

SHAKESPEARE'S SEARCH FOR A HERO¹

WHEN I speak of a hero I do not imply the possession of those qualities which we normally think of as heroic. I do not mean courage in battle, constancy in love, generosity in triumph, resignation in defeat; I do not mean the glamour of physique and the leadership of arms, although we shall find these qualities in many of Shakespeare's people. I mean by a Shakespearean hero, not the character whom his judgment approved, but the character with whom his imagination was identified.

A very penetrating critic, Mr. Middleton Murry, to whose recent book on Shakespeare I am greatly indebted, has written as though he did not exercise the prerogative of moral judgment. He would have us believe that Shakespeare's genius was a mirror wherein the contradictions and the multiplicity of life expressed themselves, and that it was not in his nature to interpret this movement in the light of moral principles. In a word, he was a man of imagination rather than a man of character. I do not question a limited truth in this. Shakespeare was a man of his own time. The romantic tradition of criticism, to which we owe the dangerous elucidations of Coleridge, so stressed the universal character of his genius that it forgot that he had also a "local habitation and a name." It ignored his particularity of time and place. I can see no reason to doubt that he shared the baffled and half-sceptical philosophy of his time; nor that in the person of Hamlet he gave it a definitive voice. His mind did not move against any fixed background of theological beliefs, as Dante's did, but he clearly inherited, along with many others of his time, a hierarchy of moral values which were the legacy of a Christian and a classical culture. He will indict Goneril and Regan for filial ingratitude, Anthony for excess of passion, Macbeth for treachery and murder. Even when his characters have committed crime or folly they are haunted by a high conception of honour. In fact, in

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this word "honour," I think we have a clue to Shakespeare's closest apprehension of truth.

Here Shakespeare was very much in the central tradition of his world. That is to say he was closer to Chaucer than he was to Marlowe and closer to St. Thomas More than he was to either. You may say that he was the supreme prophet of human passion and yet admit that he was afraid of its excess. All the golden comedies of the early years are sunny with the love of life. They bear their own unconscious witness to the dawn of Christian humanism. They are sane with a Christian sanity. Shakespeare looks at man—at Benedick, Harry, and Hotspur; he looks at women—at Portia, Rosamond, Viola and Beatrice; and he sees them whole and he sees them good. Their physical ardour, articulate and unashamed, is good; so is their moral courage and their quickness of honour and their glancing wit. There was of course a time towards the end of Shakespeare's life, when he had suffered and seen more, perhaps, than is good for the equilibrium of even the greatest soul, and this period I shall call the period of obsession. It was the time of *Troilus* and *Timon* and *Lear*. It was a mood of black pessimism, of deep disgust for the animality of man, but, like other moods, it passed. Yet the Shakespeare who emerged from it was a wiser man if he could not be a greater poet. Haunted by the high companionship of honour, he had travelled from Harry the King to Brutus, from Brutus to Hamlet, from Hamlet to Antony, from Antony to Lear, and from Lear to Prospero. You may call this journey anything you like according to the angle of your approach to Shakespeare. If you try to accompany him, you will learn a great deal. I have called it "Shakespeare's Search for a Hero," and that perhaps is as good a name as any other. But although we shall come, as he did, to the end of it, we shall never see what he saw by the way.

By Shakespeare's Hero, then, I mean the man in whom his imagination, protected by his honour, identified itself most completely. The more closely we look at Shakespeare's heroes, the more plausible does their succession become, the more exactly do they correspond to what we may suppose to

have been the progress in Shakespeare's soul. Let us take a look at the young Shakespeare. A scion of the middle classes whom circumstances and inclination had turned into a vagabond; a successful author favoured by the aristocracy; a man of the theatre, claiming his protection from the Crown and winning his popularity from the mob. You see the contacts radiating to all parts of the social hemisphere—the Crown, the nobility, the middle classes, and the people. You see, perhaps, why Shakespeare talked such good sense in politics; why he could admit the right of kings, as in *Richard II*, and yet not quite admit them to be divine; why he could despise the mob as in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, and yet show how the pride of dictators could have a fall. Anyway we see that Shakespeare was not only an actor-author, but also a man of action. He can have had little time to dream, and he was certainly attached to no artistic coterie—although he drank with the rest at the Mermaid. His condition was the best possible condition for an artist. He had to earn his living. And to earn his living he had to do what we all must do; he had to please his public and his patrons. Therefore it is that we find in all the early plays a fine noise of rhetoric, and in the middle of the noise a personal note of poetry; a fine battle of conceits, and here and there a personal flash of wit; a furious *melée* of blood and arms, and in the midst of the *melée* the voice of the born dramatist; a splendid cavalcade of soldiers and courtiers and aristocrats and kings, and somewhere in their ranks the lineaments of the Shakespearean Hero.

We meet him first in *Love's Labour Lost*. He is Berowne; Berowne-Benedick, I should say. His wit is formal and his style cramped. He lacks full spontaneity as yet, but he will be Benedick later on. His Rosaline, too, has in her the beginnings of Beatrice; but she is also the beetle-browed hussy of Romeo's adolescent dream, with whom Beatrice would have had small patience. Berowne and Rosaline are the couple which keep on turning up, and it is perfectly fair to see in them and in their successors a reflection of Shakespeare himself. They are the poet in his first act of spontaneous self-expression. Berowne is perhaps a little too

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much of a courtier for our liking and his world too circumscribed for our taste. Possibly the favour of the aristocracy had gone to Shakespeare's head. But Berowne will soon break the boundaries of Whitehall and in his great speech is beginning to soar into poetry. For the rest, he is something like the ideal Englishman of Shakespeare's day, brave, mercurial, witty, gallant, cynical on the surface, deeply tender underneath, the soul of chivalry and honour. He is the natural man whom we shall see later on in Henry V raised to the full height of his dignity.

But we need not let Berowne detain us. He is merely an introduction. He reappears presently as Mercutio, and with Mercutio Shakespeare is already getting into trouble. This man of his, this bluff, witty, gallant boon-companion, is beginning to run away with the plays. He is a glory which he can never shed and a menace he can never shake off. But in *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare is writing a tragedy of human love. He is trying to say for the first time that human love is greater than human life and that that is the reason for its defeat. That is what Shakespeare sees in human love: the paradox of triumph in defeat. There hovers around the heads of all his tragic lovers the peculiar nimbus of martyrdom.

Romeo was, of course, by rights the hero of *Romeo and Juliet*, but somehow he did not awaken in Shakespeare's soul the miracle of creative spontaneity. There is after all an intelligible reason why actors think Mercutio the better part. He is so much the better part that Shakespeare had to kill him in the second act; that was the only way in which he could be fair to Juliet—for Juliet was his greatest achievement up to now. There was always this danger—that the woman whom he had created should be spoilt by the man whom he loved.

Next time he was more careful. At this period Shakespeare was beginning to rummage in Holinshed. He was seeking his own response to the upsurge of patriotic feeling around him. He had already created his own particular Englishman in Mercutio; for Mercutio is no more Italianate than Micawber. He has the poetry and the humour and the

passion and the reticence of your typical Englishman. But we may suppose that the Elizabethan audience wanted a national hero, not merely a national character. There is no reason to think that Shakespeare did not share that want or that he was so Olympian as to be exempt from patriotism or even from jingoistic pride. He spoke for Elizabethan England much as Kipling spoke for Edwardian England. But he spoke for many other Englands too.

Shakespeare quickly found the man he wanted—Falconbridge in *King John*. Falconbridge is perhaps his best version of his best friend. He has the brusque humour of Mercutio; he has Harry's genius for comradeship; he has Hotspur's poetry and courage. He is complete from the first line to the last. But he is also the cynic which was later to appear in Enobarbus. Both Falconbridge and Enobarbus show their heroic qualities in the same way. They are both loyal to a weak man. Falconbridge sees the falsity and the weakness of John, but he sticks to him none the less. Enobarbus will leave Antony because his mind is at war with his heart, but his desertion kills him and is itself atoned for in his death.

Shakespeare was still preoccupied with history, and English history did not fail him. But his imagination penetrated it more and more. He annexed it, as he annexed the plots of his plays, and then gave it back to us transfigured. You may say, if you like, that he began to re-write *King John* in *Richard II*. In each play there is a weak king, but though Shakespeare does not spare the weakness of Richard, he wastes no sympathy on Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke is a part of the mechanics of history and is only used to bring Richard to death and Henry V to life. He is an interim figure.

People have seen in *Richard II* a prefiguring of Hamlet, but I cannot quite accept the pedigree. Shakespeare found Richard and his imagination entered into his character and his circumstance, and revealed them to us in a sustained magnificence of speech. But Hamlet he created. You may say that, being Shakespeare, he could not have helped creating Hamlet. You can only say that it was very lucky for us

that his imagination happened to alight upon Richard.

No, Richard is rather apart from the progress I am trying to trace, but he is the one example in Shakespeare of a character failing through too much imagination and too little character. He came to ruin, not through excess like Othello and Antony, but through a moral void within him. Shakespeare pities him a little, but not nearly so much as he pities himself. There is a sense in which it is true to say that Richard II was the author of *Richard II*, and that what Shakespeare cared for was not the overthrow of the man but the dethronement of the king; or, more exactly, the degradation of the crown. And it is here, in Richard II, that we can see most clearly Shakespeare's views on kingship. Mr. Murry has some extraordinarily acute observations to make on this point, in which he shows, conclusively to my mind, that Shakespeare did not take Richard at his own valuation. Richard, he would seem to imply, loses his right when he loses his authority, and it is just authority that Shakespeare salutes in Bolingbroke. Mr. Murry has pointed out something that had never struck me before: that it is in the character of York, who loyally accepts the new regime, that Shakespeare's own views are expressed. In a word, Shakespeare was an authoritarian but he was not a legitimist.

Shakespeare's hero—Mercutio-Falconbridge, as we may call him—now divides into Falstaff on the one hand and Hotspur on the other. Hotspur has his rhetoric and his poetry:

By heaven, methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale faced moon.

He has too his straightforwardness, his courage, and his rough but honest way with women. But Falstaff has his cynicism; that question mark about the world; that scepticism about virtue and honour itself; that natural philosophy and that abundant wit. Falstaff is Shakespeare's supreme apology for human nature. He invites us to a tolerance to which his author would never have persuaded us later on. Yet Shakespeare goes further into the depths of human nature with Falstaff than he has ever gone hitherto. Falstaff, the philosopher of the tavern, the man of wenches and wine,

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the hedonist in love and the coward in war, hovers on the brink of eternity. He is like a monstrous moth hovering round an eternal candle. When Mercutio is dying, he can say:

Look for me to-morrow and you shall find me a grave man.

When Falstaff has Doll Tearsheet on his knees, they can talk like this:

Doll: . . . when wilt thou leave fighting o' days and foining o' nights and begin to patch up thine old body for heaven.

Fal.: Peace, good Doll, do not speak like a Death's head; do not bid me remember mine end.

We ask ourselves why Shakespeare-Hal rejected Shakespeare-Falstaff? The reason is quite simply that while there was room at a pinch for Falstaff and Hotspur (so long as Hotspur was killed off) and room to spare for Falstaff and Hal, there would certainly not be room for Falstaff and Harry. The claims of the hero are imperative and Shakespeare had to cut the Gordian knot in a speech which must have hurt him as much as it hurts us. Yet in the epilogue to *Henry IV*, Part II, Shakespeare promises to continue the story with Sir John in it and "make you merry with fair Catherine of France, where for anything I know Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already he be killed by your hard opinions."

Shakespeare, as you see, did not quite know what to do with Falstaff, but he could not bring himself to bid him good-bye. You will remember what he does. He decides with an artist's perfect intuition to pit the death of Falstaff against the life of Harry. There was nothing else he could do with Falstaff, and there was certainly nothing else that Falstaff could do. So Shakespeare gives us Mistress Quickly's account of his end in a speech which is among the most perfect conclusions of literature. The enormous moth is singed by the eternal candle. And I do not think it altogether fanciful to suggest that the moment when Falstaff "fumbled with the sheets, and played with flowers, and smiled upon his fingers' ends . . . and cried out 'God, God, God' three or four times" was the moment when Hamlet was conceived.

(To be concluded)

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