

12 November 1962

We are this week privileged to watch an experiment being performed by the principal of the London Academy with a group of his students; an experiment planned to discover whether Shakespeare really could have had in view the ascent of that *Ladder of Self-Discovery* which is the key to what Aldous Huxley has called the 'Perennial Philosophy'. I must confess that until I read John Vyvyan's books, and through his introduction became acquainted with Castiglione's *Courtier* and other works which spread from the Platonic Academy in Florence throughout Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century, I could never put my finger on the secret of Shakespeare's universal influence. We can scarcely hope that John Vyvyan will accept Michael MacOwan's invitation to come all the way from Cornwall, but perhaps he will be interested in further experiments along this line.

We must be careful to avoid assuming too much about the enigmatic figure of William Shakespeare and, in particular, of over-stressing the influence of Neo-Platonism on his writings. We must recall how little we really know between the record of baptism at Stratford of 'William son of John Shakespeare' on 26th April, 1564 and the first reference to a successful actor-playwright called Shakespeare in London in 1592 – the bitter dying words of Robert Greene, whose position as chief dramatist had been usurped by 'the upstart crow', who is 'in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in the country'; and Henry Willoughby's mention of him by name in 1594, which is the first direct reference to be found in English literature.

If the two William Shakespeares are the same, the situation in 1594 would be that the playwright at 30 had already become established as a poet on the publication under his own name of *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1594, and was also becoming known as actor and dramatist. On the night of the 28th December, 1594 there was a rowdy programme at Gray's Inn by the Lord Chamberlain's players ending with *The Comedy of Errors*, 'so that night was begun and continued to the end with nothing but confusion and errors; wherefore it was ever afterwards called "The Night of Errors"'. So even if that happens on Tuesday, the LAMDA players will be in good company!

In selecting a few sequences from the plays out of the great number which might have been used to illustrate the theme of the Ladder, we have chosen those which show dramatic action out of regard for the audience, and out of regard for the players we have chosen scenes which best suit their talents, and we have naturally been tied by the requirements of assigning parts to as many as possible; so you must not mind a given character being played by more than one actor.

Subject to this, we have tried to take scenes from plays which would support or refute Vyvyan's claim that Shakespeare was entirely consistent and faithful to a central idea 'throughout the full span of his work'. Though modern critics have proved that the dramatist kept reshaping his plays (often years afterwards), yet we can be fairly certain about the dates of first performances of the four plays selected. Thus *Romeo and Juliet*, though first conceived as early as 1591, may be safely dated around 1596 in the form we now know it, and was in fact the play that first made Shakespeare's popularity as a dramatist throughout the country.

As regards the *Merchant of Venice*, what was probably a rough draft is mentioned under the date August 25th, 1594; and we are always being reminded that Dr. Rodrigo Lopez, the Queen's Jewish Physician, had been executed on 7th June, 1594, and that the Earl of Essex (close friend of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton) was then under fire as instigator of that nasty business – hence perhaps the 'Mercy' lines given to Portia in the Trial Scene, first performed in 1596.

About *Hamlet* there is more doubt – though there certainly was a pre-Shakespearian play (now lost) on the subject, and also an early adaptation by W.S. himself. The play, as we know it, probably appeared in 1603. It is closely linked in style with *Julius Caesar*, being placed in the First Folio after *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, but before *Lear*. It is, therefore, at the time of his mood of tragedy and disillusionment.

Finally, *The Winter's Tale* may be safely assigned to the years 1610 and 1611, as there is a lengthy reference to a performance of this as a *new* play at the Globe on May 15th, 1611; and Ben Jonson mentions it with *The Tempest* in the introduction to his *Bartholomew Fair* (1612-1614). It may be poetic justice that it should be quite certainly derived from the most popular novel of the day *Pandolfo: the Triumph of Time* written by that same Robert Greene whose death-bed utterances nearly twenty years before had expressed his bitterness that the players should have deserted his plays for those of the 'upstart crowe'.

*

To return to the 'Perennial Philosophy' – Vyvyan's contention (*Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty*, p.107) is that:

... the theme of self-discovery is always revived by Shakespeare in precisely the context where Allegory demands it. And it is achieved by finding something – not the 'many a thousand grains that issue out of dust' and which are 'not thyself' – something that the rough elements cannot touch: a spiritual self, whose love has the power to bring harmony on earth, and whose beauty is a revelation of heaven. It is a discovery of splendour without limit, and the soul that knows itself –

Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

As You Like It

This Divine Love was called by the Neo-Platonists the 'Heavenly Venus', as derived from, but not at all in opposition to the earthly love between men and women. We submit that *both* Shakespeare's heroes and his heroines have to pass a series of tests (often very stringent) on their way up the Ladder. They are all very human – only Portia seems super-human, the personification of Mind (the Platonic *nōus*). If Love, both human and Divine, wins and they pass these tests, the play has a happy ending; but if Love loses, then nothing can go right and all are involved in the tragedy. The chief characters awaken each other – Romeo awakens Juliet, and of course Juliet would have quite transformed Romeo had they been given time. Even so they are not wholly tragic, for by their deaths they end the long feud between their families. But Ophelia fails her tests – she is too weak. Had she been another Rosalind, or Imogen, or Hermione, she might have restored Hamlet to sanity and Love, which could have saved him from attacking everybody indiscriminately, instead of concentrating on his single target – his father's murderer.

Then there are the supporting characters. As Vyvyan points out, the plays are worked out on the *Terencian* plan with the characters ranging themselves on either side, like the white and the black pieces of the chess-board – Mercutio, Benvolio and Tybalt; Antonio, Gratiano and Nerissa; Horatio, Polonius and Laertes; and (perhaps most important of all) Camillo and Paulina. They are not far enough on the Ladder to be conscious of their true roles, and so often they serve black instead of white by their mechanical actions.

Enough of this preamble – let the players speak for themselves.

*

FOR GROUPS ONLY

You have heard this year about Castiglione's 'Ladder', and this week you will see certain Shakespearian scenes which seem to show difficult situations through which heroes and heroines must be successfully guided by Love in their ascent of the Ladder of Self-Discovery.

Next week you will begin to study what might be the original source of the idea of the Ladder – namely 'The Seven Steps to Self-realization' according to the Nyaya System (which has, I believe, never before reached the West in its complete and practical form), and of the tests which the aspirant must pass on the Way with the help of Universal Love.

* * *

