A History of SHAKESPEARIAN CRITICISM

By

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PREFACE

THIS work aims to follow the course of aesthetic opinion on Shakespeare from his own time to the end of 1925 in England, France, and Germany. I have made a selection from the countless works on the subject, and given an exposition of each followed by a commentary. In the exposition I have endeavoured to include only what is characteristic, and in the commentary to place the author historically and estimate his intrinsic worth. I have also extracted from each his most general opinions, and alined and compared them at the close of the chapter, in order to make them yield an aesthetic moral, and thus trace an outer circle of Shakespearian appreciation.

It may be worth recording that the idea was suggested to me by a chance speculation in *The Times Literary Supplement* (Feb. 5th, 1920) that such a book might prove remarkably interesting—'a kind of epitome of the movements of the human mind through three most eventful centuries'.

My thanks are due to Miss Marian Edwardes, my German translator, for her devoted service; to Professor J. G. Robertson, who kindly gave me advice in my choice of German works; and to Mr. J. M. Robertson, who lent me his copy of Verplanck's edition of Shakespeare—a book I had searched for vainly through the libraries of London.

CONTENTS

VOLUME I

VOLUME II

Chapter I

ENGLAND 1598–1694

INTRODUCTION. MERES. HARVEY. BEN JONSON. HEMINGE AND CONDELL. ANONYMOUS. I. M. S. HALES. ANONYMOUS. JOHN BENSON. DIGGES. SHEPHARD. WILD. DENHAM. CARTWRIGHT. COWLEY. FLECKNOE. PEPYS. EVELYN. FULLER. MARGARET CAVENDISH. DRYDEN. PHILLIPS. TATE. TEMPLE. SEDLEY. DRAKE. RYMER. GILDON. CONCLUSION.

IN reading the earliest critical remarks on Shakespeare we must bear in mind the imperfect state of criticism itself. The treatises of Aristotle, Quintilian, Longinus, Dante had been merely occasional, and not until the sixteenth century, in Italy, during the Renaissance, was criticism recognized as a separate art and a branch of literature. Its main stream has been followed by Professor Saintsbury, and its various ill phases pointed out, from some of which, as the latest of the arts, it has not even yet freed itself; it therefore suffices to say here that most of the opinions expressed on Shakespeare during his lifetime, or for nearly a century after, are interesting historically rather than intrinsically—being either whimsical and irregular, or enslaved by the rules of an art as yet too uncertain of itself to be liberal.

Francis Meres[1] in 1598 includes Shakespeare with Sidney, Spenser, Daniel, Drayton, Warner, Marlowe, Chapman as one of the enrichers of the English tongue. The author of the *Venus* and *Lucrece* is 'mellifluous and hony-tongued', and the Sonnets are 'sugred'. If the Muses spoke English they would use Shakespeare's 'fine-filed phrase'. The Latins accounted Plautus and Seneca best for comedy and tragedy; but Shakespeare, in England, excels in both, and is also among the best lyric poets. At least this shows how early the conception of Shakespeare as a universal genius had dawned; and we note the tribute to his 'fine-filed phrase' as a warning to those later critics who considered that he lacked art.

Gabriel Harvey,[2] in a manuscript note of about 1598 or 1600, asserts that the younger ones delight in *Venus*, but those who are wiser in *Lucrece* and *Hamlet*.

Ben Jonson[2] prefixed to the First Folio (1623) a critical poem which starts by affirming that Shakespeare cannot be praised too much; that he is 'Soule of the Age'; above all poets such as Chaucer, Spenser, Beaumont; even excelling 'Marlowe's mighty line'. The famous statement follows that he had 'small Latin and less Greeke', yet none the less may he be compared to 'thundering Aeschylus' or any of the

[1] *Sh. Allusion Book* (ed. J. Munro, Chatto & Windus, 1909).

[2] Ibid.

poets of 'insolent Greece or haughty Rome', and the section concludes with the equally famous verse: 'He was not of an age but for all time!' Nature and art now become the topics, and the 'nature' of Aristophanes, Terence, Plautus pales before Shakespeare's. Not that he lacked art, for a good poet is made as well as born, and he did toil to 'strike the second heat', and produce his 'well turned and true-filed lines'. We must note this tribute of Ben Jonson to Shakespeare's art, for Ben Jonson's plays are thought to owe more to art than inspiration, and he is said to have envied Shakespeare his popular successes. He was a scholar in the technical sense, which Shakespeare was not, and is popularly supposed to have made of his more exact knowledge a weapon to injure Shakespeare.

He pursues this theme in *Timber* some years later in a more strictly critical spirit. 'Would he had blotted a thousand', he replies to those who commended Shakespeare for never blotting out a line. Disclaiming any prejudice, for, he says, he loved the man and honours his memory on this side Idolatry, he blames his facility. His wit was in his own power; would the rule of it had been so too; for many times he fell into those things that could not escape laughter.

Shakespeare's fellow-actors, Heminge and Condell, who collected his plays and printed the First Folio, likewise prefixed an address with some critical remarks. They call him a happy imitator and gentle expresser of nature, and it is they who use the phrase which drew Ben Jonson's fire, that there was scarce a blot in his papers.

Some anonymous verses prefixed to the Second Folio (1632) attribute to Shakespeare only the power to excite in the soul two different passions—those of comedy and tragedy. Another poet-critic, in the same place, under the initials I. M. S., describes Shakespeare's mind as reflecting ages past, and able to raise up ancient sovereigns and make us feel their joy or rage, yet to temper passion so that we take pleasure in pain, and both weep and smile. In fine, by heavenly fire he 'moulds us anew': and thus, whether consciously or not, fulfils the object of tragedy according to Aristotle.

John Hales of Eton,[1] about 1633, replies to Ben Jonson's charge that Shakespeare had not read the ancients, and affirms 'that if he would produce any one Topick finely treated by any of them, he would undertake to shew something upon the same subject at least as well written by Shakespeare'. This is another spontaneous tribute to Shakespeare's universal quality, more characteristic of the private reader, who tells faithfully what impresses him, than the professional critic.

In 1640 a new edition of Shakespeare's poems was published, and appended to it was a poem written some three years earlier by an anonymous author.[2] The tribute he pays to Shakespeare's 'smooth Rhimes' is no new one, but he proceeds to say that nature admires

[1] *Sh. Allusion Book.* [2] Ibid.

herself in Shakespeare, and recognizes his 'dressing was her chiefest comelinesse'. On the same occasion John Benson praises Shakespeare's poems as serene, clear, and elegantly plain, neither intricate nor cloudy so as to puzzle the intellect, but perfectly eloquent.[1]

The rhymed Prologue to this edition was contributed by Leonard Digges, and he preaches on the text that poets are born not made, to the gain of Shakespeare and loss of Ben Jonson. An audience ravished by *Julius Caesar* would not brook a word of *Catiline*. He vindicates Shakespeare from borrowing a phrase from Greeks or Latins, or gleaning from the works of contemporaries; but his most noteworthy line is that Shakespeare had 'art without art unparaleld as yet'.

Samuel Shephard (1646) rates Shakespeare equal to the Greek tragedians and above Aristophanes in comedy, while his *Lucrece* shows that he understood the depth of poesy.[1] The same year or thereabout Robert Wild, exalting his wit, as instanced by Falstaff, laments his lack of learning. Had he united the two 'Ben would have blushed, and Jonson never writ'.[1]

These selected early critics satisfy more than those about to follow, for their criticism is mostly praise, and of a kind more definite and particular and less vague and general than is commonly supposed.

Two poetical criticisms of 1647—Sir John Denham's and William Cartwright's—witness that Shakespeare's reputation was eclipsed by Fletcher's.[1] The former finds the results of Jonson's labour and Shakespeare's ease united in Fletcher; the latter condemns the wit of Shakespeare's 'Fooles and Clowns' as old fashioned, such as 'our nice times' would call obscenity. 'Nature was all his art . . .' he concludes. A few years later (1651) Samuel Shephard, whom we have already noticed, wrote in an epigram that Fletcher and Beaumont are now the shining lights, Jonson is forgotten, and Shakespeare's sun quite shrunk beneath a cloud.[1]

The tide of depreciation continued to flow, and Cowley (1656) compared all the dramatists just mentioned to vintners who dilute good wine to make it yield more profit. He would cheerfully undertake to prune their poems and lop many away.[1]

Richard Flecknoe (1660) states concisely what no doubt were the accepted opinions of the literary and theatrical world: that Shakespeare excelled in a natural vein, Fletcher in wit, and Jonson in gravity. To compare Jonson with Shakespeare would reveal the difference between nature and art, and with Fletcher, between wit and judgement.[1]

We now come to Pepys, whose *Diary* in the years 1660–9 contains remarks on the performances of Shakespeare's plays which he witnessed. Pepys was not a critic in the strict sense, but, against the opinion long held that he was a typical average Englishman, it has been wisely said that the average Englishman does not write one of the best books in

[1] Ibid.

his country's literature. He was in any case a frank impressionist, and it must be borne in mind that the plays he saw had probably been altered by Davenant. *Macbeth* seems to be his favourite play, and to grow upon him the more he sees it. The first time it is only 'pretty good'—and he saw it again to his 'great content'. The *Tempest* also pleased him the more he saw it; and he was 'mightily pleased' with *Hamlet*. He read and re-read *Othello* and esteemed it 'mighty good', till he chanced upon a play called *The Adventures of Five Houres*, and that made *Othello* seem 'a mean thing'. *M.N.D.* was the most insipid ridiculous play he ever saw in his life, and *Twelfth-Night* a silly play. Some years later he saw the latter again and still condemned it as one of the weakest plays he ever saw on the stage. His fellow-diarist, John Evelyn, saw *Hamlet* and mentions that the old plays begin to disgust this refined age.

With Thomas Fuller (1662) we get again the comparisons and set opinions of the professional criticism of the day. Like Plautus, Shakespeare is an exact comedian who could also write tragedy, but he instances the rule that poets are born not made, and nature itself was all the art used upon him.[1]

An interesting tribute to Shakespeare's universality comes from Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, in 1664. He expresses to the life all sorts of persons, humours, natures, passions—as if he had been transformed into each person he describes. You would even think he had been metamorphosed from man to woman, so well does he describe Cleopatra and other women. In tragedy he presents passions so naturally and misfortunes so probably as to pierce his readers' souls and force tears from their eyes. He had a clear judgement, a quick wit, a spreading fancy, a subtle observation, a deep apprehension, a most eloquent elocution. He was a natural orator and poet, inexhaustibly witty and eloquent—for he infused his own wit and language into the bare designs of the plots he took from history. This latter statement and the earlier one that he excelled in drawing women, stand out from the conventional phrases about art and nature of the schools, or the mere impressionism, which have occupied us so far. In another letter she rates her husband as being far beyond Shakespeare for comical humour as Shakespeare beyond an ordinary poet in that way; and her husband was the best heroic poet in any age.[2] We recall Thackeray's drummer who chronicled the victories of his drummer-grandsire, but generously admitted that Monsieur Turenne might at least have had a share in them.

The great name of Dryden now confronts us, and his remarks on Shakespeare range over the years between 1668 and 1694. First comes the *Essay on Dramatick Poesie* where, breaking loose from received rules and opinions, he boldly estimates Shakespeare as 'the man who of

[1] *Sh. Allusion Book.* [2] *Sociable Letters*, CXXIII, CLXII.

all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul'. He continues: 'Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the greater commendation: he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there. I cannot say he is everywhere alike; were he so, I should do him injury to compare him with the greatest of mankind. He is many times flat, insipid; his comic wit degenerating into clenches, his serious swelling into bombast. But he is always great when some great occasion is presented to him: no man can say he ever had a fit subject for his wit and did not then raise himself as high above the rest of the poets'. This was the escape of Dryden's poetic soul into the Paradise of true criticism; but he is nearer to his age when he blames Shakespeare in his historical plays for cramping the business of thirty or forty years into a representation of two hours and a half. This, he says, was to look on nature through the wrong end of a perspective and receive her images not only less but more imperfect than the life, and so make a play ridiculous rather than delightful. Shakespeare and Fletcher wrote plays with irregular plots; only Ben Jonson's plays were perfect; yet we admire Ben Jonson and love Shakespeare.

In the Prologue to *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare is again praised for artless beauty, and for unconsciously excelling in a manner which the learned, observant Jonson could not. In the *Conquest of Granada* Dryden's evil critical angel almost overcomes the good in their struggle for his soul. He admits that Shakespeare and Fletcher have great wit and noble expression, but they lived in ignorant times when poetry was hardly beyond infancy, and so their plots were lame or made up of ridiculous incoherent stories. Many—such as the *W. Tale* or *M. for M.*—are either grounded on impossibilities or so meanly written that the comedy cannot make us laugh or the serious part concern us. Some of Macbeth's speeches are bombast, and cannot be understood; and Jonson was right to say the effect was horror. We get a gleam of light when he admits that Shakespeare has often written better than any poet in any language, but it is hurriedly quenched by the remark that he writes in many places below the dullest writer of ours or any age.

Seven years later (1679) Dryden opens his Preface to *T. and C.* with one of his trumpet-blasts of eulogy: that we venerate Shakespeare like the Greeks Aeschylus, only more justly; but he soon returns to the flats of contemporary criticism. Since his day language is more refined, and many of his phrases that are still intelligible are coarse or ungrammatical, and his style is so pestered with figurative expressions that it is affected as well as obscure. His genius is more bold and masculine than Fletcher's, and he moves terror while Fletcher moves compassion. In character-drawing Shakespeare excels—a character being 'a composition of qualities which are not contrary to one another in the same person': such as Falstaff who was liar, coward, glutton, buffoon.

Caliban is a species of himself, a person not in nature, and he is most judiciously furnished with a distinctive person, language, character. Yet it surprises us to learn that one person drew even more characters than Shakespeare and discriminated them better—and that person was Ben Jonson. Shakespeare's judgement succumbed to the fury of his fancy, and he coined new words and phrases and overdid metaphors. In the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius the passions are natural, the thoughts arise from the matter, and the expression is not viciously figurative. The deposition scene in *Richard II* surpasses anything in any language. Replace Shakespeare's bombast with simple words, and the beauty of his thought will remain. He excels in scenes between man and man, Fletcher between man and woman; therefore the one best describes friendship and the other love. Again the lamp flares up before it expires: Shakespeare had a universal mind comprehending all characters and passions—and Fletcher was but a limb of Shakespeare.

In his last utterance Dryden affirms that English comedy has surpassed that of the ancients, and so has English tragedy, despite its irregularities—and that Shakespeare had a genius for it. . . .

It may be said of Dryden more than any man that his virtues were his own, his faults those of his age. He repeated the word first spoken by Longinus that the object of a literary work is to 'transport': a saying so true yet so neglected that it had to be formulated afresh by Pater. But again and again, after one of his flights of praise, he droops his wings and settles upon earth, and blames Shakespeare according to current orthodox notions of what verse should be, or tragedy or comedy, or plot or character-drawing. In the long critical battle of the ages Dryden played a hero's part, yet at times he departed from the modern critic's rule to judge by the impression. Himself a poet, he blamed Shakespeare for exceeding in metaphor, and it is amusing to think that in our own time this same charge has been brought against Dryden's prose. His great contribution was the character of Shakespeare quoted at length from the *Essay on Dramatick Poesie*. It strikes like the crescent of the new moon on the night of contemporary criticism—but the main body of the radiant orb was long to remain in darkness.

Edward Phillips (1675), setting aside questions of decorum and economy in which others excelled, claimed that Shakespeare attained the loftiest tragic height, most exactly represented nature, and, in place of learning, pleased with a certain wild and native elegance, besides an unvulgar style.[1]

Nahum Tate (1680) doubted whether common report of Shakespeare's want of learning was wholly true; and he instances the exact manner in which he had reproduced Rome. Nor is it only the externals that you see, 'but the particular genius of the man'. No man was more

[1] *Sh. Allusion Book.*

versed in men and things, as a dramatic writer should be, and, like a diligent spy upon nature, he traced her through her darkest recesses. The following year he makes a pregnant remark to which we shall return later: that Lear's real and Edgar's pretended madness have so much of extravagant nature that only Shakespeare's creating fancy could have produced them. The images and language, though odd and surprising, are yet so agreeable and proper that nothing else could have replaced them.[1] The gist of the matter was in Tate; he has exactly surveyed the Shakespearian country and marked where the mightiest roads were afterwards to be built.

Shakespeare, says Sir William Temple (1690), was the first to open the vein of humour on our stage, which has run pleasantly since: a remark worth noting because he intends 'humour' in a more modern sense than the 'humours' of Ben Jonson.[1]

In his Prologue to the *Wary Widow* (1693) Sir Charles Sedley laments that his age neglects Shakespeare. He had a fruitful genius and happy wit; he was the pride of nature and the shame of schools; a creator, not a mere learner from rules.

Drake (1699), surveying the ancient and modern stages, ranks Shakespeare first among the dramatists, though yielding in art to Ben Jonson and dialogue to Beaumont and Fletcher. Nothing in ancient drama can rival the plot of *Hamlet* for its admirable distribution of poetic justice, where the criminals are taken in their own toils. All Shakespeare's tragedies are moral and instructive, and many of them in this exceed the best of antiquity.[1]

We now come to Thomas Rymer[2] who starts by comparing the ancients and moderns, greatly to the disadvantage of the latter. The plot of a tragedy is its soul, and with the ancients it was a reasonable soul, with the moderns a brutish soul. Had the English continued the work of the Greek tragedians they might have surpassed them, but they chose irregular ways. The ancients made their criminals worthy to be pitied, but the moderns, by permitting murder on the stage, shut out their criminals from pity. The sight of the fact impressed too strongly, and no art could afterwards subdue it. When punishment followed crime the ancients used their art to find extenuating circumstances and waken pity for the guilty person.

Drama flourished in Athens, whereas in Rome it became merely a show to please the eye. In modern times England has excelled her neighbours in poetry, and on the stage *Othello* takes the first place. The fable or soul is the poet's part, because he takes characters from the moral philosopher, thoughts from the teachers of rhetoric, expression from the grammarians. Here the moral instructs, but the fable is improbable and absurd, the characters or manners unnatural and

[1] Ibid.

[2] *Tragedies of the Last Age* 1678 and *Short View of Tragedy*, 1692–3.

improper. Othello, a Venetian general, does nothing in character; and when maddened by jealousy deputes Iago to kill the rival, and himself kills the silly unresisting woman. This is no part of a soldier's character, and there never was in tragedy, comedy, or nature such a soldier as Iago. To surprise the audience Shakespeare made him false and insinuating instead of frank and plain-dealing. A soldier is the knave, and a Venetian lady the fool; therefore such characters can neither profit nor delight an audience; nor can they utter any fine or noble thoughts. The same applies to meaning and expression, of which there is more in the neighing of a horse or growling of a mastiff than in Shakespeare's tragical flights. The Duke and Senators neglect the state affairs to hear Brabantio's private griefs, and they all wish their daughters as happily married. Desdemona, on arriving at Cyprus, indulges in farce of a 'Jack-pudden' kind with Iago, when any moment may bring news that her lord is drowned. The cause of all this was the illiterate audience, the carpenters and cobblers for whom Shakespeare wrote—thus profaning the name of tragedy. Othello, called from his bridal chamber to settle a brawl, behaves like a phlegmatic Justice Clod-pate, not a fiery soldier. The temptation scene has attained first place in our theatre by its mops and mows, its grimaces, grins, and gesticulations. Words should merely beat time to the action, here they encumber it. Othello shows no soldier's mettle, but gapes after every paltry insinuation, and labours to be jealous. The foundation of the play is monstrous, and produces nothing but horror and aversion. Everything proclaims Othello jealous, but Desdemona is blind and deaf, and harps only on 'Cassio'. Such a monster as Iago never existed; he has no reason to hate Desdemona: and to abet her murder has nothing of the soldier, the man, or nature in it. Shakespeare does all by contraries, to surprise the audience with what is horrible and prodigious. Othello treats Desdemona as a drunken tinker might treat his drab. A noble Venetian lady is murdered for being a fool. The catastrophe cannot instruct, for she had done nothing to deserve her fate. The last speeches remind us of the criminals at Tyburn, only there we have justice, here neither justice, reason, law, humanity. The tragical part is a bloody farce without salt or savour.

In *Julius Caesar* he sins not only against nature and philosophy, but history also. It is sacrilege to put the noblest Romans into fools' coats; but his head was full of villainous images, and he merely took great names to recommend them to the world. Brutus in his true historical character is humane; and then he speaks of bathing his hands in Caesar's blood. In such a bare-faced manner does Shakespeare proceed from contradiction to contradiction. He is out of his element in tragedy, his genius being for comedy and humour where he might please the cobblers. . . .

The right word to describe Rymer's criticism is 'atheistic'. The

agnostics of last century assumed such a thing as 'external reality'—a universe with iron laws revealing no trace of God or the soul. Modern thought has corrected them by affirming that the human mind is part of reality, and no estimate of the universe can exclude the soul with its experience, its powers, and its hopes. We may say of Rymer that he exceeded the agnostic view—as Morley said of Bradlaugh that blank negation could go no further. Poetry arises in the poet's soul and is addressed to the reader's: but Rymer had not experienced Shakespeare. He approaches him as the agnostics approached their dead universe—and his is not criticism but dissection. We have exposed him at length that the reader may judge fairly, but instead of refuting him at length we will take one crucial instance; his charge against the Venetian Senate for preferring Othello's private affairs to those of the State in time of war. This is literally true—but the being whose soul is not ravished by Othello's story of how he won Desdemona, till he forgets the external order, had better close the book. Rymer continues that the Senators take his part, and all wish their daughters as happily married. Surely the beauty of the passage alluded to is doubled by the Duke's comment, 'I think this tale would win my daughter too'. We do not blame Rymer for having preconceived ideas of what the drama should be: such were inevitable in the then state of criticism. We blame his atheism: for, having no sense of poetical mysteries, he has as little right to legislate on aesthetic matters as Bradlaugh on religious. He is 'a critic and no critic', to parody Beaumont and Fletcher—or, more truly still, in the words of Professor Sainstbury, 'the worst critic that has ever been'.

Charles Gildon attacks Rymer as a 'hypercritic', and says that Shakespeare's excellence is built on innate worth, not show, action, pronunciation.[1] If Desdemona is too humble for the drama, Homer's Juno, who talked Billingsgate, is too low for the epic. Mr. Hales of Eton started a debate between Shakespeare's friends and enemies, and the judges unanimously preferred Shakespeare above all Greek and Roman poets. If Shakespeare faulted it was because he had to please the audience he depended on, and so he mingled comic and tragic. He knew nothing of Aristotle and the unities, but the greatest ignore rules and mix virtues and vices. Despite his faults he attained the end of all just poems—pleasure and profit—by moving terror and pity for changes of fortune. Rymer blames the Venetians for employing a Moor, but it is a vice of mankind to despise black races, and the poet must represent things as they should be, not as they are. It is false to say that Desdemona perverts nature by loving Othello. His known and experienced virtue gave credit and authority to what he said, and would wake pity and admiration. His speech about cannibals has poetical probability, and would raise her idea of his dangers, and is no more

[1] *Some Reflections on Mr. Rymer's Short View of Tragedy*, 1694.

absurd than Virgil's Cyclops and Harpies. Both Homer and Sophocles prefer the admirable to the probable—such as the story of Oedipus; whereas Othello's jealousy and Iago's revenge are the natural consequences of our ungoverned passions. The morals of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and most of Shakespeare's plays are mightier than any in Sophocles except the *Electra*. Iago is a true Italian, and we cannot expect his soldier's profession to purge away his vices. Expression is excellent as it gives a full and clear idea of things. Contrast Richard II and Bolingbroke riding through the streets, and we get a perfect union of the beauties of thought and expression. There is no bombast in Shakespeare: that is, ill-matched words and thoughts. His words fix the image in our minds, and satisfy us, and the more we view the image the more it gains upon us. Rymer is palpably wrong about the temptation scene, for half words and ambiguous reflexions do work up jealousy. . . .

It was not hard to refute Rymer, but in doing so Gildon has made some critical remarks that are worth study. He is confident in rating Shakespeare above Greek and Latin poets, which shows that Dryden's opinion had prevailed; and he is liberal-minded in absolving him from Aristotelian rules. He skilfully vindicates Shakespeare's conception of Iago; and judges that we gain from his poems both pleasure and profit: though it must be admitted that Rymer, strangely enough, believed that the end of poetry was to please. When Gildon remarks that Shakespeare's words fix the image in our minds, and the more we view it the more it gains upon us, he almost anticipates some modern comments on Shakespeare's extraordinary power over words.

A hundred years lie between Meres and Gildon, and we will now cast a backward glance, omitting for the moment Ben Jonson and Dryden whose names rise like peaks above the others. The first thing to strike is the power with which Shakespeare impressed himself upon the soul of the century, and the failure of its intellect to decide the impression. This was largely because critical lights were as glow-worms in a benighted territory; terms like 'nature' and 'art' had fixed meanings, and the function of the imagination had yet to be discovered. Comparison, the critic's chief weapon, rather tells against Shakespeare; for mid-century writers like Cartwright, Shephard, Cowley, Flecknoe compared him to his disadvantage with Ben Jonson and Beaumont and Fletcher. The general average estimate of the century, however, was that Shakespeare was England's greatest, because most universal, poet—perhaps the world's greatest poet, because in drama he rivalled, if not surpassed, the Greek tragedians and the Latin comedians, and his stream of narrative verse flowed as smoothly as Ovid's. He is admitted to have excelled in 'nature'—a word we should now replace by 'realism': his readers or audience ascribing the tremendous impression on their minds from characters such as Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth to Shakespeare's literal rendering of external fact. Nahum Tate, who

spoke of Shakespeare's 'creating fancy', was the first to hint at the strange power of the imagination. The complaint that he wanted art does not apply to his verse at its best, on which epithets such as 'fine-filed' and 'honeyed' have been lavished, but rather to scenes of secondary importance where clowns and jesters held the stage—and also to the construction of his plays as a whole. The critics of the schools, led by Ben Jonson, required the Aristotelian unities, and were horror-struck at the loose joins of the chronicle plays, or at a play like *A. and C.* where the action was divided between Rome, Athens, and Egypt—or the fifteen years covered by the *W. Tale*. Yet there are not wanting critics who insist that Shakespeare had unparalleled art, and that, apart from rules, he achieved the end of poetry which is pleasure and moral profit.[1]

One of the frankest tributes to Shakespeare's power is paid by Pepys, who records his experience in a disinterested manner. Each time he saw *Macbeth* and the *Tempest* he liked them better—and so it must have been with many thousands of contemporary Londoners. Margaret Cavendish, as we saw, first noted the exquisite skill with which Shakespeare discriminated women. If then we search through the foregoing, and separate impression from judgement, we shall not accept the popular view that Shakespeare was slightly regarded in the seventeenth century. Though the impression, as it rose in the heart, was often dispersed by the east wind of orthodoxy, opinion was slowly crystallizing that he was the greatest and most universal world-poet. As the fragments of the old land worn down by sea or river go to form the new, so there were building in the deeps of the mind new conceptions of an art beyond the laws of Aristotle.

If we revert for a moment to the very learned world we shall see a process like our planet's of alternate night and day. Milton's lines of Jonson's learned sock and Shakespeare's native wood-notes will express the attitude most concisely. Jonson's mind was critical, and he wrote his plays in a critic's spirit more than a poet's—but he was great enough to discern Shakespeare's opposite genius. Yet he turned from the sun, and, in *Timber*, withdrew much of his earlier praise by over-insisting on Shakespeare's carelessness and facility. Dryden's first splendid eulogy equals or surpasses Jonson's, but he, too, was overtaken by the night of fixed ideas. Like Ronsard, Tasso, Milton he was haunted by the abstract idea of the Virgilian form of epic or Euripidean form of tragedy before the subject was determined at all.[2]

[1] Mr. Munro, in his introduction to the *Sh. Allusion Book*, warns against the exuberance of Elizabethan and Jacobean praises of Shakespeare, born of a splendid enthusiasm for literature.

[2] See W. P. Ker's *Collected Essays*, i. 14.