, nor the author or adapter of the newly revived morality-play of *Everyman*, two pieces which might almost make pre-Shakespeareans of us, just as the tenderness and simplicity of the primitive painters created the Pre-Raphaelites. Shakespeare himself and his immediate predecessors are the direct heirs of this anonymous Cinderella of literature. The greater part of the pieces which he saw played in his youth by strolling players in Stratford—farces, worthless interludes, moralities still loved by the people in the sixteenth century—bore no special author's name. There was thus not much space for the development of literary ambition in this sphere. But the condition of things was somewhat different where, as at Court, an educated audience was more critical in its demands, and at the same time displayed an interest in certain persons as poets. The influence emanating from this quarter, therefore, must not be undervalued. Then, too, came the extraordinary development of the London theatres, the improvement in acting and scenery, a growing interest on the part of the public, so that the once so despised comedians began to attract dramatic authors who had to write up-to-date plays for them. These were originally not people moving in circles favourable to the development of pure literature; they were, if not actually actors, often failures, or wrecks of men, displeasing to the honest citizen, suspected of the police, Bohemians, in fact, of doubtful repute and questionable calling. But shipwrecked students as they often were, they had imbibed the mental training and culture of their time, which was invaluable for the theatre, and occasionally, like Peele, drifting from the stage of the university to that of the Court, and finally to the popular theatre, they everywhere acquired artistic inspiration for use later on.

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But none of their various writings was originally intended for print ; as in the Middle Ages, the author still remains hidden behind his work, and, just as in our days in the cinema, the exact title of a piece was probably unknown to many of the audience in Shakespeare's time and very few were familiar with the name of the author.<sup>1</sup> Certain entries made in diaries which now form our chief authority for the dates of certain plays are equally instructive. Thus Manningham, the lawyer, writes on February 2, 1601, "At our festival we had a play called *Twelfth Night, or What you Will*," and notes the things in it that impressed him most, but it is significant that the writer, a very well educated man of literary tastes, takes no interest whatever in the name of the author. It is precisely the same case with the diary of Dr Simon Forman when he writes out the plot of *Macbeth*, which he had seen at the Globe Theatre. The same thing may be observed in the catalogues of books. The poet Drummond of Hawthornden in drawing up a list of his books enters the names of his plays, among them three by Shakespeare, without mentioning the name of their authors, a thing quite contrary to his usual practice. It is thus no mere accident that none of the names of the authors who wrote the primitive earlier works used by Shakespeare has been handed down to us. The most discriminating researches were required to prove that *The Spanish Tragedy*, which was probably the most influential of all pre-Shakespearean dramas, was the work of the poet Thomas Kyd, whose name had long since sunk into oblivion. This state of things naturally created much bitterness among the playwrights of those days. The public is never over-grateful to its benefactors. The man who devoted himself to high-class literature enjoyed at least the prospect of finding a patron among the aristocracy and of being preserved from starvation. But the popular dramatist was not so well off. His works were accepted by a theatre for a miserable sum, and

<sup>1</sup> When the 'Engrossing Clerk' of the Revels Office had to draw up a very carefully written list of the several plays acted before King James at Whitehall in the winter of 1604-5 he spelled the name of the author of *Hamlet* 'Shaxberd.'

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he was perhaps granted a single benefit performance, but he retained no further rights. Hence the embittered playwrights not unfrequently direct their wrath at their employers, and Greene, one of the most productive of them all, even died with a curse at the actors on his lips. This very curse, full of inexpressible bitterness, happens to be the first mention we find of Shakespeare, who is referred to as "an upstart crow beautified with our feathers." In later centuries we have seen the successful dramatist surrounded by a crowd of admirers and made the lion of the hour, but at the end of the sixteenth century this was only the case to a very limited degree.

4. THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM.—The effect of such a condition of things on individual freedom of action is obvious. It has to yield absolutely to public opinion; against this it is often impossible to attempt any resistance, even on the most important points. If in the nineteenth century Ibsen, a fanatic for individualism, was obliged at the first performance of *A Doll's House* to make the preposterous concession to the public of allowing his heroine to return to her 'doll's house,' what could we expect of a playwright living at a time when the individual was hampered by a thousand fetters and menaced by a much stronger resistance than that of mere tradition? Faust's complaint,

Das beste, was du wissen kannst  
Darfst du den Buben doch nicht sagen,

may aptly be applied to the dramatic activity of the more advanced spirits of that time.

Marlowe is an instructive example of this. What we know of him is enough to assure us that he was a bold, critical mind, unfettered by any dogma or tradition. When this man adapted the folk-tale of Dr Faustus, certainly attracted to it by that feeling of intellectual affinity and sympathy with the subject which alone ensures poetic success, he imparted to his hero an audacity of speculation almost amounting to criminality which, as we may assume from external evidence, was a vital part of his own nature. The idea of selling one's soul to the devil, which made even



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the most daring spirits of that time tremble in their innermost hearts, had no terror for this man of violent passions. "Had I as many souls as there be stars, I'd give them all for Mephistopheles," he exclaims. This unheard-of blasphemy must have caused shivers of horror to his audience, and impressed on them the certainty of a frightful end for such an evildoer. And the poet by no means disappoints his hearers, for his Titan finally shrinks to something so pitifully small that even the most pious man in the pit must have been satisfied. As the hour approaches in which his pact must be fulfilled, we find him whimpering and cowering under the burden of his sins, convulsed with fear at his approaching end. But it would be a complete misunderstanding of the poet's purpose to suppose that this represents Marlowe's personal point of view. *His own individual conception can and must find expression only within the limits of public opinion*; the rest he keeps to himself. In the same way we must regard the problem presented to us in *The Merchant of Venice*. In those days no one would have thought of challenging current opinion with a play embodying a serious thesis, any more than one would do it in a cinema-theatre to-day. If people argue that the treatment of the character of Shylock is an attempt of this nature they misinterpret not only the text, but likewise the prevailing social conditions of the theatre, just as those overrate the freedom of thought of the Elizabethan stage who read into the play of *Richard II* all sorts of ideas which would have been considered revolutionary at that time (Ulrici).

It is true that just during Shakespeare's period of production a certain important change took place in this condition of things, and, what is most significant from a sociological standpoint, toward the middle of his dramatic career the relations of the poet to the public underwent a remarkable alteration. A social revolution which had long before invaded other departments of art—e.g., architecture—also begins to take place in the drama: individual personages struggle out of the anonymous obscurity of theatrical art, cultivating more assiduously their artistic



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personality, laying stress on the independence of their own performances to the very last letter, and even making a determined stand against the past by securing the admission of the drama into the field of literature proper. This movement is aided on the one hand by the inestimable efforts and personal propaganda of Ben Jonson; on the other by the evident rise in the social status of the dramatic author.

The men who toward the end of the sixteenth century and at the beginning of the next devote themselves to the theatre, like Marston, Beaumont and Fletcher, Tourneur, etc., are no longer mere wrecks, or Bohemians, as they had been ten years before, at the beginning of Shakespeare's career, but for the greater part the sons of good families, who occasionally return to their former professions, military or civilian. Such a change, of course, has its influence on the art itself; above all, it may be noticed in the new attitude of the artist to the public. This is clearly shown in the so-called 'theatre-war,' in which Dekker, Marston, and Jonson, with others, attack one another in satirical pieces on the stage, jeering at and making fun of each other's weak points. Here is presupposed an interest in the playwright and a personal knowledge of his works on the part of the public which ten years before would have been impossible, and even now seems astonishing in the face of the general indifference exhibited toward the author, described above. The dramatist has evidently risen several degrees in the social scale.

In consequence of this innovation, conflicts with public opinion, which had so far gone unchallenged, were not to be avoided. It has already been related in another place (*cf.* the author, *Shakespeare im literarischen Urteil seiner Zeit*) how Ben Jonson, the most radical of the innovators, summarily denied the critical qualification of the public, which had rejected the more classical side of his art. The burning question after this seems to have been how far the public is entitled to follow its own taste and how far the artist ought to make concessions to it. This question, which in the course of the centuries is constantly

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