

What's in a Name?

Hugh Trevor-Roper

From *Réalités* (English Edition), November 1962



We reprint this essay by historian Hugh Trevor-Roper for its perspective on a topic that has generated very little scholarly effort in 400 years—determining Shakespeare's philosophy and character from the contents of the canon. His methodology, in fact, is that of J.T. Looney, the man who proposed the Earl of Oxford as the man behind the name William Shakespeare. Looney analyzed the plays and poetry of Shakespeare for consistency in theme, plot and characterization and found that the author evinced the following general characteristics:

Shakespeare was a matured man of recognized genius, eccentric and unconventional in behavior with an intense sensibility, an enthusiast of drama, a lyric poet of recognized talent who also possessed a superior education classical in foundation, and was the habitual associate of educated people.

Looney further proposed that Shakespeare's particular characteristics included having feudal connections as a member of the higher aristocracy, to be a supporter of the Lancastrian faction, an enthusiast for Italy, a follower of sport (including falconry), a lover of music, loose and improvident in money matters, doubtful and somewhat conflicting in his attitudes to women, and of probable Catholic leanings, but touched with skepticism.

Trevor-Roper used a variant of this methodology to uncover Shakespeare's personality and philosophy. Examining the works from the

inside, he looked,

first, to the range and limitations of Shakespeare's conscious knowledge and thought; secondly, to the underlying assumptions which are taken for granted by all his characters; thirdly, to the world from which he draws his customary images. The first of these methods may show us something about Shakespeare's mind; the second about his philosophy; the third about his tastes.

What Trevor-Roper found was the sensibility and philosophical outlook of an aristocrat pervaded with nostalgia for the past and gloom about the future, precisely because Shakespeare's arrival coincided with the end of the Renaissance. Indeed, lacking that historical perspective, literary scholars have frequently mistaken Shakespeare's "exuberance" as the result of his being Nature's (ignorant) Child—instead of perceiving the underlying cause of that exuberance *to be his widespread learning*. The entire skein of Shakespeare's mind—personal, political and philosophical—is laid out in Trevor-Roper's examination, which readers will enjoy discovering on their own. — Editors



Of all the immortal geniuses of literature, none is personally so elusive as William Shakespeare. It is exasperating, and almost incredible, that he should be so. After all, he lived in the full daylight of the English Renaissance, in the well-documented reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James I. He wrote thirty-five plays and 150 highly personal sonnets. He was connected with some of the best-known public figures in the most conspicuous court in English history. Since his death, and particularly in the last century, he has been subjected to the greatest battery of organized research that has ever been directed upon a single person. And yet the greatest of all Englishmen, after this tremendous inquisition, still remains so close a mystery that even his identity can still be doubted.

For what is the man revealed by all this systematic research? The external records show that William Shakespeare was born at Stratford-on-Avon, the son of a local tradesman whose business declined and who was fined for keeping an unauthorized dungheap. The son evidently left Stratford for London, became an actor and then a playhouse-manager, and being careful of money, was able to retire early. He died, reasonably prosperous, at Stratford, leaving his second-best bed to his wife. During his lifetime nobody claimed to know him. Not a single tribute was paid to him at his death.

As far as the records go, he was uneducated, had no literary friends, possessed at his death no books, and could not write. It is true, six of his signatures have been found, all spelt differently; but they are so ill-formed that some graphologists suppose the hand to have been guided. Except for these signatures, no syllable of writing by Shakespeare has been identified. Seven years after his death, when his works were collected and published, and other poets for the first time claimed to have known him, a portrait of him was printed. The unskilful artist has presented the blank face of a country oaf.

Such is the best the historians can do. Clearly it is not enough. It may be the shell: it is not the man. To find the man we must look elsewhere, not at the historical fragments but at the authentic deposit of his mind: at his copious, undisputed works. Surely, we say, we shall find him there. But what in fact do we find? In the end, the mystery is only deepened. A supreme dramatist, Shakespeare is always creating other characters, but never reveals his own. His characters express their own thoughts, not his, and in the end, only they, not he, assume reality.

Where the historians have failed, the literary detectives have set to work. They have combed his works for personal revelations, snatches of autobiography, hints of character. Unfortunately they only end by quarrelling among themselves. Some of them father upon Shakespeare their own beliefs. Roman Catholics have made him a Roman Catholic, Protestants a Protestant, democrats a democrat, patriots a patriot. He has been made the prophet of the British Empire, the upholder of Victorian morality, and one distinguished modern scholar has defined his character as "Christ-like." When I think of Shakespeare's irrepressible ribaldry, his elaborate obscenity, his religious indifference and his questionable amours, I admit that I find this last parallel somewhat strained.

Nevertheless, any man who has written as much as Shakespeare must have revealed his personality in his writings. The problem is to know where to seek it. I believe we can discover something provided we are not too ambitious. We must not expect Shakespeare to declare himself openly. If he reveals himself, it will be indirectly, not in the positive opinions which his characters express, but in the background against which, and the words in which they express them. We must therefore look, first, to the range and limitations of Shakespeare's conscious knowledge and thought; secondly, to the underlying assumptions which are taken for granted by all his characters; thirdly, to the world from which he draws his customary images. The first of these methods may show us something about Shakespeare's mind; the second about his philosophy; the third about his tastes. In addition, from such of Shakespeare's writings as may seem autobiographical, we may learn something of his life.

First, Shakespeare's mind. In the past, Shakespeare has often been seen as "fancy's child," an untutored natural genius, without learning, art or sophistication. This view, based on the informality of his style and the early popularity of his rustic comedies, began to be held soon after his death. Ben Jonson and Milton both held it. Thereafter, as taste became ever more "classical" and "correct," it became stronger. To the 18th century, Shakespeare was a "primitive": a genius indeed, but a savage genius; even, to Voltaire in a moment of bad temper, "le sauvage ivre."

Today we cannot see him thus. Freed, by the Romantic Movement, from the classical dogmas of the 17th and 18th centuries, and enabled, by modern scholarship, to appreciate intellectual systems other than our own, we now realize that the century of the Renaissance, whose exuberance seems in retrospect so haphazard, in fact had its own rules, and that Shakespeare knew those rules. No scholar today would see Shakespeare as a mere "child of nature." On the contrary, we realize that he was highly educated, even erudite.

It is true, he does not parade his learning. He wears no heavy carapace of classical or Biblical or philosophical scholarship, like Donne or Milton. But he is clearly familiar, in an easy, assured manner, with the wide learning of his time and had the general intellectual formation of a cultivated man of the Renaissance. He was at home in the Aristotelian cosmology of his time. He had learned the new Platonic philosophy. He was familiar with foreign countries, foreign affairs, foreign languages. He might give Bohemia a seacoast — but it had one. His Danish names in *Hamlet*, his French names in *Love's Labour's Lost*, show familiarity with current politics. His knowledge of Italy was extraordinary. An English scholar who lived in Venice has found his visual topographical exactitude in *The Merchant of Venice* incredible in one who had never been there.

And as in substance; so also in form. Shakespeare was a great student of style, a great experimenter and inventor of words, though so many of his inventions have been accepted into our language that we easily forget their novelty. His early works were deeply influenced by the elaborate, artificial "euphuism" made fashionable by John Lyly: a style of writing which he first marvellously exploited, then transcended.

Exuberant, experimental, sophisticated . . . these indeed are the qualities of the Renaissance. But when we speak of the European Renaissance of the 16th century we must distinguish its phases. There is its beginning, the period of Machiavelli and Erasmus and Thomas More, and there is its end, the period of Tasso and Cervantes and Montaigne; and Shakespeare very definitely belonged to its end. This is particularly obvious when we move from the range of his mind to its limitations, from his speculations to his assumptions. For the assumptions of the later Renaissance differ markedly, in at least one respect, from those of the earlier Renaissance. This limitation is to be observed in the field of politics and social ideas.

The early humanists had been rebels. They had uttered social and political protests. Erasmus, though the friend of kings, Machiavelli, though the author of *The Prince*, had been essentially republicans. More had written, in *Utopia*, a radical tract. But at the end of the 16th century all this was changed. Even the greatest, most imaginative writers took the courtly, aristocratic society around them for granted. Shakespeare could see and feel the sufferings of the poor. He could make great tragedies out of the insensitivity or unworthiness of kings. But of social or political protest there is, in his works, no trace.

Whatever his own social circumstances, in his outlook Shakespeare was an unquestioning aristocrat. To him the established order is a mystical harmony, kings rule by divine right, and any challenge to that harmony, that right, is unforgivable.

It was its usurpation of the throne which, in the historical plays, was the hereditary tragedy of the house of Lancaster. On the other hand, popular leaders — whether Roman tribunes or English rebels — are to him merely vulgar demagogues. The people, indeed, are quite unfit for public affairs. Kings may make war for trifles, nations may be sacrificed to chivalric honour, but the duty of the people is to admire and obey.

Above a certain social level, Shakespeare sees a kind of consecrated *douceur de vivre*, a charmed, delicate, sophisticated world whose recreation is true comedy, whose disturbance is tragedy. Below that level there are of course servants who may be dignified by their loyalty to noble masters. But the independent sub-noble world, the world of artisans and craftsmen, if it exists for Shakespeare, exists only as his butt.

Shakespeare's social conformity is reflected also in religion. In the 16th century religion was the business of the state. It was also the business of every man. It dominated public and private life. And yet even here the most famous of Englishmen contrives to remain mysterious. We do not know Shakespeare's religion. His father, as late as 1600, was a Roman Catholic: Shakespeare himself conformed to the Established Church.

That in itself does not mean much. From the plays we can deduce nothing. That profound, questioning, universal spirit, which could be so philosophical, so metaphysical, so Platonic, never utters a syllable which suggests a personal religion. Beneath his conformity, he may have been a Catholic (but an anti-papal English Catholic); he may have been a Protestant (but certainly not a puritan); he may have been a sceptic. Most probably he was a sceptic. In his comedies he loves this life only; in his tragedies there is no hint of another. All we can say certainly is that, though profoundly concerned with the predicament of man, he never questioned the religion of state. The religion of protest, like the politics of protest, left him cold.

A cultured, sophisticated aristocrat, fascinated alike by the comedy and tragedy of human life, but unquestioning in his social and religious conservatism — such is the outward character revealed by Shakespeare's works. But behind that outward character there is another, more intimate character: a character which has been revealed most skilfully and effectively, I think, by the study of his imagery. For although Shakespeare's characters express their own views, not his, the language they use, and the metaphors they choose, are his, not theirs.

First, we may discover something of Shakespeare's tastes. Shakespeare, it is well known, had a remarkable familiarity with the law. His plays are very largely about court life, even if the court is occasionally transplanted to Arcadian settings. And they were performed in London. But in spite of all this he was, essentially, a countryman and a landsman. His love and understanding of the country are extraordinary; far deeper than that of any other poet, even in England. His knowledge of hunting and hawking (though not of fishing) is that of an expert. His love and observation of wild animals, and especially wild birds, is intimate and minute. He has a great eye for the weather and its nuances, for the seasons and their changes. All the moods of the country exhilarate him. He loved wild flowers and was

clearly a devoted gardener: only Francis Bacon (a passionate gardener) compares with him here. Indeed Shakespeare sees mankind almost as part of nature: sometimes basking in a delightful, smiling Nature; sometimes caught up in a fierce, cruel, inexorable, insatiable Nature.

So much is obvious. But if we look further, we soon find something else. In his contact with nature, as with all else, Shakespeare shows — and this indeed seems his most personal characteristic — an extreme, exaggerated sensitivity. In a rough, cruel age of strong tastes and uninhibited pleasures, Shakespeare had, together with his bounding vitality, a delicacy of perception which gave him strange, heightened pleasure — but also pain.

Positively, he delighted in freshness, the freshness of nature, and he hated interference with that freshness. Intensely musical, familiar with all instruments, he loved silence too, which to him was a kind of harmony, and he was acutely pained by jarring sounds or harsh voices. He was keenly aware of smells, especially bad smells — the smell of the unwashed multitude particularly revolted him; but he disliked the strong perfumes with which his contemporaries disguised those smells. He had a delicate sense of touch, hating sticky surfaces. He disliked paint, as he disliked all disguising films. He had a horror of greasy food. Above all things, he delighted in the subtleties of natural movement.

Now this intense delicacy of perception, combined with his zest for natural life, gives Shakespeare's early works their marvellous freshness, their glancing, sparkling luminosity. But the same sensitivity had also its obverse side. Shakespeare, we often feel, had a skin too few: whatever he saw he felt, and he felt it far more intensely than most of his contemporaries. This too we can see in his love of nature.

For all his intimate love of hunting, Shakespeare hardly ever shows personal delight in it. On the contrary, his sympathies are always with "the poor hunted deer," the trapped bird, the over-driven horse, the baited bear. Again and again he enters, intensely and personally, into the suffering which others take for granted. Perhaps the most remarkable instance is of the snail. To most men the snail typifies slowness, and Shakespeare liked darting movement. The snail is also sticky, and Shakespeare hated stickiness. And to gardeners, like him, it is a pest. But to Shakespeare all these obvious disadvantages are transcended by one sympathetic quality. The snail, to him, is the type of sensitivity. Whenever he mentions it, it is to describe its "tender horns," so "soft and sensible," shrinking back in anguish from painful contact with the rough world. Shakespeare, it is clear, loved snails: they epitomized what Keats called his own "snailhorn perception of beauty."

How did this sensitive creature, this delicate, aristocratic character, so acutely aware of the pleasures and pains, the comedy and tragedy of life, himself survive the rough-and-tumble of the Elizabethan age? The answer is, I think, that he did not survive it intact. At a certain point in his life his heightened sensitivity turned from awareness of the marvelous outward beauty of the world to perception of its remorseless and, in the end, meaningless cruelty.

To some men, such a change might well be reflected in religious conversion.

But Shakespeare was really a non-religious man. Being unable to take refuge in an abstract God, he found himself face to face with the brute tragedy of human life. So the exquisite poet of Arcadia became the greatest tragic poet of the modern world. For although even the dates of Shakespeare's plays, like everything about him, are uncertain, their order seems clear enough, and shows us the moment of change. Up to a certain date Shakespeare wrote mainly comedies; or if he wrote tragedies, they were tragedies like *Richard II* or *Julius Caesar* in which the spectacular death of the hero does not involve the audience in any general tragic philosophy. After that date he wrote his great tragedies — *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* — and even his comedies are not exempt from the same basically tragic conception of life. In his last plays, whatever their form, Shakespeare unmistakably sees the world as a grim, impersonal machinery of blind fate and brute time in which all the fragile beauty of life and potential nobility of man are ground down to triviality and dusty nothing.

Is it possible to document this change in Shakespeare's personal life? A great dramatist transmutes all his own experience, and we can never be more than half-sure of any allusion. Nevertheless one work of Shakespeare at least is largely personal. In the Sonnets, Shakespeare already presages something of the change. There we see the exalted, refined, passionate, "platonic" love which he could feel for an evidently aristocratic young man; but there also the painful, mortifying sensations which the physical aspect of love always and increasingly aroused in him. The decisive point in the change, however, seems to be marked by that great but terrible play, *Troilus and Cressida*: a play in which all Shakespeare's marvellous power of language seems to be devoted to the expression of one emotion: disgust with human life, its grossness, its falsity, its futility.

Moreover, about the same time, Shakespeare wrote another play which, it is now widely agreed, is largely autobiographical: that most bewildering, most fascinating of all his plays, *Hamlet*. Hamlet, the over-sensitive man, whose chameleon sympathy with all around him, whose capacity to enter into all men's doubts and fears, enabled him to mount brilliant plays but disabled him from imposing his personality on events or leaving any personal trace in history — this is Shakespeare himself: Hamlet to whom "this goodly frame, the earth" was "a sterile promontory," and the sky "this majestic roof, fretted with golden fire," no other than "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours"; to whom society itself was "rotten" and the life of thinking man purposeless and vain.

From that time on, in tragedy and comedy alike, Shakespeare constantly expresses this sense of helplessness and disgust. The old fastidiousness, which had enabled him to detect ever fresh subtleties of beauty, harmony and delight, is now expressed again and again in the imagery of nausea: the foul stench of human wickedness, the leprous touch of a diseased world, the greasy taste of false emotions, the jangled chords of a fractured society. Love itself, whose infiniteness and purity had inspired *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Sonnets*, has now become a gross, physical act, like "the engendering of toads": in his later plays Shakespeare seems sometimes obsessed, hysterical about the act of sex: bawdiness has turned to loathing. The whole

world, to him, has now lost order and meaning:

"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods," says King Lear, "they kill us for their sport." Even language, the realm of Shakespeare's sovereignty, has become a means of corruption: "You taught me language," (says Caliban) and my profit on't is, I know how to curse." So Shakespeare moved into his great tragic period. His character, in those Jacobean days, had received a new dimension. Great tragedy does not spring from a gay heart. Shakespeare's scepticism had turned to hatred of a world from which God had fled; his love of life — the message of his early play Love's Labour's Lost — had turned to disillusion with life. His delight in nature even, had been subordinated to tragedy.

The serenity of Macbeth's castle emphasizes the treachery it is to encompass; the imaginary, evanescent clouds described by Antony are a presage of his own dissolution; the tide-washed beach is the place of Timon's grave. And yet, of course, the change is not total. In the interstices of tragedy the old spirit, the old gift of fantasy, the old exquisite sense of beauty breaks through, as strong as ever, to achieve fresh miracles of lyric power. In *The Tempest*, perhaps his last play, Shakespeare showed that he could still produce a comedy as fresh and idyllic as of old — but a comedy, if we listen closely, with a heavy, tragic undertone.

For in Shakespeare's last period the English Renaissance came to its end. Already the age of effortless, aristocratic gaiety had passed. The baroque era of introspection and doubt had begun. Shakespeare (whoever he was) lived long enough into that era to bring together, in a marvellous marriage, two opposite qualities: the wonderful, iridescent freshness of Elizabethan England, and the growing disillusion of the early 17th century.

He was lucky — or rather, we are lucky — in his generation. Had he lived a little earlier perhaps we should never have had the great tragedies of his maturity. Had he lived a little later, we might have lost the marvellous freshness of his youth. We had Shakespeare, said Lord Keynes in a famous boutade, when we could afford him. Certainly we had him at the only time when he was possible. A few years after his death the political and social structure which he took for granted crumbled in ruin. For twenty years the London playhouses were closed. Tragedies and comedies were forbidden. Rebellion, which he hated, God, whom he ignored, and the puritans, whom he detested, were not long in claiming their revenge.

