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Shakespeare

How many a book or essay about Shakespeare has begun with a sort of shame-faced apology for another book or essay about Shakespeare! But, although innumerable dissertations have been written about the plays, the sonnets, and individual characters — hundreds have been written about Hamlet alone + more are sure to follow — each one does usually present some new interpretation, some new depth of meaning which may take one's breath away, or make one angry at once.

Well, I need not feel too abashed at my seeming temerity. I am not attempting to introduce any new interpretations of my own. I have merely wandered through the gardens of thought of ~~other people~~ ^{various}, culling a blossom here + there, to make into this little arrangement.

We owe the existence of Shakespeare's works in the world today to Queen Elizabeth I. The Puritans were gaining power, + they were determined to ~~destroy~~ ^{eliminate} all theatrical representations of whatsoever origin + nature. Throughout her reign the Lord Mayor + Corporation of London wrote about their efforts to close the theatres, a glory of the town to visiting foreigners, + the most innocent + exciting entertainment for the citizens. They described themselves, after all their efforts + with victory in sight, as "coming up against a stone wall." Elizabeth was that stone wall. This brilliant, cultured woman with her keen sense of humor — she appreciated Falstaff so much that she

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commanded Shakespeare to write a play about "the fat knight in love" + The Merry Wives of Windsor was the result - who spoke Latin + Greek + three other languages as well as English, paid not the slightest heed to such killjoys + kept the theatres open. The Queen had granted beautiful Kenilworth to the Earl of Leicester, + for her famous visit there in 1575 the most stupendous entertainments were prepared for her. It was Leicester's last desperate attempt to capture her ~~precious~~^{virgin} heart + win her in marriage. The men of Coventry came to present their pageants, among them the "storial show" of Lady Godiva, in the great courtyard. The puritanically inclined City Corporation endeavored at once to suppress these traditional performances, but this did not weigh with the cultivated Queen who bade them perform, + rewarded them. She even supported her own company, Dactors, wearing her livery + called "The Queen's Men." Think of it! But for her we would go through life with no Mid Summer Night's Dream, no Othello, no Macbeth, no Rosalind, no Dogberry, no Falstaff.

There was one Puritan who appreciated him however: you remember Milton wrote, "sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child
Warbling his native wood notes wild."

English in Shakespeare's day had a stronger, more masculine sound than ours. Every shire in England had its own dialect and Shakespeare spoke with the pronunciation of his own Warwickshire: woonder for wonder, woone for won, smoother for smother, smoake for smoke, sturre for stir, rolling the r.

Long a was stronger: auncient, inchaunt, auner.

In Shakespeares day a man named Hornby was the village blacksmith in stratford. The smithy stood at one end of the town by a flowing stream. At just such a place a scene occurs in King John. The news is spreading through the countryside that a new war is about to start. War was always a fearful disaster to the country folk as they were the ones to bear the brunt of it. They paid for most of it by having extra taxes squeezed out of their already meager earnings, & they fought on foot in rags and mud. So we can fully understand the tension & confusion of the two men in the following scene: I saw a smith stand, with his hammer in his hand, thus / The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool, / With open mouth swallowing a tailor's news; / Who with his shears & measure in his hand, / Standing on slippers which his nimble haste / Had falsely thrust upon contrary feet. It is an authentic portrait. That wonderful mind which absorbed everything & forgot nothing, must often have observed just such a scene.

"Andrew"

When Antonio remarks in The Merchant of Venice that he is so sad he has much ado to know himself, Salerio says, "Your mind is tossing on the ocean." He says Antonio is worried about his merchant ships in perils of the sea. "There, where your argosies with portly sail, Like signiors & rich burghers of the flood, Do overpeer the petty traffickers, That curtsy to them, do them reverence

As they fly by them with their woven wings" Shakespeare's imagery! Antonio's* rich vessels with their wind-filled sails resemble portly aldermen of a flood, & lesser vessels, as they dip up & down in the waves, drop curtains to Antonio's nobler ships as they fly past on woven wings. Salerio goes on to say that if he had such a venture on his mind, his own wind cooling his broth would remind him of "what harm a wind too great at sea might do." He could not look at the sand in an hour glass without thinking of sandy flats on which his wealthy Andrew ^{Montjoy} had gone aground. I could never understand why Shakespeare used such an unlikely name for an Italian ship as Andrew until I discovered the reason in the book, "Shakespeare the Man" by W. L. Rowe. In 1596 a powerful English fleet left Dover to sail to Cadiz where it achieved a brilliant victory, conquering the city. Two Spanish flagships were captured at Cadiz, one of them named St. Andrew. All England rejoiced & Shakespeare pridefully commemorated the event by giving the name "Andrew" to one of Antonio's ships. Of course, this immediately presents us with the equally exasperating problem of why anyone would name a Spanish ship Andrew. Well, these little things are sent to try us. By the way, the great Queen on this occasion demonstrated her alertness, her watchful concern for her subjects. She learned that the young lords Southampton, Derby & Mountjoy had gone to Dover to take part in the siege of Cadiz & she

immediately dispatched commands to them to return at once because they had no heirs and she would not allow their great names to be extinguished in case they should die in battle.

Portia

In *The Merchant of Venice* the social world of that city centers around pleasure. It is a world of luxury & leisure, of sprightly conversation & frivolity, of music & romance. Except for just a few scenes *The Merchant of Venice* leaves an impression of sumptuous clothes, witty discourse, gay or dreamy melody, & romantic love; the foundation of all this being wealth, the riches obtained through trade, the merchandise brought in by sailing ships such as Antonio's "argosies." But there is something not quite right; something is awry. This is revealed in the first words spoken by five of the leading characters. The very first line of the play, spoken by Antonio the rich merchant, is, "In sooth, I know not why I am so sad." Portia's first words are, "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is weary of this great world." "Our house is hell," says Jessica in her opening speech, & we wonder of what cruelty her father has been guilty until she explains that the hell referred to is tediousness. Bassanio's first words are, "Good signiors, when shall we laugh? Say when." Gratiano, after a reference to Antonio's morose appearance begins, "Let me play the fool! / With mirth & laughter let old wrinkles come / And let my liver rather heat with wine / Than my heart cool with mortifying groans." His

cure for care is merriment & much talk. So the trouble with these charming people is boredom. Nerissa, Portia's highly intelligent & calmly perceptive lady in waiting in her opening speech explains the situation in a few cogent words: "For ought I see they are as sick that surfeit with too much as they that starve with nothing." (Shakespeare wants us to take note of that.) So all of these colorful, cultivated ladies & gentlemen are inwardly restless through boredom, & no one more so than Portia. She has a brilliant mind, great beauty & charm, much wit, but - she is a woman. Men may wander in & out of taverns & various meeting places all day long. They may lean over the bridge called the Rialto by the hour exchanging quips or greetings with the occupants of the gondolas as they glide underneath. Or they may turn around & watch the passing street scene & enjoy gossip with all their numerous acquaintances who come & go. But Portia, "wasting her sweetness on the desert air," being not only a woman but young & unmarried, must stay at home while away the time with whatever simple amusements may be contrived there, relieved only by decorous shopping expeditions well chaperoned, & by occasional balls and visits. Portia needed outside activity; to be heard & seen & appreciated.

Then her chance came. Bassanio came to Belmont to seek the "lady richly left," & try his luck in choosing the right casket & thereby winning Portia for his wife. He chooses correctly & Portia gladly accepts the young &

handsome gentleman. No sooner are they married than a messenger arrives with the terrible news that Shylock demands a pound of flesh cut by himself from Antonio's body near his heart. Bassanio & Antonio are true friends, besides, Antonio had made his friend's successful venture possible by lending the necessary money, 3,000 ducats, which he had borrowed from Shylock who now demands payment or the pound of flesh. Of course, Bassanio must leave his bride at once and hurry back to Venice after explaining the dreadful contretemps to Portia who perfectly understands. When she considers that the man who helped her husband woo & win her is the one in trouble, the situation and her capabilities seem made for each other. Why not impersonate a young doctor of law & go to Antonio's rescue? She regards the "whole device" as she calls it, a kind of prank, terrific fun. Her maid, Nerissa, shall be her clerk, & her imagination speedily conjures up a host of opportunities for acting that her own & Nerissa's disguise as young men will offer, of the "quaint lies" they will tell, of the fun they will have. She says to Nerissa, "I'll hold thee any wager, When we are both accoutred like young men, I'll prove the prettier fellow of the two, And wear my dagger with the braver grace, And turn two mincing steps into a manly stride," etc. She thinks not at all of the tragic situation of Antonio nor of the responsibility of Bassanio for the plight of his friend. The fact that she is to have the leading role in a play in real life eclipses all else. There is more than a bit of the stage-struck girl in Portia.

In the court of justice after the introductions are over, Portia as the young Dr. of Law, says to Shylock: "Of a strange nature is the suit you follow, / Yet in such rule that the Venetian law / Cannot impugn you as you do proceed." It seems a strange way of beginning, like a partial prejudgement of the case in Shylock's favor. But his hopes must be raised at the outset to make his ultimate downfall the more dramatic. "Do you confess the bond?" she asks Antonio. "I do," he replies. "Then must the Jew be merciful," says Portia, addressing Antonio. It would have been more courteous if, instead of speaking of him in the third person, she had turned directly to Shylock & said, "Then must you be merciful." But the word "must" is a mistake. Instantly Shylock seizes upon it & demands sarcastically, "On what compulsion must I? Tell me that." Portia is caught. One can fairly see her wheel about to face Shylock & that unanswerable question. He is right: "must" + "mercy" have nothing to do with each other; no law can force a man to be merciful. This moment was not anticipated; she had not rehearsed this. But how superbly she rises to the occasion! Instead of trying to brush Shylock aside or hide behind some technicality or casuistry, she forgets the part she is playing & answers him with sincerity & truth, agreeing with him that mercy can never be a matter of constraint. You all know these flawless lines so I'll repeat only the first four: "The quality of mercy is not strained. / It droppeth as the gentle rain from Heaven / Upon the place beneath."

It is twice blest: / It blesses him that gives + him that takes....." Then those powerful words which would surely give the cruellest avenger pause: Though justice be thy plea, consider this / That in the course of justice none of us / Should see salvation: we do pray for mercy / And that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy. These words are all right out of her heart. A hush falls over the courtroom as she speaks them (as it always does over the audience whenever the Merchant of Venice is performed.) Who can doubt that even Shylock is moved? Maybe he will show mercy. After that celestial speech as from an angel visitant, will a miracle happen? It is the supreme moment in the play. Then, incredibly, it is Portia who fails Shylock, not Shylock Portia. We shall never know what might have happened had Portia given Shylock his chance. She suddenly realizes that the great triumph she has rehearsed will be lost to her if Shylock relents, so she pushes aside her nobler self, + reverts so quickly to the role of the young doctor that it takes our breath away. She sinks from compassion to legality: I have spoke thus much / To mitigate the justice of thy plea / Which if thou follow, this strict Court of Venice / Must needs give sentence 'gainst the Merchant there. It is unbelievable. "You should show mercy, but if you don't, the court will be compelled to decide in your favor." It is as if a mother, having entreated her son to give up some wrong course, and feeling as if she had almost

won, were to conclude, "I hope you won't do it but if you insist I shall have to let you because your father thinks it is all right." It is like a postscript that cancels a whole letter. So Portia the lover & mercy is deposed by Portia the actress so that the latter may have the excitement & triumph of the rest of the play, & Shylock, jerked back from celestial music into the harsh reminder of vengeance has nothing to say but, "My deeds upon my head! I crave the law." From now to the end of the courtroom scene she mingles the last drop of possible suspense from every step in the rising excitement. She stretches every nerve to the breaking point. It is she who says to Antonio, "Therefore lay bare your bosom." She who asks if there is a balance ready to weigh the flesh, a surgeon to stay the blood. She stretches out the scene as long as possible, keeping Antonio & Bassanio upon the rack. To Shylock she says, "A pound of that same merchant's flesh is thine. The court awards it & the law doth give it. / And you must cut this flesh from off his breast. / The law allows it, & the court awards it." Apparently it is all over with Antonio. Which one feels the greater anguish? Antonio about to die so painfully or Bassanio who caused it all? Shylock lifts his knife. But with "Tarry a little," Portia plays the three trump cards she has held back ~~until now~~ for this moment. ① - The flesh must weigh a pound exactly, not a hair's weight more or less. ② - Not one drop of blood must be shed. ③ - His real intent

was the murder of Antonio, + if an alien attempted to take the life of a Venetian he must forfeit all his possessions + possibly his life. What possessed Portia to torture not only Antonio, but her own husband as well with such unnecessary suspense? She knew what was coming + could have let it come at once. She could have immediately invoked the law providing a penalty for any alien plotting the death of a citizen of Venice. Instead she extracted the uttermost drop of suffering from the two men she supposedly loved. Because she wanted a spectacle, a dramatic triumph with herself at the center.

As I said at starting almost every commentator presents some new idea which may delight the reader or make him angry. Only one Shakespeare scholar I have ever read, Goddard, describes Portia's attitude in this way, + if by chance, any of you are hearing this interpretation for the first time, I want to hear ^{later} ^{on} what you think about it.

Goddard claims that Shakespeare wanted the audience to be shocked at her unnecessary delay. He points out a few hints which Shakespeare gives us: Shylock says to the presiding Duke in the courtroom, "I can give no reason.... more than a lodged hate + a certain loathing I bear Antonio, that I follow thus a losing suit against him." Mark that "losing suit." The words prove he really did not expect to win. He had hoped that his preposterous suit would be disallowed + that he would agree to forgo the

money since he had said that he would rather have the pound of flesh, & so there would be a chance of gaining Antonio's friendship. He had said, "I would be friends with you & have your love." He really meant it.

Another hint is ^{found} in the beginning of the play. Portia says, "I can easier teach twenty what were ~~well~~ to be done, than to be one of the twenty to follow mine own teaching." She taught mercy as beautifully perhaps as anyone has ever taught it, but follow her own teaching, ^{*}she did not. ^{*}according ^{to} Goddard.

Parish Top

Twelfth Night I. 3

Maria rebukes Sir Toby Belch for getting drunk every night with Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Sir Toby counters with: "With drinking health to my niece. I'll drink to her as long as there is passage in my throat & drink in Illyria. He's a coward & a rogue that will not drink to my niece till his brains turn o' the toe like a parish top." Until I finally ran the explanation to earth, I wondered what a parish top could be. W. J. Rolfe in an 1884 text book wrote that every village had a huge top for the villagers to whip up & down the street, trying to keep it always in motion & themselves warm with the exercise on cold days.

Dank as a Dog

I Henry IV II. 1

A carrier enters with a lantern in his hand & says, "Neigh-ho! an it be not four by the day, I'll be hanged. Charles' wain is over the new chimney, & yet our horse not packed. What, ostler!" "Charles' wain" is the Big Dipper. "Charles" is a corruption of "churl" meaning peasant & "wain" is an old word for hay wagon with a long shaft.

The second carrier enters & says, "Peas & beans, here are as dank as a dog, & that's the next way to give poor jades the bots: this place is turned upside down since Robin Ostler died." The ~~word~~ ^{simile} dank or damp as a dog troubled some critics as early as 1640, & "bog" or "dock" had been suggested by them in place of "dog." But W. J. Rolfe says that, "an appropriate & congruous resemblance would be as inappropriate & incongruous in such mouths as clear & forcible phraseology." Taylor the Water Poet, 1580-1653, so called because he ferried people across the Thames in a barge, makes fun of these critics in one of his writings called Llogge of Warre. He writes, "But many pretty ridiculous aspersions are cast upon Dogges, so that it would make a dog laugh if he could be made to hear & understand them. As I have heard a man say, ~~I sweate~~ I am as hot as a Llogge, or as cold as a Dogge, I sweate like a Llogge (when a Dogge never sweates), as drunk

as a Dogge, hee swore like a Dogge & one told a man once that his wife was not to be believed, for she would lie like a Dogge."

Green Fields Henry V. II. 3

The hostess, Mistress Quickly, is describing Falstaff's last hour to his devoted friends. He had died a day or two before, & she had been with him to the last. She assures them that "he is in Arthur's bosom if ever man went to Arthur's bosom. She says that when she saw him fumble with the sheets & smile upon his finger ends, she knew the end was very near: for "his nose was as sharp as a pen, & a' labbled of green fields." George Bernard Shaw wrote that this last sentence was "silly" & incorrectly copied, that more likely Shakespeare had written, "his nose was as sharp as a pen on a table of green frieze," a kind of felt. But the meaning is far more subtle than that. In Shakespeare's time boys spent many hours a day in school - 6:AM to 6:PM in summer & 6:30 to 5:30 in winter. At least an hour a day was devoted to Bible study. They also had to attend church twice on Sundays where they listened to still more scripture. It is certainly not to be wondered at that there are more than 1200 quotations from the Bible in Shakespeare's works. Now Falstaff was slowly dying in his bed, & as he became weaker his mind wandered back to his childhood days,

and he heard the familiar words, "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." The busy, bustling hostess had received scant education & though, no doubt, she went to church, her perception would not be keen, nor her imagination lively, nor would she have been a particularly devout listener. So when she heard her old friend murmuring, "lie down in green pastures," the words had no special significance to her, and ^{later} in telling all about the sad event to his friends, she merely remembered that he had babbled something about green "fields."

Falstaff and Shallow II. Henry IV.

Falstaff has gone into the countryside of Gloucestershire to recruit soldiers among the villagers, & there by chance he meets an old acquaintance from his youth in London, the doddering Justice Shallow. Shallow is thin & dry & drones reminiscences in an old man's witless tenor. A good example of his way of talking is given when he invites Sir John to dinner & the latter tries to get out of it by saying that he cannot tarry for dinner. Justice Shallow says, "I will not excuse you; you shall not be excused; excuses shall not be admitted; there is no excuse shall serve; you shall not be excused." He is the exact anti-thesis to the fat knight who tells the audience in a monologue, one of his best, exactly what he thinks of Master Shallow: "I do remember him at Clement's Inn like a man made after supper of a cheese paring. When a' was naked,

he was for all the world like a forked radish with a head fantastically carved upon it with a knife." He goes on to say that he can hardly wait to be with the Prince again, + cash in on his mimicry of Shallow for the Prince's entertainment. He will keep him laughing for days on end. But after dinner at Shallow's home, with his neighbors and tenants gathered round to meet the old friend from the far off London days, there is something noble in Falstaff's decision to grant Shallow just what he desires, even to falling in with his way of speech:

Shallow Justine Shallow says: O, Sir John, do you remember since we lay all night in the wind-mill in St. George's field?

Falstaff No more of that, good Master Shallow, no more of that.

S. Ha! 'Twas a merry night. And is Jane Nightwork alive?

F. She lives, Master Shallow.

S. Doth she hold her own well?

F. Old, old, Master Shallow.

Nay, she must be old; she cannot choose but be old; certain she's old; & had Robin Nightwork by old Nightwork before I came to Clement's Inn.

ce That's fifty-five years ago.

Shallow Ha, cousin Silence, that thou hadst seen that that this knight and I have seen! Ha, Sir John, said I well?

We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow.

Those few words express all that Shallow could hope to say in 20 quavering years. Instantly the hearers ~~may~~ visualize the two young men

swaggering arm in arm out of a tavern door, and just then the sweet thunder of the bells of old London town ring out the midnight hour, & they pause a moment to listen before they sally forth together to further frolic.

Falstaff could have crushed this cheese paring of a man with a word, a look, but instead, with real magnanimity, he exalts him to his own level.

On Seeing the Plays Performed cont'd

is, so to speak, rubbed into us. Then the jack-pudding nonsense of Pompey + the appalling tiresomeness of Elbow, + the wishy-washy japes of Lucio must be doggedly endured." (A. B. Walkley, *Drama & Life*, p. 156). It is only fair to add, however, that the author notes 2 great scenes in the play which profit immensely by stage-representation, the first where Isabella turns with rage + loathing on Angelo (II. 4), + the still greater scene (III, 1) of her dismay + horror when she finds that her brother cares more for his own life than for his sister's honor.

Logan Pearsall Smith says, "I am, of course aware that there are people of the most delicate sensibility who love to see Shakespeare's plays acted; but I cannot enter into their minds, nor understand their taste any more than I can understand the taste of people who dislike oysters or cannot read Jane Austen."

Conclusion

Poetry was given to man, Goethe said, to make him satisfied with himself + with his lot. Certainly poetry, either in verse or prose, exquisitely performs this function. The other day when I was working on *The Merchant of Venice*, my eye was caught by the first words of the last act which beguiled me with their magic: "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." I may be old + cross + ill. A wasted life may lie behind me + the grave yawn close in front. What does it matter!! Then I read this: "In such a night / Did this be fearfully o'ertrip the dew, / And saw the lion's shadow ere himself / And ran dismayed away." I may have lost my illusions, my hopes, my teeth + my umbrella. It doesn't matter in the least! Then I savor this: "In such a night / stood Dido with a willow in her hand / Upon the wild sea banks, + waft her love / To come again to Carthage." Even that "fading mansion, my aching, coughing body, becomes an instrument of music + like a battered old violin, shivers + vibrates with tunable delight." Lorenzo goes on to tell Jessica: "Naught so stockish, hard, + full of rage / But music for the time doth change his nature." True. Whenever I am stockish or full of rage the music of this scene will, in the magical five minutes it takes to read it through, charm me back to a calmer temper.

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Shakespeare was a great psychologist,
and whatever may be known in the
heart of man may be found in
his plays.

— Goethe

Margen Gockey April 1984