THE WORD MUSICIAN---WHO LOVED HIS TOOLS

Alchemy That Bathes in Strange Gold All His Plays

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By Richard Le Gallienne

THE determining factor in Shakespeare's genius, that gift without which, so to speak, his other gifts would walk instead of fly, is, of course, his unparalleled gift for poetic expression; his imaginative, atmospheric, and rhythmic use of words. His dramatic vision, his handling of character, his worldly and other-worldly wisdom, his all-inclusive humanity, draw their peculiar energy and wear their supreme naturalness of manifestation from this veritable elixir vitae of language. Action and thought alike, concrete objects, immaterial dreams, and aery fantasies take on their proper form and color and motion, and attain their intense visibility by means of this creative magic, this Prospero's wand of words. Human life, with all its conditions and accidents, thus moves and has its being in his writings at once in the light of our common day and in speculo aeternitatis. Man and his doings have thus an unmatched tangible and audible every-day reality, and, at the same time, that significant look and accent, as of unknown beyond-the-world meanings that also belong to them: at once life as seen by the man-in-the-street, and by those high gods who, it may be, "kill us for their sport."

Imogen. I draw the sword myself: take it, and hit
The innocent mansion of my love, my heart:
Fear not; 'tis empty of all things but grief.

Painted by J. Hoppner. From the Collection of Emil F. Begiebing

Othello. By heaven, he echoes me,
As if there were some monster in his thought
Too hideous to be shown.

Tommaso Salvini.
From William Winter's "Shakespeare on the Stage."

Variously fortunate in the period of his birth, Shakespeare as poet was particularly fortunate in finding the English language still to some degree in the process of fusion, not yet, at all events, grown cold, but still sensitively ductile to individual use. One could still, literally, conjure with it, treat it largely as one's own, bend it to one's will, make it the sport of one's fanciful experiments, and generally handle it as a "lord of language." Of course, great writers can always do this in some measure. It is their power to give it their individual impress that makes them great writers. But long traditional use obviously hampers that power. When Shakespeare wrote, it was still possible so to use it without the appearance of violence or eccentricity. Style or manner, however highly fantastical, could still seem a natural efflorescence, a spontaneous taking of shapes and colors, rather than a studied artifice. So Shakespeare's wildest flights or most decorated patterns seem to have an appropriateness such as, say, George Meredith's have not—they seem natural as the vagaries of streaming and leaping flame, on the "pied" or "freakt" quaintnesses of flowers.

His most tremendous and multitudinous effects have an elementalism which, perhaps, we only find again in Wagner, who found music still plastic as Shakespeare found language. If there is any parallel to the dark glories of "Macbeth" and "Lear," is it not to be found in such music as Siegfried's "Funeral March"?

Some modern novelists of the "realist" persuasion have professed a scorn of language, have forsworn the sour grapes of "style," and announced their superiority to "literature." A painter might as sensibly forswear his palette and brushes, or a soldier throw away his sword. No great writer has ever indulged in this egregious affectation. On the contrary, great writers, realizing that the effects they aim at are to be compassed by words, and that their success in achieving them must depend on their mastery of their myriad tiny and delicate tools, study them from the beginning to the end of their lives with a craftsman's love. They are indeed first seen to be predestined to their artistic task by their love of their tools. They invariably begin by loving words for their own sake. So Shakespeare began in "Venus and Adonis" and "Lucrece," and nothing is more strikingly apparent throughout his plays, the sternest as well as the gentlest, than that he loved words, reveled in them boyishly at times, tossing them joyously about from hand to hand like colored jewels, or gathering and heaping them up greedily like flowers, as at times we see him taking an almost grim pleasure in his dark mastery over their terrible and subtle enchantments, as though in the exercise of some black, unhallowed magic: words charged with doom, as in his description of the coming on of night in "Macbeth":

Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood:
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse:
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse,"

words of ribald exuberance and coarse vitality, as in the exchange of humorous abuse between Prince Hal and Falstaff at the Boar's Head:

There is a devil haunts thee in the likeness of an old fat man; a tun of man is thy companion. Why dost thou converse with that trunk of humors, that bolting-hutch of beastliness, that swollen parcel of dropsies, that huge bombard of sack, that stuffed cloak-bag of guts, that roasted Manning-tree ox with a pudding in his belly, that reverend vice, that gray iniquity, that father ruffian, that vanity in years?

Words of heartbreaking, tender prettiness, as in Perdita's catalogue of flowers;

O Proserpina,
For the flowers now, that frighted thou let'st fall
From Dis's wagon! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength. * * *

Some writers, of whom Flaubert is the type, exhaust themselves in a fanatic quest of the "mot juste," the one inevitable word, or set of words, for the matter they would express, or the effect they would produce, but Shakespeare is no such doctrinaire. Rather than miss his aim, he will let fly a cloud of arrows, any one or all of which will hit his mark. He prefers superfluity of effect to parsimony, for, while loving words, he is their master, not they his, and, while valuing them for themselves, he values them still more for the use he would make of them. Thus he will pile up half a dozen images where one would have satisfied a less vigorous and abounding imagination. He loves to gain his effects by a fine excess that seldom, however, suggests redundance. Even in the stress of dramatic action, his profusion seldom impedes, but usually heightens or enriches it.

More than any other poet, he realizes the superior power of symbolic over realistic utterance, and understands that the most potent force in words is their suggestive, atmospheric property, that they are used to most purpose to evoke rather than to define. The other property by which words act upon us is their sound, their music, and it was their pictorial and musical suggestiveness on which Shakespeare most constantly relied to weave the fabric of his vision. In the plays which haunt us most by their sheer loveliness—such as "As You Like It," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and "Romeo and Juliet," the pictorial and musical qualities of words seem to have suffered a sea-change and become blended one into the other, as one might imagine the influences of painting and music combining and becoming one under the action of moonlight. This verbal alchemy that bathes in strange gold all his plays in varying degrees is illustrated nowhere better than in the "In such a night" passage in the last act of "The Merchant of Venice." Here how distinguish the pictures from the music, or both from the moonlight:

The moon shines bright: in such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees
And they did make no noise, in such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls
And sigh'd his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressid lay that night. * * *
How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

When, before or since, were words so dew-drenched and music-haunted, and certainly not even John Keats, high priest of the worship of the moon, has ever written such a page of pure moonlight.

Shakespeare was 29 when, in 1593, "Venus and Adonis," the "first heir of my invention," was published, with its dedication to Henry Wriothesly, Earl of Southampton. "The Rape of Lucrece" followed the year after, dedicated to the same noble lord. As Professor Raleigh has pointed out, the fact of his thus beginning his career as a poet, pure and simple, was probably an important factor in the subsequent worldly success of his career. A dramatist, however great, had as yet no social status; but it was a gentlemanly thing to be a poet. Poetry was a learned toy of the Court, a feature of the fashionable Italian Renaissance. Noblemen themselves affected it. Had not the young Earl of Surrey in the last reign been one of the first sonneteers and lyrists, and Sidney was a favorite of the Queen? Ovid, too, being the fashionable model of the time, two highly decorated poems written in his manner, and sponsored by a nobleman, might well make the young poet persona grata among the wits of the Court—a connection to prove of great practical value to the future dramatist and producer of plays. These two poems were no mere prentice work either. They show the poet as already the possessor of a highly polished art. They are full of clearly seen pictures, vividly wrought as those Italian paintings with which Professor Raleigh considers Shakespeare to have been familiar. They abound, too, in that minute first-hand observation, particularly of country sights and sounds, which was to be characteristic of the plays, as in that picture of "poor Wat," the hare pursued by the hounds; and they have already in a marked degree that individual accent in the rhetorical and meditative passages which we can only call "Shakespearean"—particularly that accent which is to mark the "Sonnets," several favorite themes of which are here already tried over with no immature touch:

The tender spring upon thy tempting lip
Shows thee unripe; yet mayst thou well be tasted.
Make use of time, let not advantage slip;
Beauty within itself should not be wasted;
Fair flowers that are not gathered in their prime
Rot and consume themselves in little time. * * *

Upon the earth's increase why shouldst thou feed,
Unless the earth with thy increase be fed?
By law of nature thou art bound to breed,
That thine may breed when thou thyself art dead,
And so, in spite of death, thou dost survive,
In that thy likeness still is left alive.

Again and again in the reflective apostrophes to Night and Time and Opportunity we have the very accents, the favorite rich and sombre words of the "Sonnets" and the tragic plays, and the moralizing is of the same cast as that of many a sententious soliloquy to come:

Time's glory is to calm contending Kings. * * *
To fill with worm-holes stately monuments,
To feed oblivion with decay of things,
To blot old books and alter their contents,
To pluck the quills from ancient ravens' wings,
To dry the old oak's sap and cherish springs,
To spoil antiquities of hammered steel,
And turn the giddy round of Fortune's wheel. * * *
Thou ceaseless lackey to Eternity.

or this of Opportunity:

When wilt thou be the humble suppliant's friend,
And bring him where his suit may be obtain'd?
When wilt thou sort an hour great strifes to end?
Or free that soul which wretchedness hath chain'd?
Give physic to the sick, ease to the pain'd?
The poor, lame, blind, halt, creep, cry out for thee;
But they ne'er meet with Opportunity.

In these early poems, too, the exuberant lyricism of Shakespeare's spirit sets the formal meter a-dance with that song which was to accompany the plays like aerial music, here at the beginning, as at the end with "The Tempest":

Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear,
Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green,
Or, like a nymph, with long dishevell'd hair,
Dance on the sands, and yet no footing seen:
Love is a spirit all compact of fire,
Not gross to sink, but light, and will aspire.

It was a lyric, as well as a dramatic, age. Out of the strong came forth sweetness. England's mighty youth sang out of its strength, and in no mere figure of speech, but in fact, the England of Elizabeth was "a nest of singing birds." In this impulse the Court partook, and helped to train it by its devotion to music, and its demand for madrigals that could be sung to the lute or viol. Shakespeare's natural lyric gift, therefore, had the advantage of an environment in which lyrical poetry and music were still inseparable, and words and music were born together. Thus, as Pater has pointed out, his songs so sing themselves that we can hardly distinguish the words from the melody, which indeed conveys the meaning no less, perhaps even more, than the words themselves. So is it with the "wood-notes wild" of "As You Like It"—that play in which all the birds of the wood seem to be singing together in that song of indescribable freshness and natural warbling sweetness which is the very voice of the woodlands in the youth of the world:

Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the wild bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither,

His Poems "A Shell Filled with the Rumor of Eternity"

Here shall he see
No enemy
But Winter and rough weather.

And his dirgelike songs of sorrow have the same spontaneous simplicity of art which only nature makes:

Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious Winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages.
Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

There is, obviously, no need to quote these or a hundred other familiar perfections, yet to recall them by the eye to the haunted memory of the reader is the only adequate form of critical appreciation. Of all the lyric enchantments of Shakespeare there is none of us but can say "My youth lies buried in thy verses." They are of the romantic stuff of our lives, of the very essence of our spiritual beings. And so is it, too, with the more solemn and stately glories of the high meditative and elegiac passages in the plays, or with those passages of descriptive splendor and beauty, or those passages of inspiring eloquence or heart-broken tenderness: with Claudio's terror of death:

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice,
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to the worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts
Imagine howling. * * *

with Cleopatra's barge:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne,
Burn'd on the water. * * *

or the trumpetlike prologue to "Henry V.":

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, Princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
Assume the port of Mars and at his heels,
Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
Crouch for employment,

or Laertes at Ophelia's grave:

Lay her i' the earth:
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violets spring!

or Romeo's:

For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes
This vault a feasting presence full of light.

The beauty of nature made many great poets in the nineteenth century, but the dawn is still Shakespeare's:

But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
Walks o'er the dew of yon high-eastward hill,

and who but he has put the multitudinous seas in one line:

In cradle of the rude imperious surge.

When we think of Shakespeare as poet, a thousand passages such as these spring to the mind, fair as the early mornings of boyhood, wonderful as our first sight of the sea, hallowed and strange, "enskied and sainted," as the face of young love in starlight, poignant as our first acquaintance with grief. To say over the names of some of the plays is to wander again in old dewy forests, or to recapture lost fairylands. They are, indeed, "the holy writ of beauty," and to hold a volume of the "Sonnets" in the hand is as though indeed we laid our hand on the solemn heart of man, or held to our ears a shell filled with the rumor of Eternity.

There is nothing in any other of our loved poets, however great or deep thoughted or lovely or fragrant or tender, that we cannot find, too, in Shakespeare in utterance more golden, in words of more thrilling bloom or majesty. All other poets seem his children, or his forerunners:

All stars are angels, but the sun is God.

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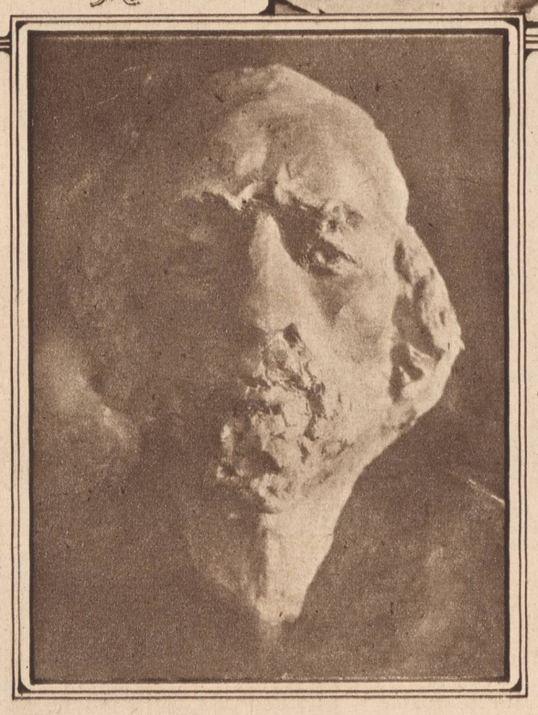
Othello. If thou dost slander her and torture me,
Never pray more.

John McCullough.
From William Winter's "Shakespeare on the Stage"

Juliet: Love's heralds should be thoughts,
Which ten times faster glide than the sun's beams,
Driving back shadows over louring hills.

Mrs. Hopkins. (then Violet Vivian of the Ben Greet Players, before Yale University).



Shylock: O father Abram, what these Christians are,
Whose own hard dealings teaches them suspect
The thoughts of others!

Sir Johnstone Forbes-Robertson.
Sculpture by John F. Parker

How to Read Shakespeare

From George Bernard Shaw's "Dramatic Opinions and Essays." Copyright, Brentano

SHAKESPEARE is so much the word-musician that mere practical intelligence, no matter how well prompted by dramatic instinct, cannot enable anybody to understand his works or arrive at a right execution of them without the guidance of a fine ear. At the emotional climaxes in his works we find passages which are Rossinian in their reliance on symmetry of melody and impressiveness of march to redeem poverty of meaning. In fact, we have got so far beyond Shakespeare as a man of ideas that there is by this time hardly a famous passage in his works that is considered fine on any other ground than that it sounds beautifully, and awakens in us the emotion that originally expressed itself by its beauty.

Strip it of that beauty of sound by prosaic paraphrase and you have nothing left but a platitude that even an American professor of ethics would blush to offer to his disciples. Wreck that beauty by a harsh, jarring utterance, and you will make your audience wince as if you were singing Mozart out of tune. Ignore it by avoiding "sing-song"—that is, ingeniously breaking the verse up so as to make it sound like prose, as the professional elocutionist prides himself on doing—and you are landed in a stilted, monstrous jargon that has not even the prosaic merit of being intelligible. Let me give one example: Cleopatra's outburst at the death of Antony:

O withered is the garland of the war,
The soldier's pole is fallen; young boys and girls
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon.

This is not good sense—not even good grammar. If you ask what does it all mean the reply must be that it means just what its utterer feels. The chaos of its thought is a reflection of her mind, in which one can vaguely discern a wild illusion that all human distinction perishes with the gigantic distinction between Antony and the rest of the world. Now it is only in music, verbal or other, that the feeling which plunges thought into confusion can be artistically expressed. Any attempt to deliver such music prosaically would be as absurd as an attempt to speak an oratorio of Handel's, repetitions and all. The right way to declaim Shakespeare is the sing-song way. Mere metric accuracy is nothing. There must be beauty of tone, expressive inflection, and infinite variety of nuance to sustain the fascination of the infinite monotony of the chanting.