I

THE PERSONALITY OF SHAKESPEARE

In *The Importance of Being Earnest* Lady Bracknell reproves Mr. Worthing, 'to lose one parent may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness'. To be invited to give the Founder’s Day Address twice within three years is not only an unprecedented honour, but must look like favouritism. However, it happens that a Shakespeare biography of mine has achieved some notice; so it must have been thought, in the Quater-centenary year, not altogether inappropriate to draft me.

I realise that, if I were wise, I should not attempt such a subject; I should offer you something uncontroversial, such as 'The semi-colons in Shakespeare'. Or would you like a whole lecture on his use of the double reflexive? — You know the form,

Narcissus so himself himself forsook;

or

Thou of thyself thy sweet self dost deceive.

This usage was rather characteristic of Shakespeare in the early 1590s, and there is something to say about it — would you like me to carry on about it all one afternoon? I prefer to rush on, where the angels fear to tread, and assail a more significant subject. Of the comments on my book many and varied, some sensible, some even laudatory, others wholly idiotic, one that I much value comes from a leading Canadian writer, Hugh MacLennan: ‘No learned man should ever overlook (as most of them do) the great merit of the good policeman, who never fails to recognise the importance of the obvious!’ Here the policeman is a simple historian, breaking into the sacred enclosure of the ‘experts’ — in itself sufficiently scandalous; all I can provide is the plain common sense of the historian: I offer you my simplicity.

The first and most obvious thing about Shakespeare is that he...
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was not only a dramatist but also an actor. Shakespeare’s work is full of comments on his profession from the inside. These offer an extended criticism of his craft, more to the point than any other dramatist of his age. We may sum it all up in Hamlet’s advice to the players on ‘the purpose of playing — whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature’. And that, we shall see, offers us a clue to his own personality — his naturalness, ease, and spontaneity, his fidelity to nature. Ben Jonson, who knew him well, pays him the tribute we all might envy for ourselves: ‘he was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature’. Nothing secretive, or contorted, or inhibited about him: a normal man in his make-up, very much in line with nature, but whose nature was illumined by, under the pressure of, the abnormal fact of genius — giving that return upon oneself (the double reflexive), the redoubled awareness, the creative energy that drove him to people a world of imagination before he died, like Balzac, at the age of fifty-two.

Shakespeare seems to have resented the necessity he was under of earning his living by the ungentlemanly profession of acting:

Alas, ’tis true I have gone here and there,
And made myself a motley to the view,
Gored mine own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear . . .

Then,

O, for my sake do you with Fortune chide,
The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,
That did not better for my life provide
Than public means, which public manners breeds.

‘Sold cheap what is most dear’ — evidently his own thoughts, his poetry, what he cared for most. He would have preferred to be a gentleman and a poet. It is not the first or the last time that a man of genius has kicked against the traces of the necessary vehicle that has carried his genius, given him the best everyday chance of its expression. William Shakespeare was very keen on being regarded as a gentleman — as indeed his carriage of himself merited in that violent, swaggering age: one of the few among the theatre folk who did not get involved in the broils