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HAD SHAKESPEARE READ DANTE?

by J. J. Dwyer

Many years ago the late John Churton Collins, whom many of us remember, wrote in one of the Reviews several articles entitled "Had Shakespeare read the Greek Tragedies?" I have completely forgotten the arguments used, but he was persuaded that Shakespeare was something of a classical scholar and I remember on one occasion hearing Churton Collins prove that the "quality of mercy" speech in "The Merchant of Venice" was taken straight out of Seneca's "De Clementia." Everybody agrees that the Poet was saturated with Ovid and it seems to me that certain of the "Dark Lady" sonnets and allied passages in "Antony and Cleopatra" have plainly recognizable echoes of Catullus. But to Maurice Baring we are indebted, so far as I know, for raising the question, "Did Shakespeare ever read Dante?" Baring's charming collection of favourite passages, labelled "Have You Anything to Declare?" naturally contains a full section on Dante and this section both begins and ends with Francesca of Rimini (Inferno V). "There is a passage," he says (p. 109) "in 'Measure for Measure' which makes me think that he (Shakespeare) may possibly have read the 'Inferno' "; and he proceeds to quote that famous outburst of Claudio (Act III, Scene 1) on the terrors of the Other World:

Ay, but to die and go we know not where:
. . . and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; . . .

These lines and the whole of the passage seem in truth to be a summary of the punishments described in the "Inferno" and the last three lines above quoted irresistibly suggest;

La bufera infernal, che mai non resta.

That is all that Baring has to say on this subject, but there is more than that. In the same celebrated episode, Francesca, telling Dante how she was suddenly and pitilessly slain, speaks:

. . . della bella persona
Che mi fu tolta, e il modo ancor m'offende.
(v. 101-2)

Now this strange expression, "and still the mode offends me" crops up in a surprising way in the middle of "Othello." Montano is called upon by Othello (Act II, Scene iii) to explain what happened to him in the "night brawl" got up by Iago and he does so thus:

Mon: Worthy Othello, I am hurt to danger:
Your officer, Iago, can inform you -
While I spare speech, WHICH SOMETHING NOW OFFENDS ME -
Of all that I do know . . .

The context of course is very different. But that seems to make it all the more remarkable as if this singular expression had stuck in the mind of the poet and he found that he simply had to use it. Everybody who writes knows how some expressions met in the course of one's reading haunt the mind and clamour to be used somehow, whereupon the obsession is dispelled. It seems to me that the appearance in "Othello" of "il modo ancor m'offende" is an example of this.

In Canto xxxiii which contains the dreadful story of Ugolino we find one of those curious verbal similarities that may mean so much when one is hot for certainty in the quest to which the Shakespeare Fellowship is vowed. Ugolino has begun to tell of the frightful vengeance taken by his enemies and he interrupts his narrative to say:

Ben se' crudel, se tu gia non ti duoli
Pensando cio ch'al mio cor s'annunziava:
E se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?

(xxxiii, 40-2)

Cruel indeed art thou, if yet thou grieve not,
Thinking of what my heart foreboded me,
And weep'st thou not, what art thou wont to weep at?
(Longfellow's Translation)

Does not this instantly recall:

"If you have tears prepare to shed them now"?

The fully annotated edition of Cary's translation of "The Divine Comedy" provides some striking verbal parallels. We can disregard Ugolino's words about being turned to stone (si dentro impetrai), because that has been said in every language, but in another place we find this:

Come procede innanzi dall'ardore
Per lo papiro suso un color bruno
Che non e nero ancora e il bianco more
Inf. xxv, 64-6.

This striking simile is aptly compared by the annotator with the words of the dying King John:

I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen
Upon a parchment; AND AGAINST THIS FIRE
DO I SHRINK UP.
K. John, v, sc. 7.

Compare again the queer phrase "cima di giudizio," (Purg. vi, 37), with the literal translation of it found in the mouth of Isabella when she is pleading with Angelo:

How would you be
If He, which is the top of judgment, should
But judge you as you are?
"Measure for Measure," ii, sc. 2.

One of the most celebrated and most quoted passages in Dante is the outburst against the military weakness and political divisions of Italy which render her an easy prey to the foreigner. Everybody knows the lines:

Ahi, serva Italia di dolor ostello,
Nave senza nocchiero in gran tempesta,
Non donna di provincie, ma bordello!
Purg. vi, 76-8.

And here is the surprising thing, the Queen says of poor Richard in his downfall:-

Thou most beauteous INN,
Why should hard-favoured GRIEF be lodged in thee,
When triumph is become an ALEHOUSE guest?
Richard II, Act v, sc. i.

Here is another curious verbal parallel:

et io gustavo
Lo mio, temperando col dolce l'acerbo
Par. xviii, 3.

Chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy.
"As You Like It" iii, sc. iii.

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In the third canto of the "Purgatorio" is the celebrated colloquy of Dante with Manfred. At first sight it may seem fanciful to suggest that there is affinity between that which the unhappy prince relates to Dante and Hamlet's scene with the Ghost of his father. There are no striking verbal echoes such as those referred to above. But there is to my mind a strong underlying resemblance. I do not know exactly what there is in the Scandinavian saga that is the source of the plot of "Hamlet," but I do not expect to be told that there is very much about Purgatory in it. Now Shakespeare, half-Catholic and half-sceptic, clearly understands the doctrine of Purgatory as a place of expiation and I cannot help feeling - though of course I can adduce no proof - that he must have had Manfred in his mind when he wrote that thrice-famous scene. Manfred begins in the same way: "Io son Manfredi," and bids Dante go and tell his fair daughter what has befallen her father. He then relates how he was defeated and slain in battle and how he came to be in this place of expiation:

"Orribil furon li peccati miei,"

The foul crimes done in his days of nature, coupled with the fact that he died excommunicate, would lead the reader of The Divine Comedy to expect to find him elsewhere; but Manfred explains how at the very last moment the divine compassion intervened to save him from eternal doom. He goes on to relate how his remains were torn up from his tomb at Benevento and brought away to the river bank hard by the Verde. This was done by order of the Bishop, WITH MAIMED RITES, because the Prince had died under the ban of the Church:

Dov'ei le trasmuto a lume spento,

And Manfred bursts out against the formalism of those priests who denied him Christian burial:

Per loro maledizion si non si perde -

By their curse man is not wholly lost, all the same! One is reminded here of the burial of Ophelia. This parallel is perhaps not very strong, but the whole episode is strangely suggestive. The last line, too, brings us back to the doctrine which Shakespeare so clearly understood:

Che qui per quei di la molto s'avanza.

"For those on earth can much advance us here"; that is, by their prayers.

Lastly, the spirits of the blessed in Paradise are represented by Dante not in human semblance but always as moving and circling forms of living light. From Canto xxiii onwards there are many expressions which bring vividly before the mind's eye those images that haunted the imagination of Fra Angelico and Botticelli when they attempted to visualize and to depict the luminous glory of the blessed amid the music of the spheres. Here are some of those passages:

Vid' io sopra migliaia di lucerne,
Un sol che tutte quante l'accendea;
Come fa il nostro le viste superne;
E per la viva luce trasparea
La lucente sustanzia tanto chiara
Nel viso mio, che non lo sostenea.
(Parad. xxiii, 28-33)

Ciascun di quei candori in su si stese
Con la sua fiamma . . .
(Ibid. 124-5)

. . . quest'e la favilla
Che si dilata in fiamma poi vivace
E, come stella in cielo, in me scintilla.
(xxiv, 145-7)

. . . dentro al vivo seno
Di quello incendio tremolava un lampo
Subito e spesso, a guisa di baleno.

(xxv, 78-81)

And so it goes on, "lo schiarato splendore" and "l'infiammato giro," and much more. There perhaps is nothing in the plays and poems that directly corresponds with these pictures; but there is in Shakespeare one marvellous and unforgettable phrase, familiar to us all, in which they seem to be all summed up:

filling the brain with NIMBLE, FIERY AND
DELECTABLE SHAPES.

(2 Henry IV iv 3)

Dante was a traveller and a pilgrim, and in this connection it is strangely interesting to note what he says about the term or the name of Romeo. In the "Vita Nuova" (xli) 54 he explains that those are called PALMERS who journey over the sea whence they bring back palm branches:-

per quello
Che si reca il bordon di palma cinto.

(Purg. xxxiii 77-8)

that they who journey to the sanctuary in Galicia (St James of Compostella) are called PILGRIMS; and that they are called ROMERS who journey to Rome. In the sixth Canto of the "Paradiso" he introduces Romeo of Villeneuve, who was Chamberlain to the high and mighty prince, Raymond Berengar IV, Count of Provence. Romeo, who had been a pilgrim to Rome, had rendered the Count great service but was ill-requited:

. . . la luce di Romeo, di cui
fu l'opera bella a grande, ma mal gradita.

(Parad. vi 127-8)

Romeo was high spirited and sensitive about his reputation. When he was calumniated he left the Court and went his way, though old and poor, declaring that if world knew the heart he had in him, much as it praised him, it would praise him more.

Indi partisse povero e vetusto,
E se il mondo sapesse il cor ch'egli ebbe,
Mendicando sua vita a frusto a frusto,
Assai lo loda e piu lo loderebbe.

(Purg. vi 139-42)

These words remind me of one who had travelled much in Italy, who was Lord Great Chamberlain and bore the canopy, who complained bitterly of loss of reputation but confidently predicted that future generations would do him justice.

The foregoing instances have been collected without any great knowledge or research. I have no doubt that members of the Fellowship will be in a position to add to them very considerably. If any readers who can will do so they will doubtless make a useful contribution to Shakespearean studies.

MR WILLIAM KENT'S NEW BOOK

Mr William Kent, one of our most enthusiastic members, and a recognized authority on the history of London, is publishing this month his new book "London Worthies" (Heath Cranton Ltd, Large Crown 8vo, 18 illustrations, 10s. 6d. net). It will be of great interest to members of the Fellowship because it is unique in being the first book of its kind to attack the Stratfordian faith. Mr Kent will be pleased to send a prospectus of his book to members who would like one: his address is 73 Union Road, London, S.W.4.

The following is an extract from the Preface:-

There will be found some heresy here, both religious and literary. The former (to be found under such names as Bradlaugh, Hardy, Holyoake, and Huxley) will surprise no reader of "Dickens and Religion," "London for Heretics," and my previous, and most shocking, book, "The Testament of a Victorian Youth". Atheistical antiquaries are rare; conservatism is the badge of the tribe. I am, however, pleased to recall another in the person of Mr Arthur Bonner, F.S.A., President of the Balham Antiquarian Society. He is a son-in-law of Charles Bradlaugh, and in September 1938 was my lieutenant in conducting nearly a hundred delegates to the International Freethinkers' Congress on a London tour. My literary heresy will be found under the head "Shakespeare." This may surprise readers of "London for Shakespeare Lovers," as this book was written on orthodox assumptions. I was, however, when I wrote it growing too sceptical myself to express any disdain of the sceptics. Since then, after considerable study and thought, I have abandoned the Stratfordian faith as bankrupt. It is significant that so sane and able a critic as E. E. Kellett should recently have written, reviewing a "discussion" book

on Shakespeare in the "News-Chronicle": "It is too late in the day to ignore the anti-Stratfordian theories! Right or wrong, they are not unreasonable, and are supported by very plausible arguments, if also by some very reckless ones." It is significant too, that so popular a periodical as "John O'London's Weekly" should arrange a literary duel between a Stratfordian believer and a denier of the faith. I must congratulate Dr W. P. Barrett on showing more courage than other professors by entering the lists, though they may not thank him for revealing the weakness of the defence. My friend Mr Percy Allen vainly challenges them. I also throw down the glove to anybody who chooses to debate on the issue: "Is it now reasonable to believe that the Stratford actor wrote the Shakespeare plays?" I have little expectation of any response. The Stratfordians are so reluctant to enter the war they maintain they can so easily win; so mercifully reticent about publishing the book that must bomb us out of existence! I ought to say that the "dedicatee" (if I may coin a word) must not be held responsible for the dedicator's opinion. Recently Mr John Burns threatened to certify me if I continued in this course in conversation with him.

NEWS FROM AMERICA

Extracts from letter from Dr Louis P. Benezet, of Hanover, New Hampshire, U.S.A., to Mr Percy Allen, February 13th, 1939:

I have been giving a series of lectures at Northeastern University, Boston, on American Government and Politics. This has involved frequent trips to Boston, 150 miles away; but I have enjoyed it. I gave President Speare a copy of my Shakespeare booklet, and he was greatly impressed. I hope that he asks me to give a talk on the subject before the entire student body (1,700).

On November 25th I lectured before the Hathaway Shakespeare Club of Philadelphia (170 women), and had an enthusiastic reception. That same evening I repeated my lecture at the house of my former classmate and old friend, Professor Herbert A. Milles of Bryn Mawr College. Milles had some twelve members of the faculty from Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (only one mile apart), two Quaker Institutions with high reputations for scholarship. (B.M. for women. H. a man's college.)

It was interesting to see the reaction. McKinnon the well-known psychologist, and his Ph.D. wife confessed themselves converted, as did Dr Watson and Professor Tattimore. The only two who refused to open their minds were the teachers of English. Here, at Dartmouth (College), I find a number of men who are open-minded. Ashley K. Hardy, head of the German department, told me, after my lecture here, that I was exactly right: that Shakespeare is the only English dramatist, as Heinrich von Kleist is the only German dramatist, that knows the real language of the aristocracy. Eric Kelley, of the English Department, has asked me to talk the thing over with him, and E. Bradlee Watson - who is to teach the Shakespeare classes, this spring while Brooks Henderson takes a sabbatical half-year off - keeps questioning me to know more about de Vere.

I gave two lectures in December to the Connecticut State Teachers' College. The students gave me an enthusiastic reception. I offered my new (Shakespeare) book the other day to John Freeman of Houghton Mifflin Company. He was keenly interested, and I know that I made a convert of him before I had finished; but he pointed out that their house publishes books on Shakespeare by Kittredge, and classics edited by him, so that they would not dare appear with a book on the other side.

OCCASIONAL NOTES

On Wednesday, February 1st, at King's College, Strand, Mr Percy Allen lectured to The Elizabethan Literary Society, on "Shakespeare and Montaigne," showing, particularly, the close relations which exist between the philosophy of Montaigne's Essays, and the plays "Twelfth Night" and "Hamlet." Mr Allen, following Admiral Hubert Holland, argued that "M.O.A.I. doth sway my life" means that "Shakespeare" was powerfully influenced by the writings of Montaigne, whose first two books of Essays, were published in 1580, not long before the first drafts of "Twelfth Night" and "Hamlet" were written. The chair was taken by Dr F. F. Boas, President of the Elizabethan Literary Society. There was not a vacant seat in the room, and the President suggested that Mr Allen should continue the subject of Montaigne during the next session of the Society.

On February 23rd at St Ermins Hotel, Westminster, with our President, Col. M. W. Douglas in the chair, Mr Percy Allen gave the first of his new series of four lectures, on the Shakespeare plays and Folio. His subject was, "Lord Burleigh in the works

of Shakespeare and Spenser;" his argument being that Burleigh was the Fox in "Mother Hubbard's Tale" - the Ape being Alencon, or Simier - and was also Polonius in "Hamlet," Pandarus in "Troilus and Cressida," Shallow in 2 Henry IV, and "Old Double" in that same play; the last reference being, of course, to his persistent trick of repeating everything - 'Tis true 'tis pity; pity 'tis 'tis true," and so forth.

There followed an animated and helpful discussion, led by Mr Kent, who accepted Mr Allen's conclusions, as did most of the thirty persons present. One of the audience, it seems, stated at the close, that whereas most Shakesperean controversialists fought with pins, "Mr Allen used a shining sword."

On Saturday evening, February 25th, Mr Allen lectured at the well-known Berkhamsted School in Hertfordshire, on "Lord Oxford as Shakespeare," the occasion being one of the meetings of the English Society, at the school, which is among the oldest in England. He spoke in the Headmaster's study to some fifteen sixth-form boys, prefects, and masters. The meeting began at 8.10; and two hours later - when Mr Allen had to run for his train - intelligent questions were still being asked and answered. Most of the audience had been following the Shakesperean discussion, then running in "John O'London's Weekly," to which Mr Allen had contributed a letter.

On March 9th at St Ermins, Mr Allen spoke on "The Wonder-Motive in 'The Winter's Tale' and Other Late Shakesperean Plays," emphasizing the idea that those responsible for the writing of these late, and usually not wholly Shakesperean, plays - which are mainly symbolical in character - seem to have been agreed that the whole mysterious Shakesperean story, which culminated in the publication of the Folio in 1623, was a very wonderful one; and would, at last, be generally recognized as such. A lively discussion followed the lecture, which was attended by about thirty persons, over whom our President, Col. M. W. Douglas, presided.

On March 23rd Mr Allen spoke on "Cymbeline" and "Pericles," both of which he regards as spurious Shakesperean plays. He had no difficulty whatever in showing that "Pericles" was probably written by George Wilkins, from his own novel, with a similar title, and included a clever series of pastiches from scenes in various genuine Shakesperean plays, among which were "Richard

II," "Twelfth Night," "Othello," "The Tempest," "Macbeth," and "King John." In the regretted absence of our President, through indisposition, the chair was ably taken by Mr Dwyer, who led one of the best, and most helpful, discussions that have ever followed Mr Allen's talks. The concluding lecture of the series will be on April 19th, when the subject will be, "The Mystery of the First Shakespeare Folio."