

MYTHOGRAPHY:
FANTASIA ON SOME SHAKESPEAREAN THEMES

"Qui necesse est regere, nescit disimulare."

-- James VI/I

Since the Elizabethan drama contributes to the creation of the Machiavellian stereotype, it seems logical to turn to the master literary mythmaker himself, William Shakespeare. What we discover is perhaps less fantastic than "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and less powerful than "Macbeth" but revealing nonetheless. Still much of Shakespeare's political thought remains concealed in a formal maze that even such modern political theorists as Allan Bloom and Harry V. Jaffa have not completely unravelled.¹ The argument proceeds that if Shakespeare had deep insights into human nature, then he had the potential to develop a somewhat systematic view of politics, which he may do in treating the nature of kingship. In the kingship of Lear we have at the outset a peaceful and united Britain. In Richard II, as Bloom indicates, we have a divine king reduced to the status of man, and conversely in Julius Caesar a man elevated to the status of god. As Lessing, quoting Longinus, remarks in "Laokoon," Homer had the tendency to deify his men and humanize his gods, much to the detriment of both of them. In de-humanizing or super-humanizing his kings Shakespeare portrays "the dread and fear" of monarchy, not only the awesome power of

mercy and governance and even of healing but also what kings fear and what their subjects fear and bear.

'Tis called the evil:

A most miraculous work in this good king,
Which often, since my here-remain in England,
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven,
Himself best knows . . .
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy;
And sundry blessings hang about his throne
That speak him full of grace.²

It is that immanence and fullness of grace which characterizes the Stuart theory of monarchy and is associated with divine right. Shakespeare treats the political and psychological stresses of monarchy, Caesar and Caesar's wife, not to mention Macbeth and Macbeth's wife, the conflict between private duty and public interest, the point of honor, or the values of timocracy, the problem of usurpation and legitimacy and the issue raised in John of Salisbury of tyrannicide and rebellion. By using a myth-historical framework, the dramatist is able to warn against the problems of foreign marriages, especially to Moors, Othello and his like, although we do not know how strongly he is alluding here to the "Spanish marriage." He deals with the problem of law and toleration in "The Merchant of Venice," indeed he fosters an entire Venetian mythology. He examines succession, dynasty, and that Hobbesian "ceaseless search of power after power," the 'bestriding of the world like a Colossus,' but all the while Shakespeare does not antagonize or seem to engage in vigorous debate on the great political controversies of his day. How judiciously masquerades his opinions as universal truths, and short of creating a myth of himself (what a tour de force if he really were Bacon) how better could he demonstrate his mastery of human nature and mythmaking.

In a way both tragedies and comedies reveal and conceal (like masks) his views of public life just perhaps as his sonnets reveal and conceal his views of private life. His myths are so good that they are not recognizable sometimes as fiction. His Romans indeed may be Englishmen (plebian or patrician), and his Italians with their fine Italian hand, are they Italians or no? They are also Romans and equally well America

We discover Lilian Winstanley in Hamlet and the Scottish Succession^{arguing} that his Danes are Scots and that the problems of succession and legitimacy of "Hamlet" are very specifically those of James VI. Certainly Hamlet would feel comfortable with one of James' favorite mottoes: "Who needs to rule, needs to dissimulate." In praising Shakespeare's mythography, Winstanley concludes that "Shakespeare is writing what is practically a piece of mythology," or to be more accurate she stops short of that conclusion to offer the alternative that "Shakespeare is writing a literary drama in which he incorporates a certain amount of contemporary history deliberately and of a set purpose."³ Even if Winstanley's conclusions are correct, "Hamlet" loses nothing of its universality as a work of art. The play merely gains an additional dimension with specific historic circumstances and political philosophies. "The play's the thing," no matter if Bacon authored it as Ignatius Donnelly and other politician-critics have suggested.

Winstanley maintains that Shakespeare can only be understood in the context of the Elizabethan audience, which she gives the gift of a rather sophisticated understanding of political affairs. Problems occur in the fact that although Hamlet bears some comparison to James VI/I, she wants to incorporate more than a bit of Essex, as a martyr to James' cause, in his character, just as she wants to telescope the two Bothwells into Claudius. The suggestions are thought-provoking, but given the lack of confirmatory evidence, not to mention that some of what exists is "spectral," the verdict has to be that old Scots "not proven." How much did the average English theater-goer know before Boswell and Johnson about the intricacies of Scottish politics or even Scotland itself? There may, of course, be two plays for two audiences of different levels of intelligence. Even if we cannot completely validate Winstanley's thesis,

Regardless of the correctness of her analysis, we must credit Winstanley with theorizing and add that her theories are not easily disproved because we know so little about Shakespeare as a person, not to mention his politics. Even if she has Shakespeare virtually looking over Elizabeth's shoulder as she reads James' correspondence, she is not completely wrong in arguing that minds so well-versed in human nature, Queen and Bard, might arrive at the same conclusions regarding James' character, particularly that strange admixture of rashness and indecisiveness, "method" and "madness" which he shares with Hamlet.

Ultimately "Hamlet" treats Revenge, and there is something of the dilemma of Orestes without either Athena or even Portia to rescue him. There may also be echoes of Oedipus. Shakespeare's "Hamlet" probably draws upon an earlier play of that name (possibly by Thomas Kyd), which does not deal with the Scottish succession but has its own ghost "shouting like an oyster-wife, 'Hamlet, revenge.'" For revenge, however, James had far too forgiving a nature. Elizabeth condemned his leniency with its effect of encouraging the dissident Scottish nobles to march on the palace periodically and attempt to capture the king. James' hatred of duelling and his general dislike of violence are not particularly consistent with Hamlet, A recent bar association mock trial has attempted to exonerate Hamlet by reason of insanity, but James was never considered mad, however much he might advocate dissimulation. James was dishevelled. unbathed. Perhaps indeed Hamlet is a diminutive of James, or as the name appears in Shakespeare's much reworked Danish source, Saxo Grammaticus, Amlet, which leaves the unhappy alternative derivation from Americ or Omlet (because he is scrambled?). His sexual preferences are not as ambivalent as James'. *Hamlet does not slobber over his courtiers.* Nor is there any evidence for the "poison in the ear" unless it is to be taken from the death of Prince Henry of France, again rendering Hamlet a clever pastiche of several historical figures.

Before proceeding further, we need to allow Winstanley an appeal. Again her key point is that the playwright is addressing a very specific audience who can recognize James VI/I in Hamlet. (Were Elizabethan audiences any more interested in politics than modern ones, or did they go to the theater to "escape?" Admittedly a new theory of

the Kennedy assassination can attract a sizeable box office.) Winstanley reminds her audience that it is dealing with a situation in which a king (Darnley/Hamlet's Father) has been murdered and the Queen (Mary/Gertrude) has managed to marry the murderer in somewhat indecent haste (Bothwell/Claudius and the "incestuous sheets"). An elderly counsellor (Polonius/Burleigh) becomes entangled in the plotting and intrigue. Scotland becomes Denmark in the interest of avoiding censorship just as Masonic Scotland may actually be Spain.

Winstanley bolsters her argument for Shakespeare's metamorphosing political mythology by citing evidence of analogues from other plays. Her safest claim relates "Macbeth" to the Merlin prophecy of Arthur's return and the reunification of Great Britain under a single monarchy. (Perhaps it is passing strange that such an astute observer of the complexities of human character did not select a Camelot theme, especially given the Tudor concern with the Arthurian legends.) A connection lies in Banquo as the ancestor of the Stuarts. The choice of a Scottish theme itself may be intended as a compliment to the Scottish throne. Shakespeare certainly elaborates on the account in Holinshed's Chronicles and leaves rather open the appropriate historical analogue of Lady Macbeth. Macbeth's attempt to thwart the Arthurian prophecy is foredoomed to failure.

Besides the Arthurian cycle the Tudors were also concerned with the Brutus theme and the claim to legitimacy associated with the settlement of Britain by the Trojan heroes. The handling of Brutus in "Julius Caesar" must have caused Winstanley's audience a few qualms, for Shakespeare cannot support tyrannicide or even criticise a founder of the royal house as can be done with more recent royals. Falling on his sword, Brutus must yet emerge as "the noblest Roman of them all" to preserve both historical veracity and royal proprieties

That the other Shakespearean plays do contain political figures like Sir Walter Scott's "originals" is an acceptable proposition, but who can fix with exact certainty the real identity of Timon of (Athens=London?). The audience may, however, equate Falstaff with Sir John Oldcastle (his original designation). The Rodrigo Lopez affair

may be associated with "The Merchant of Venice." Prospero in "The Tempest" may conjure up the Elizabethan magus, Dr. Dee, yet there is nothing as overt as Spenser's Gloriana or "the false Duessa" of "The Faerie Queene." (Mary's character had been pretty thoroughly attacked between Knox's sermons and Buchanan's scribblings. At least some people believed that she was implicated in the Kirk o'Field assassination of Darnley.) Shakespeare had to watch his P's and Q's in that the players had fallen into disfavor over Essex's performance of "Richard III" and over "Henry IV." That Elizabethan dramatists did become entangled in political intrigue as well as the kind of spying that John LeCarre called "secret theater" is amply evidenced by the death of Kit Marlowe and the Walsingham connection. Nicholl maintains that Touchstone in "As You Like It" comments directly on Marlowe's murder over "the reckoning."⁴ There is something mysterious and unsettling which remains over the motives behind Marlowe's death, and there may well have been both a Shakespearean as well as a Scottish connection. Whatever the truth, as the Duke of Alba, said of Francis, a lot of people died of "Mary Stuart."

Shakespeare had to be cautiously politically with an eye to the charges against Hayward because of his treatment of Richard II. Hayward was accused of "creating an altered history" for political purposes. Tyrants, tyrannicide, and assassination conspiracies were risky business. Although the conspirators in "Julius Caesar" do not come off well, that British bust of Caesar, which we now learn isn't Caesar, even resembles Elizabeth just a bit in her old age. Elizabeth was supposed to be concerned with killing a monarch, even a tyrant, and James would have made the same conclusion if his thought was moving toward the "divine right of kings," that splendid mythological structure which supported a host of Stuart peccadilloes.

Winstanley wants to argue beyond the thesis that Shakespeare's characters can be equated with historical models to the specific conclusion that "Hamlet" is a partisan tract favoring the Scottish succession. However, is the play that favorable to Hamlet = James (?), who "fails of his election" which may have more overtones from the recent publication of Calvin's Institutes than political turmoil. Hamlet is a student from Wittenberg, as is Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, but the occult connection may be more

significant than the Protestant association. Hamlet, after all, is a murderer, whether his political revenge finds justification or madness mitigates the malhecho. He does not succeed to the throne of Denmark.⁶ Why? Well, he may merely have been passed over in the succession because of Claudius' manipulations, but the succession hardly passes by marrying Gertrude. Hamlet may be illegitimate, Polonius' son, in which case he slays his father behind the arras (and what is the old man doing in Gertrude's bedroom anyway, sordus et vetus), attempts to court his sister, murders his brother or half brother, and all in all behaves considerably more like Oedipus than Oedipus does himself, who merely wants to gain the throne of Thebes and only incidentally to marry Jocasta. Had the Elizabethan audience gotten wind of the Countess of Lennox and the "warming pan baby" and the tale of the child's skeleton wrapped in cloth-of-gold and immured in Edinburgh Castle? What had they made earlier of the missing princes and their murder in the Tower? We certainly have not verified the allegation of a more than passing resemblance of James to Lennox ancestral portraiture ("they all look alike anyway, the Scots lairds"), and must allow that old canard to rest before being "hoist on our own petard." Still what delicious gossip and speculation for a Scots-baiting audience, not that the Scots were that o'er fond of the B^uerla (warlocks = English?) or Sassenach or "tailyards" at whom they had wagged their tails at Sterling. If Shakespeare is so favorable to Essex as a Jacobite martyr, and by no means the last, and the Stuart cause, the final election "lights on Fortinbras," that troublemaking son of old Norway, who had been pretending to raise troops to fight Shakespeare's Polacks.

More persuasive than the bits and pieces such as the existence of a Guildenstern at the Scottish court is the spectral evidence from the ghost of old Hamlet who parades in full armor, which was one of Darnley's idiosyncrasies. However Hamlet himself impugns the spectral evidence. Even an Elizabethan audience, credulous as it might have been, might well have asked if Hamlet was being set up. If such was the case the cui bono was Fortinbras, but there is not a shred of evidence that Fortinbras with his designs on the throne was trying to drive Hamlet mad, not a shred either in Saxo's narrative for all its barbarism and lack of ro-

mantic interest. Was the ghost story merely a diabolical illusion? Here again lies a bit of evidence to bolster Winstanley's theory, specifically the apparition which appeared to James IV at Flodden Field with the slaughter of the "flowers o' the forest" in that period of Scottish history known as the "rough wooing." James was warned by a staphylomatic old man wearing a blue cloak not to take "his lads o'er the border," or more accurately to return the army to Scotland. Here, too, the Queen may have been plotting to prey on the mind of her superstitious husband, who was about to invade her homeland. But when Lord Hume attempted to repeat the sequence by going out to the suttlery and coaching a random old man in the admonition, the same warning was delivered. The lights went out. The old man disappeared, again much to the consternation of the king. More so perhaps than any other monarchy in Europe (others were bothered mostly by dea^{rn}-bed ravens) the Scots had their ghosts and their "second sight." There was the "mask of the red death" at Jedburgh at the wedding of Alexander III and the fair Yolande. There was that episode at Saucieburn in which an old man in a religious habit who assassinated James III, leaving a dagger lost by James IV on the battlefield as its calling card. Little wonder with this ancestry that James VI had cause to be into demonology and witchcraft, the "more things" of Horatio's philosophy. But where confronting the issue of "spectral evidence" we should recall: "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." and Hotspur's response: "But will they come when you do call for them?" ("Henry IV" III:i,53). We might also recall the delightful parody in Doyle's tale of Argentine D'odd and the ghost-seller, who slips the landowner who is set on having an ancestral ghost a Mickey Finn and makes off with the ancestral silver. Perhaps we should also recall Milton's somewhat curious conclusion in Eikonoklastes:

Other stuff of this sort may be read throughout the whole Tragedie, wherein the Poet us'd not much licence in departing from the truth of History, which delivers him a deep dissembler, not of his affections onely, but of Religion.

NOTES:

1. Allen Bloom and Henry Jaffa, Shakespeare's Politics (1964); John Alvis and Thomas G. West, Shakespeare as Political Thinker (1981), p. 51 (Caesar and Richard II); Cf. Charles H. McIlwain, The Political Works of James I (1616, ed.) (1918).
2. A.M. Hocart, op. cit., p. 38, discussing "Macbeth" IV:3.; Cf. also, Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism (1994); Derek Cohen, The Politics of Shakespeare (1993); Alexander Legett, Shakespeare's Political Drama: The History Plays and the Roman Plays (1988). Although many of these authors refer to political problems in Hamlet, few seem aware of Winstanley's evaluation in relation to Elizabethan political mythology.
3. Lilian Winstanley, Hamlet and the Scottish Succession (1970), p. 165 on Shakespeare's mythography.
4. J. Leslie Hotson, The Death of Christopher Marlowe (1925), pp. 65ff; Charles Nichol, The Reckoning: the Murder of Christopher Marlowe (1992), pp. 73-76; George Garrett, Entered from the Sun the Murder of Marlowe (1990) (fiction).
5. Cf. George Malcom Thomson, The Crime of Mary Stuart (1964) p. 124, n. 124, mentioning that the image of the siren in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" refers to Mary; Cf. Andrew Lang, The Mystery of Mary Stuart (1901), always an authority on mysteries Scots; T.F. Henderson, The Casket Letters (1890) on the issue of medieval style forgery in the creation of a mythological Mary. As in dealing with the Bacon controversy, it is easy to be carried away (or repelled) by imaginative speculations in the absence of hard evidence. Myth has that very effect. Anagrams and accrostics proliferate. Yorick becomes Riccio, and the "damned spot" becomes Riccio's blood which would not wash out at Holyrood Palace. Indeed "Macbeth" becomes a prelude to "Hamlet." Antonia Fraser's recent biography, Mary, Queen of Scots provides an excellent remedy, but it is still easy to get caught up in the romantic mythology with the young Douglas and the escape from Loch Leven. Thomson, p. 145 on the Duke of Alba. **
6. Cf. "Titus Andronicus" i: 1, 228, 1, 22 and "The Merchant of Venice" ii:9, 3 on the Prince of Arragon and the problem of the meaning of "election" in Shakespeare.
7. Milton, Eikonoklastes, p. 85. John Milton, Works, Vol. V. (1932).

** Cf. also, M.H. Armstrong Davison, The Casket Letters A Solution to the Mystery of Mary Queen of Scots and the Murder of Lord Darnley London: Vision Press Limited, 1965; Not only was there a Rosencrantz associated with Bothwell, but he was Viceroy of Norway and a cousin of Anna Thronssen, Bothwell's Norwegian "wife." (p.61); Riccio may have been a better choice than Polonius as James VI's father if we are to credit the outcry after the Gowrie affair at Perth (August 5, 1600), "Come down, thou son of Signor Davie, thou hast slain an honest man than thyself." (p.62).