PERSPECTIVES ON
Shakespeare

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ALUR JANAKI RAM

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PREFACE

The essays collected here are of a mixed kind : some of them formed part of my earlier book, *Reason and Love in Shakespeare : A Selective Study* (1977) while other essays were separately published at different times in learned journals, Indian and overseas. The justification for grouping all of them together in a single volume is that they share, to some extent, a similar bias and concern : the comparative bias as in the essays dealing with *Hamlet* and "The Phoenix and the Turtle", and the elucidation of love-theme in relation to some conceptual elements of the Elizabethan intellectual background as in the essays concerned with the *Dream, Love's Labour Lost, Much Ado, Othello,* and *Troilus and Cressida.*

I am aware that this is not a book with a specific thesis or argument. The slight justification for offering these "perspectives" in a book form is to make them easily accessible to the general and specialist students of Shakespeare and his age, considering that Shakespeare is still accorded a respectable place in the English curricular of Indian universities and colleges. There has also been the other temptation to "salvage" from obscurity some of my earlier essays published long ago in learned journals. Articles published in journals sometimes go unnoticed unless they form part of a book.

The first essay of the volume, "Some Renaissance Images of Man in Shakespeare", published in the *Indian Journal of English Studies* (XX, 1980) attempts to "peer at a few images of man" in *Hamlet, Henry V,* and *The Tempest*, in relation to Renaissance-humanist notions of man's rationality and dignity. The second essay dealing with the narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis,* was part of my earlier book and has been reprinted here since, it is a kind of vindication of Shakespeare's Venus as the Queen of love. It

is my contention that Adonis's 'old' text in the poem on love vs lust has much too often been interpreted by the critics over the years to the disadvantage of Shakespeare's Venus who, it has been argued, stands vindicated in her own right as a multiple divinity embracing both the fertility and higher *voluplas* principles.

The third essay dealing with Ebreo's *Dialoghi* and Shakespeare's brilliant memorial piece was published in the overseas journal from Holland, *English Studies* (61, 3, June 1980). Its main thesis is that love and reason as Shakespeare presents them have strong Neoplatonic affiliations. The comparative assessment of the love-reason relation in the *Dialoghi d' Amore* and Shakespeare's poem clarifies the latter's metaphysic of love-a metaphysic resting on the twin notions of love-reason equation and the paradoxical state of two-in-oneness.

The Neoplatonic aspects of the-love-reason theme as involving certain modes of knowing and loving are the subjects of the essays, 4 & 5, dealing with *Love's Labours Lost*, *Much Ado* and the *Dream*. (These essays were part of my book cited earlier and can be read independently of the broader frame of reference of that study). The bias of the essay on *Troilus and Cressida* (which formed part of my earlier book) has been slightly abridged and altered to make the point that in the war-torn world of the play 'troth'-truth antithesis has become a conspicuous feature of the wider spectrum of disjunction that critics have recognised; that this antithesis makes a mockery of the values of love and honour that the characters of the play swear by from time to time.

The two essays (8 and 9) on *Hamlet* are in the nature of minor forays into comparative criticism. The essay, "Two Moral Dilemmas : Arjuna and Hamlet", first published in *Philosophy East and West*, (Hawaii, XVIII, April 1968) examines the dilemmas of the two mythical heroes of East and West as having a universal frame of reference, related as they are to the basic problem of action in a world not altogether *untainted* by 'guilt', in a relative sense. The essay on Hamlet's submission to Providence is concerned with the evolution of Hamlet's consciousness in the final movement of the play; the much vexed question whether Hamlet becomes a negative fatalist figure towards the end

is examined in relation to the graveyard and duel scenes of the play and also in relation to the situations confronting Hector, Hamlet and Orestes.

In the Appendix has been included "Yeats on Shakespeare" published in 1967 in *Phoenix*, a journal edited by the English Literature Society of Korea University, Seoul. The essay is proof enough that Shakespeare's impact on the creative minds of other ages has been no less inconsiderable and that Yeats's interaction with some facets of Shakespeare's work is reflected in Yeats's own poems.

England under the great Queen Elizabeth I, wrote one British historian long ago, is an "inspiring theme". One could as well remark, with some variation, that English drama in the age of Shakespeare is an ever "inspiring theme" too and that the response to his work is always a delightful and rewarding experience. It is so delightful that one is sometimes tempted to assume the mantle of an interpretive commentator and critic; it is hoped that the readers of these essays will be indulgent and tolerant enough, in a knowing manner, towards foibles of interpretation offered here by regarding them as occupationel hazards of a teaching career. I also hope that these "perspectives" will be, in the final analysis, found to be some help and interest to the general and specialist students of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

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CONTENTS

I

SOME RENAISSANCE IMAGES OF MAN IN SHAKESPEARE

Studies by Ruth Leila Anderson, Lily B. Campbell, Tillyard and Theodore Spencer in the first half of this century have enriched our understanding of Shakespeare's intellectual background, chiefly the Renaissance world-view and concept of man as pre-eminently rational.[1] The concepts which these studies outlined were part of the Renaissance moral philosophy and were embodied in such works as Primaudaye's compilation *The French Academie*, Bk, II, (first English translation, 1586), Pierre Charron's *De La Sagesse* (English translation, 1607), Cicero's *De Officiis* and Sir John Davies' "Nosce Teipsum" (1599), to cite only a few of the numerous ethical works of the period. According to these authorities, man occupied a crucial place, by his specific virtue of reason, in the interrelated orders of cosmos, nature and the state. It was the rational faculty which distinguished man from the other lower orders of being, the animals and the plants : while the latter had only the sensitive and vegetative faculties, man had, besides the sensitive and vegetative powers, the rational faculty which was his distinction. He occupied a central or middle status in the created order because of his Protean character, of sharing certain qualities with the animals and plants *below* him, and certain other virtues, like the intellect and reason, with the angels *above*. No one has described this unique status of man better than Pico Della Mirandola whose oration, *On the Dignity of Man,* has come to be regarded as a classic illustration of the Renaissance optimistic view of man :

> "O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvellous felicity of man ! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills . . . . whatever seeds each man cultivates will grow to maturity and bear in him their own fruit. If they be vegetative, he will be like a plant. If sensitive, he will become brutish. If rational, he will grow into a heavenly being. If intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, happy in the lot of no created thing, he withdraws into the center of his own unity, his spirit, made one with God, in the solitary darkness of God, who is set above all things, shall surpass them all. Who could not admire this our Chameleon" ?[2]

Pico's statement is typical of the earlier Christian humanist position which laid equal emphasis on man's frailty and also his potentialities for greatness. However, certain later developments like Renaissance, skepticism and Fideism tended to undermine (as Theodore Spencer and Robert Hoopes have noted)[3] the traditional humanistic faith in reason as the highest principle of life. Fideism, represented by Calvin and Luther, tended to overemphasise Man's frailty by stating that man's rational faculties, in utter disarray as a result of original sin, are incapable of perceiving the higher truth or good without the aid of grace. Renaissance Skepticism, given a classic expression in Montaigne's "Apology for Raimond Sebonde" (1575), led a similar assault on reason by mocking at man's supposed pre-eminence in the creation. However, there was a rehabilitation of the classical-Christian concept of "right reason" the earlier ontological harmony of nature, reason morality was restored, according to Robert Hoopes,[4] by Richard Hooker and Neo-stoic writers like Justus Lipsius (*De Constantia* 1594), Guillaume du Vair (*The Moral Philosphie of Stoicks*, English translation 1958) and Joseph Hall (*Heaven upon Earth*).

Hooker, in particular, countered the Fideistic attacks on human reason by reaffirming that man is an intellectual being, and thus "in perfection of nature being made according to the likeness of his Maker resembleth him also in the manner of working."[5] By assimilating the claims of faith with those of reason, the laws of divine reason as revealed in the Scripture with those erected by

human reason in history, Hooker restored human reason to its earlier pre-eminence. He countered the Calvinist stress on the depravity of reason and will by insisting that human reason, rectified and regenerated by faith, is capable of apprehending the highest principles of truth, and seeking the good above evil. Hooker's argument in general seems to imply that it is unreasonable to emphasise only man's frailty and to underrate reason's ability to participate in the laws of divine reason. Thus, in spite of certain counter-humanistic tendencies in the early seventeenth century, reason's supremacy in the realms of knowledge and action did not suffer any radical devaluation.

II

In the light of the foregoing description of certain Renaissance intellectual contexts, it may be quite rewarding to peer at a few images of man that Shakespeare has essayed in his plays. One feels curious to know whether the Christian-humanist view of man as a crucial figure placed in an orderly universe has inspired Shakespeare to say anything in his own inimitable manner. The only memorable statement that one can think of, and that seems to sum up the ethos of a whole epoch, is Hamlet's famous apostrophe to man :

> What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god... And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?[6]
>
> (II ii. 300 ff)

This apostrophe balances nicely the gradations of man's position in the universe.

Hamlet is equally aware, it seems, of man's admirable rational dignity as a 'paragon' of animals and also his creaturely aspect as a "quintessence of dust". However, elsewhere in the play, Hamlet reiterates the standard Christian-humanist notion of man as a rational being functioning above the vegetative levels of feeding and sleeping :

What is a man
If his chief good and market of his time.
Be but to sleep and feed ? A beast, no more!
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unus'd.[7]

(IV, iv, 33-39)

The "god-like" faculty reson has not been given to man, says Hamlet, to "fust in us unus'd" but to raise him above the creaturely level of a "beast". This awareness that man is more than a "beast" and "a passion's slave" helps him finally to achieve a measure of reasonableness in his identity by recognising that "there is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. . . . the readiness is all !. . . . "(V. ii. 211-14), Hamlet's reliance on Providence,[8] towards the close of the play, raises his final performance to a level above that of personal revenge. In terms of Sixteenth century beliefs about man's relation to Providence, it was irrational for man to rely too much on fortune alone and quite rational to subordinate human enterprises and ends to the designs of Providence, a power higher than Fortune.[9] In itself, this is sufficient evidence of the fact that the play does not present a sardonic image of man's depravity, as some commentators seems to think. The experience of *Hamlet* suggests that man, for all the arrant ways of his reason's occasionul pandering to will, is essentially a being of dignity and nobility. This impression is borne out by the heroic end of Hamlet, the martial honours with which his body is finally laid to rest. The play's close envisions Hamlet as a soldier at his post in the battle-field of life, an image equally applicable to man in general.

The impression that Hamlet's tragic end finally leaves on our minds is also made by other great tragic protagonists like Othello, Lear and Antony. Shakespeare displays considerable maturity and artistry in ensuring that his tragic figures do not go down with battered and disorderly souls but with a measure of inner equipoise and self-knowledge—a wisdom or ripeness that is the culmination of their journeyings through suffering and disaster. We know that

Othello does not die merely as an executioner and strangler of his supposedly faithless wife but as a penitent man who has come to terms with himself, who has recovered the harmony of his earlier noble self before Iago set to work on him. We also know that the great Lear of the final scenes is a Lear who has recovered his true identity as father, King and Man :

> "Come let us away to prison. . . . .
> . . . . and we'll wear out,
> In a wall'd prison, packs and sects of great ones . . . ."
>
> (V. iii. 8-18

He may crumble on the stage with hallucinatory visions of an absurd universe, which the dead Cordelia in his arms seems to point at : but Shakespeare allows him to die only after giving us glimpses of his final return to sanity and wisdom. In the same way, we find Antony too making a Roman exit from life, only after he has redeemed, to a certain extent, his personal heroism, after re-establishing the overlordship of his reason over his errant will in no uncertain terms. What is important to note is that battered though they all are in the battle of life, these tragic heroes embrace their inevitable doom only after achieving a measure of order and rehabilitation within the inner microcosmic worlds of their various selves. By achieving inner rehabilitation, partial though it may be, they seem to be confirming Shakespeare's agreement with the Renaissance view that man has infinite possibilities for greatness and redemption.

There are, in the whole corpus of Shakespeare's work, two characters who seem to have been conceived as positive instances of human potentiality for achieving greatness and wisdom. If at one end of the scale, Henry V is a partial embodiment of a successful overlordship of the inner and outer micro-cosmic worlds, Prospero at the other end seems to stand for the ultimate ideal of ripeness and wisdom.

In Henery V, we are given a description of the kind of exemplary order the reformed Prince Hal has been able to effect within his own nature. The Archbishop of Canterbury is not overstating the case when he speaks of the new Prince in these terms :

> Consideration like an angel came
> And whipped th' offending Adam out of him,
> Leaving his body as paradise
> T'envelope and contain celestial spirits
> Never was such a sudden scholar made :
> Never came reformation in a flood,
> With such a heady currance, scouring faults;
>
> (*Henry V.* I. i. 28-34)

It is because Hal has purged himself of the "offending Adam" in him, of inner disorders that his flesh is heir to, that he comes to embody later the ideal of orderly kingship. He may not impress some of us today with his grandiose military campaigns; there is, however, no doubt that he seems to have been meant by Shakespeare to represent the Elizabethan ideal of a King who is a successful governor of both the outer and inner realms. When King Henry says :

> We are no tyrant, but a Christian King,
> Unto whose grace our passion is as subject
> As are our wretches fett'red in our prison.
>
> (1. 2. 241-243)

he seems to speak with a measure of confidence and humility always part of his character. He is a Christian King, Shakespeare seems to be implying. not by virtue of his faith but even as a result of his rectified and chastened reason, the achived grace of sovereignty over the lower passional elements in his own nature. The Renaissance commonplace that order at the macrocosmic or state level is analogous to the inner microcosmic order underscores King Henry's comparison of the subjugation of passions to the fettering of "wretches" in prisons. Shakespeare has also given us the antithetical versions of this ideal psychological order in the form of discorderly tyrant-figures like Richard III. Claudius and Macbeth. They bring disaster to the state because they suffer, at the moral level, from inner psychological insurrections which lead their passions and "violent" expeditions to "Outrun the pauser reason". (See *Macbeth*, II. 3. 110)

Prospero is, perhaps, the most satisfying and ideal summation of human greatness, of the inner order and tranquillity of a Christian stoical variety; he represents the wise man who feels impelled to take part with his "nobler reason" against the "fury" of his passions. In a play notable for its symbolic representation of gradations of being like Ariel and Caliban, he may be said to embody the rational soul in man as the Renaissance conceived it: [10]

> Though with their high wrongs
> I am struck to the quick
> Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
> Do I take part; the rarer action is
> In virtue than in vengeance.
>
> (V. i. 25-28)

He truly answers to Pierre Charron's description of the sage whose virtue is a judicious blend of inborn goodness with the achieved refinement of spirit and learning.[11] There is also in him a streak of wisdom of the kind that Charron, a Christian neo-stoic, describes elsewhere in his book:

> Wisdome is a regular managing of our soul, with measure and proportion ; It is an equabilitie, and sweet harmonie of our judgments, wills, manners a constant health of our mind ; . . . [12]

It is worth noting how Prospero, the human counterpart of the divine dispensation of mercy, describes the gradual moral regeneration of his opponents in analogical and symbolic terms :

> The charm dissolves apace
> And as the morning steals upon the night,
> Melting the darkness, so their rising senses
> Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle
> Their clearer reason.
>
> (V. i. 64-68)