

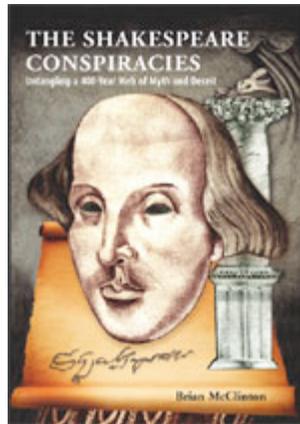
# Shakespeare's Humanism

**T**HE question of Shakespeare's religion or lack of it is a subject of endless speculation. Was he a Catholic, as Clare Asquith suggests in her recent book *Shadowplay*? Was he a conforming Anglican, as A.L. Rowse steadfastly affirms in his numerous biographies? Or was he even an atheist, as Gary Sloan suggests in the April *Freethinker*?

The answer, surely, is that the dramatist was a liberal Christian. Firstly, his works make an extensive use of the Bible and there is hardly a book in the Old or New Testament which is not represented by some chance word or phrase in one or other of the plays. Peter Milward cites numerous examples in *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973). Thus Adriana's speech on the ideal relationship between husband and wife in *The Comedy of Errors* (2:1) makes reference to Psalm 8, and her speech beginning 'How comes it now, my husband' (2:2) alludes to Ephesians 5. This passage is also used by Katherina in her speech on the duty of wives to their husbands in *The Taming of the Shrew* (5:2). Again, Portia's whole speech on mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* is a tissue of texts from the Old and New Testaments. The same applies to Isabella's similar speech in *Measure for Measure*, a play whose very title echoes Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:2).

It has often been claimed that, nevertheless, the great pessimistic speeches of Hamlet, Macbeth and Lear are in no way biblical. Macbeth's 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' speech about life being a 'tale told by an idiot... signifying nothing' seems to be a powerful expression of existential nihilism and nothing to do with Christianity. But this view is mistaken. 'Out, out brief candle' seems to be taken from Job 18:5-6: "The light of the wicked shall be quenched...and his candle shall be out with him". From the Psalms come the references to 'dusty death' (Psalm 22:15 – 'dust of death'), a 'walking shadow' and 'all our yesterdays' (Psalm 39:6 – 'every man walketh in a vain show'; Job 8:9: 'We are but of yesterday and are ignorant: for our days upon earth are but a shadow'), and 'a tale told by an idiot' (Psalm 90:9 – 'we spend our years as a tale that is told').

Of course, some of the works, particularly the last plays, have a pagan setting, but we should bear in mind the 1606 act in restraint of 'abuses of players', by which any actor jestingly or profanely using the name of God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost or the Trinity, was liable to a fine of £10. And in any case the playwright makes continued use of the Bible and Christianity in these plays. Since they look beyond death to resurrection and new life, they are surely expressing, at least in part, the Pauline ideal of the 'new man, the 'new creation', the 'new life' in Christ which the Christian first receives in baptism. Even Paulina's name in *The Winter's Tale* suggests St Paul. Her words to the statue transform the appearance of death into the reality of life for both Hermione and Leontes:



"Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him

Dear life redeems you".

In *The Tempest* Christian symbolism is superimposed on pagan myth. Many Renaissance humanists including Shakespeare tried to reconcile ancient Greek and Roman religions with Christianity. Prospero is both Orpheus, who was the greatest musician and poet of Greek myth, and the Christian God; Ferdinand, who 'dies' during the masque and then ascends to heaven, is a Christ figure, Miranda is the 'bride' of Christ and Caliban is the devil. Ariel is not only the Greek Hermes, the messenger of the gods, but also plays the part assigned in the Old Testament

to the Angel of the Lord and in the New Testament to the Spirit. In the Gospel story it is the Spirit which descends upon Christ when he has risen from the baptismal water and which leads him up to wander in the wilderness. Similarly, it is Ariel in the play who brings the travellers out of the sea to wander in the maze of the 'desolate isle'. The dramatist has consciously woven together pagan and Christian mythology because, as Colin Still argues in Shakespeare's Mystery Play, they share a 'timeless theme', namely man's spiritual pilgrimage in which through redemption and rebirth he can reverse the Fall. It is the story of the upward struggle of the human spirit, individual or collective, out of the darkness of sin and error, into the light of wisdom and truth.

So, despite their secular appearance, the Shakespeare plays often conceal a deep undercurrent of religious meaning, a meaning which has been woven into the very fabric of the works in such an unobtrusive manner that some critics have been led to imagine that it is not even there. This meaning can also be easily missed because of the nature of its content. For Shakespeare's Christianity is undogmatic and tolerant in the tradition of Erasmus and Renaissance Humanism in general.

There is, for example, never any argument on points of theology. Philosophy and religion should be kept separate because:

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (*Hamlet*)

The supernatural cannot be fathomed, and therefore rational argument is useless: 'the rest is silence'. As Lafeu suggests in *All's Well that Ends Well*:

"They say miracles are passed; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear" (2:3).

This unknown fear must not be reasoned about but accepted as inevitable:

"Must must endure

Their going hence, even as their coming hither:

Ripeness is all" (*King Lear*, 5:2).

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# Shakespeare's Humanism

Shakespeare's treatment of the limits of reason is always presented in this supernatural context, as in Hippolyta's reference to 'something of great constancy' and Bottom's dream in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Reason is vital in human affairs, but in matters of religion it is not enough.

Shakespeare shared all the characteristics of a Renaissance humanist. He was a man of the highest culture and a large familiarity with the classics, which are of central importance in the plays and in the structure of his imagination. The works are saturated with his favourite classical authors, especially Ovid, Virgil, Seneca, Plautus, Cicero, Terence and Plutarch. Indeed, he has the ancient mythology and history at his finger tips. He also shared the Renaissance desire to seek the truth about human nature. The ancient adage *nosce teipsum* – know thyself – was a key principle of humanist thought and Hamlet's speech about holding the mirror up to nature implies that poetry and drama can help us to acquire that wisdom. By doing so, we can better guard against the barbarism lurking below the surface which the baser side of human nature creates and instead promote the more civilised values. As Robin Headlam Wells writes, Shakespeare's plays show their humanist origins in the themes they dramatise: "Repeatedly, they come back to those matters that concern Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*: 'the properties of government', 'our city's institutions', 'the terms for common justice', 'the nature of our people'" (*Shakespeare's Humanism*, p27).

At first glance, his humanism seems close to the disillusioned brand of Montaigne, who stressed the limitations of reason and understanding in human affairs, in contrast to the optimism of Bacon, Erasmus and most other Renaissance writers, who believed that cultivating reason would lead to a better understanding of how to act and thus to great benefits for society as a whole. Shakespeare's apparent scepticism about such matters is exemplified in Hamlet's famous speech: "What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" (Act II, Scene II). This appears to be a counterblast to Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

Yet it is hardly the full picture. Hamlet in the early part of the play is a confused and disillusioned idealist. But he matures as he grows older. Ultimately the play challenges Hamlet's early cynicism. Similarly, the author himself shows progression from the tragedies to the late romances, where the message is quintessentially humanist. Prospero in *The Tempest* is a metaphor for the civilising power of the artist and educator whose 'liberal arts' tame the tempests in the human spirit. He exhibits the ennobling qualities of compassion, generosity, friendship, wisdom, and so on. He does not seek to retaliate against those who wronged him; he seeks only to bring them out of the darkness of hatred and revenge. Bernard D. Grebanier writes: "Shakespeare is perhaps the perfect expression of Renaissance humanism. His profound sympathy for hu-

manity enabled him to pierce to the very core of his characters; his unexcelled gifts as a poet made his men and women unforgettable creatures of flesh and blood. This may be said as much of the best of his earliest plays as of *The Tempest*, where Prospero is himself a kind of incarnation of the best of what the Renaissance had extended to mankind" (Bernard D. Grebanier, et al. *English Literature and Its Backgrounds*. New York: Holt, 1950 (p 242)).

It is also important to stress that, like many Renaissance humanists, Shakespeare had a sceptical outlook and delighted more in presenting issues than in espousing systems, and held critical awareness, as opposed to doctrinal rectitude, to be the highest possible good. It is precisely what Keats called 'negative sensibility' in which the author is content and proud to be in a state of doubt. An increasing number of writers are becoming aware of the deliberately dialectical and provisional nature of his works and the fact that they dramatise the unresolvable tensions that are the fundamental conditions of life. Similarly, his unparalleled realism may be seen as the ultimate embodiment, in poetic terms, of the intense concern for specificity endorsed by humanists from the 14th century on.

Shakespearean drama is a treasury of the disputes that frustrated and delighted humanism, including (among many others) action versus contemplation, theory versus practice, art versus nature, *res versus verbum*, monarchy versus republic, human dignity versus human depravity, and individualism versus communality. In treating of these polarities, he generally proceeds in the manner of Castiglione and Montaigne, presenting structures of balanced contraries rather than syllogistic endorsements of one side or another. In so doing, he achieves a higher realism, transcending the mere imitation of experience and creating, in all its conflict and fertility, a mirror of mind itself. Since the achievement of such psychological and cultural self-awareness was the primary goal of humanistic inquiry, and since humanists agreed that poetry was an uncommonly effective medium for this achievement, Shakespeare must be acknowledged as a pre-eminent humanist.

Shakespeare, however, eschews moralising. Preaching constrains the mind, a thought echoed by Lucio in *Measure for Measure*: "And yet, to say the truth, I had as lief have the foppery of freedom as the morality of imprisonment". The absence of an obvious ethical viewpoint has led some critics to assume that Shakespeare has none. Dr Johnson lamented that 'he sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct that he seems to write without any moral purpose'. Yet Johnson forgets the Renaissance habit of instructing by pleasing.

Consider Hamlet's 'mirror up to nature' speech. Here the playwright seems to be telling us what he is trying to do in his plays, and Johnson concludes that Shakespeare is indeed a great poet of human nature in the sense of laying it bare in all its great variety. But Levin comments: "The Elizabethan conception of art as the glass of nature was ethical rather than realistic, for it assumed that, by contemplating situations which reflected their own, men and women could mend their ways and act with greater resolu-

# Shakespeare's Humanism

tion thereafter" (H. Levin: *The Question of Hamlet*, 1959, p157). In other words, by exposing the weaknesses, cynicism and evil in the world and the destructive consequences which they inevitably produce, the playwright is educating his readers to avoid the same mistakes. And he is doing it through 'the foppery of freedom' rather than the 'morality of imprisonment'.

In fact, Shakespeare states this purpose clearly in Jaques' speech in *As You Like It*:

"Invest me in my motley; give me leave  
To speak my mind, and I will through and through  
Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world,  
If they will patiently receive my medicine".

Shakespeare's plays are profoundly moral and deal with the deepest ethical themes and issues. The clearest indication of their moral purpose is that evil never triumphs in the plays. It always suffers ultimate defeat. Othello does not end with Iago gloating over the dead bodies of Othello and Desdemona. Hamlet does not end with the prince destroying his enemies and ruling Denmark happily ever after. Even characters who are essentially good are punished for their evil acts; so in a sense Hamlet dies for the killing of Polonius and Romeo for slaying Tybalt. Despite its pervading presence, evil is always shown as being avoidable. Shakespeare invariably stresses man's moral responsibility for his actions. Hamlet, Othello, Lear and Macbeth all suffer for their sins, not because of some divine decree written in the stars. To be sure, there are often portents, such as earthquakes, comets and eclipses, as in *Julius Caesar* and *King Lear*, but they are usually presented as a sign of God's anger to come if fallen human beings do not repent and avoid evil.

Again, when we seek to discover Shakespeare's basic ethical principles, we find a lack of fixed, predetermined dogma, though with some exceptions. 'Unbitted lusts' and passions, combined with egotism, overcoming reason is a constant theme. The title of *The Tempest* alone symbolises the storms of the emotions. Prospero seeks revenge for his banishment, but the movement of the play is towards the recovery of his humanity. In forgiveness he finds not only a way towards justice but also a road back into human society itself. And by submitting his capacity to reason, Prospero epitomises Renaissance Humanist thought: "Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury do I take part: the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance". In *The Tempest* we see Shakespeare's supreme humanism at work, expressing not only a feeling for human fallibility but also an ability to see man as a potential godlike creature with powers of moral judgment finally equal to the emotional struggles these powers engender.

In Shakespeare we find also a preoccupation with 'balance' between self and others. It is noticeable that all his villains are individualists, motivated primarily by egotism. Richard of Gloucester sums it up: "I am myself alone". Parolles in *All's Well That Ends Well* avers: "Simply the thing I am shall make me live". And Iago says: "In following him, I follow but myself". The selfish ambitions of such people, or their lust or envy, lead to chaos and disaster. Moreover, by asserting themselves at the expense of

others, they become isolated not only from other people but also from themselves. So, after the death of Duncan, Macbeth confesses that: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself". The evil acts snowball, and the result is described by Albany in *King Lear*:

"If that the heavens do not their visible spirits  
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,  
It will come

Humanity must perforce prey on itself,  
Like monsters of the deep" (Act 4, Scene 2).

Hamlet, Othello, Lear, Macbeth, and so on, are all faced with the choice of putting themselves or others first. Their tragedies therefore arise ultimately from their own selfishness.

On the positive side, Shakespeare extols the humanist virtue of 'philanthropia'. Thus when Lady Macbeth suggests to her husband that his nature is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness', she wants him to become less human and more of a monster. An essential feature of kindness is the capacity for fellow-feeling, and clearly Shakespeare's good characters have this quality in common. It is also this quality that shines through the entire works and causes commentators to refer to the playwright's great compassion. Indeed, love of humanity is the overriding theme of the plays (the tragedies illustrate the loss of this love).

Repentance and forgiveness are continually stressed and Portia's great speech about the quality of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* expresses sentiments which surely lie deeply in the heart of the author:

"It is an attribute to God himself;  
And earthly power doth them show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice" (Act 4, Scene 1).

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