

## SHAKESPEARE'S UNDERSTANDING OF A PLAY

Anyone who reads carefully the works of Shakespeare will discover that he is both a poet or maker of fictions and a wise man. But there is a tension or opposition between reading Shakespeare as a poet and as a wise man. We read works of fiction first for the good of our emotions, second for the good of our imagination, and last, if at all, for the good of our reason. But we read the words of a wise man for the good of our reason. And what appeals to our emotions and our imagination is not the same as what perfects our reason. We could hardly read or follow a play of Shakespeare as a work of fiction and stop to think about everything that his words give us to think about. Shakespeare is a teacher, not only through his fictions, but through his words and the way he uses them, apart from those words being that in which he imitates.

Often there is an excellence in Shakespeare's words which serves no obvious poetic or dramatic purpose. With the brevity of wisdom, Shakespeare says much in a few words. Among these are his words about what a play should be. It should not surprise us that Shakespeare is wise in what he says about the play when he can be so about other arts and kinds of knowledge close to the dramatic art. When Lucentio says to Tranio in *The Taming of the Shrew*:

And therefore, Tranio, for the time I study  
Virtue and that part of philosophy  
Will I apply that treats of happiness  
By virtue especially to be achiev'd.<sup>1</sup>

he gives a remarkably precise statement of what ethics is about, as can be seen from the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle. And when Antony in his speech to the crowd in *Julius Caesar* says:

For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,  
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,  
To stir men's blood: I only speak right on.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Act I, Sc. 3

<sup>2</sup>Act III, Sc. 2

he gives, as Kittredge notes, a complete enumeration of the qualities of a good orator. If you study all three books of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, you will see that Kittredge is not exaggerating.

Given the excellent wise precision with which he speaks of these kindred arts or forms of knowledge, one should expect that Shakespeare would also speak wisely about his own art as a playwright. And indeed he does so. What Shakespeare says about the play helps us to understand his own plays and appreciate them more. What he says about the play also agrees with our experience of his plays.

Perhaps the first or most fundamental and central words of Shakespeare on the play are found in his most thoughtful play which is *Hamlet*. Someone who has collected much of what has been thought and written about this play made this strong statement:

The play is one of the longest...and the amount that has been written about it far exceeds that on any other of Shakespeare's works. Furness does not exaggerate when he says:

"No one of mortal mould (save Him 'whose blessed feet were nailed for our advantage to the bitter cross') ever trod this earth, commanding such absorbing interest as this Hamlet, this mere creation of a poet's brain.

No syllable that he whispers, no word let fall by anyone near him, but is caught and pondered as no words ever have been, except of Holy Writ.

Upon no throne built by mortal hands has ever "beat so fierce a light" as upon that airy fabric reared at Elsinore."<sup>3</sup>

Hamlet praises a play in these five phrases:

an excellent play

---

<sup>3</sup>William J. Rolfe, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, Preface, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1894, p. 5:

well digested in the scenes,  
set down with as much modesty as cunning...  
as wholesome as sweet,  
and by very much more handsome than fine.<sup>4</sup>

We shall give something of Shakespeare's understanding of a play by commenting on these five phrases.

### AN EXCELLENT PLAY

Shakespeare tells us what a play should be, speaking both properly and metaphorically. Speaking metaphorically, he says that a play should be both a *mirror* and a *dream*. Speaking properly, he says that a play should be both an *imitation* or likeness and a *fiction* or something made up.

Shakespeare speaks of the play as a mirror in the words of Hamlet to the players:

o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so  
overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end,  
both at the first and now, was and is,  
to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature:  
to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image,  
and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare tells us the things of which the play is a mirror in a certain order. And this order is most revealing in two ways.

We cannot imitate an age well or significantly without imitating the virtues and vices which predominate in the men who live in that age. And we cannot

---

<sup>4</sup>*Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2

<sup>5</sup>*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 2

represent virtue or vice well without imitating nature since virtue and vice are nothing other than habits by which we are well or ill disposed towards our nature. (This is why habit is the *first* species of quality in Aristotle's *Categories* since the nature of anything is always what is first in it.)

The second reason why this order is important is that nature is the measure by which we judge between virtue and vice and an age is judged in turn by the virtues or vices that predominate in it. By imitating nature as the measure of virtue and vice and the latter as the measure of the age, the plays of Shakespeare are a moral education.

The play is a likeness, as the metaphor *mirror* and also the word *image* in Hamlet's words indicate. Shortly after this, Shakespeare tells us plainly in non-figurative language that the players imitate so that the play must be an imitation or likeness:

O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others  
praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that  
neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of  
Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellow'd  
that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made  
men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so  
abominably.<sup>6</sup>

Hamlet also refers to the play as a *dream* and indeed one of his plays is called a *dream*.<sup>7</sup> When Hamlet upbraids himself for lacking the passion which the actor has in reciting the lines from a play, he calls the play a *dream* and a *fiction*:

O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!  
Is it not monstrous that this player here,  
But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit etc.<sup>8</sup>

*Dream* is the metaphor and *fiction* is the proper or non-figurative word for what he wants to express here about the play.

---

<sup>6</sup>Hamlet, Act III, Sc. 2

<sup>7</sup>A *Midsummer Night's Dream*

<sup>8</sup>Hamlet, Act II, Sc. 2

Shakespeare is telling us metaphorically that a play should be both a *mirror* and a *dream*. Or in non-figurative language, that a play should be both an *imitation* and a *fiction*. Shakespeare's care is remarkable to express this truth about a play both metaphorically and properly. We should not miss what he is teaching us here

What is the difference between calling a play a *dream* and a *mirror*? A mirror is a work of reason and art. And we expect a mirror to show us as we are. And this is the good of reason: to know things as they are, to know the truth. But the dream is a work of the imagination, not measured by the real world through the senses. We do not look for truth from dreams. As the Poet says in *Sonnet 87*:

Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter  
In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

But in the play that is called a dream, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the often quoted words of Shakespeare point to the imagination as more characteristic of the poet than reason:

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,  
Such shaping fantasies that apprehend  
More than cool reason ever comprehends.  
The lunatic, the lover and the poet  
Are of imagination all compact.<sup>9</sup>

It seems then that for Shakespeare a play should be both a dream and a mirror. What does this mean? Perhaps it could be stated briefly by saying that the play should be an imaginative likeness of nature etc., a made-up likeness. An imaginative likeness is both a mirror and a dream. I think that all great poets have to some extent realized the necessity of making something that is at the same time both a mirror and a dream and that lesser or defective poets have not seen the necessity of both. Coleridge mentions a similar point in an account of his conversations with Wordsworth:

During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry - the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth

---

<sup>9</sup>Act V, Sc. 1

of nature and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination.<sup>10</sup>

These two cardinal points of poetry here correspond to mirror and dream, for the mirror involves “a faithful adherence to the truth of nature” and the dream brings in “the modifying colours of the imagination.” But some poets and artists attempt to avoid imitation and end up with a lifeless work. Pope Paul VI spoke of this in regard to some artist friends:

And I myself also am troubled, my heart bleeds, when I see contemporary art detach itself from humanity, from life. Sometimes certain of our artists seem to forget that art must express things. Sometimes it is impossible to know what it says. It is the Tower of Babel, It is chaos, confusion...When I said this one day to some artist friends, they replied, “Whose fault is that? You impressed on us the rule of imitation. We are not imitators, we are creators.”<sup>11</sup>

Whoever these artist friends were, they obviously did not understand the two cardinal points of poetry or the necessity of the play or work of art being an imaginative likeness. To try to choose between being an imitator and a creator is a great mistake for the artist.

An *excellent* play is one that not only is both a mirror and a dream, but also one that combines these in the right ratio. This ratio need not be the same in all plays, just as we would not expect the same ratio in a fairy tale and in an historical novel. We should not expect the same ratio in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and in the English History Plays, or in the tragedies and what are now called the Romances of Shakespeare. We must understand the different kinds of plays that Shakespeare has written and have a long experience of the plays before we can see that he has achieved the proper ratio in each.

In giving us the order of nature, virtue & vice, and the age and body of the time, Shakespeare also teaches us an order of the causes: nature, choice and custom or fashion. But not everything in life is represented by

---

<sup>10</sup>Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1817, Vol. II, p. 15, quoted in a supplementary note in the second volume of Knight's *Imperial Edition of Shakespeare*, p. 671R

<sup>11</sup>Jean Guitton, *The Pope Speaks*, Meredith Press, N. Y., p. 209

Shakespeare as due to these causes. He also speaks of what is by luck or fortune, or by fate, or by divine providence in human affairs.

Again, the play must represent both about what is by nature, choice, and custom and what is by luck or fate or divine providence. And it must do so in the right ratio. But this ratio is not the same everywhere. Speaking comparatively, for example, of the ten tragedies of Shakespeare (leaving aside the English History plays), we can see that the ratio in the three Northern European tragedies is different from that in the two Italian tragedies. In *Hamlet* (which is set in Denmark) and *King Lear* (which is set in England) and *Macbeth* (which is set in Scotland), nature is more emphasized than in *Romeo & Juliet* and *Othello*. But the latter emphasize more the role of fortune and fate in our lives. There is a reason why the ratio should be different in these plays, why the same ratio would not be right in all these plays. The Greco-Roman tragedies are in-between. Fortune and fate are prominent in *Titus Andronicus* and to a lesser extent in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. But individual nature is more important in *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens*. Likewise, the role of divine providence is emphasized more in those plays where luck or fortune are more prominent. Thus at the end of the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*, the Prince says:

Where be these enemies? Capulet! Montague!  
See what a scourge is laid upon your hate,  
That heaven finds means to kill your joys with love<sup>12</sup>

The plays Shakespeare wrote towards the end of his life, what are now called the Romances in the Greek sense of that word, also involve more luck or fortune than nature compared to the North European or Anglo-Saxon tragedies. Hence, too, the greater reference to divine providence in them. Thus, for example, in the most happy ending of *Cymbeline*, the Soothsayer says:

The fingers of the powers above do tune  
The harmony of this peace.<sup>13</sup>

## WELL DIGESTED IN THE SCENES

---

<sup>12</sup>Act V, Sc. 3

<sup>13</sup>Act V, Sc. 5

Someone might think that Shakespeare approves the modern mistake that a play is more a likeness of character than of a course of action from his words about what is mirrored therein. But when he spoke properly of what was imitated, it was action. And here he again emphasizes the action. But what does it mean to say the action is *well digested*?

A play is well-digested in its scenes when the superfluous is eliminated from them, the universal is brought out in the singular, they are ordered in a plot (a plot should have a beginning, middle and end), and the knots are not only tied well, but even what is more difficult, untied well.

In the Prologue to *Troilus & Cressida*, Shakespeare tells us that the source materials for the play must be reduced

To what may be digested in a play.

If one knows the sources of Shakespeare's plays one can see his condensation of events to fit a play and the elimination of the superfluous. This is most easily seen in the history plays where much must be condensed or left out to fit a play. Hence, Hamlet speaks of the players as the "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time".

Good my lord, will you see the players well bestowed? Do you hear, let them be well used, for they are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live.<sup>14</sup>

In distinguishing between the universal and the singular in men and their doings, it is good to keep in mind that these are not separated in good fiction as they are in the philosopher's thinking. Some authors have spoke of the universal singularized or the singular as universalized in fiction. Charles Knight has an interesting quote from Coleridge's "The Friend" on Shakespeare in this regard:

Speaking of...his works themselves, we may define the excellence of their method as consisting in that just proportion, that union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular.....

Knight comments on these words:

---

<sup>14</sup>*Hamlet*, Act II, Sc. 2

Nothing can be more just and more happy than this definition of the distinctive quality of Shakespeare's works - a quality which puts them so immeasurably above all other works - "the union and interpenetration of the universal and the particular."<sup>15</sup>

When the singular lacks universal significance, it is undigested.

The word *digested* is explained in the Yale Shakespeare as *arranged* which clearly refers to the plot. Shakespeare himself couples indigested with deformed. in *Henry VI, Part III*:

an indigested and deformed lump<sup>16</sup>

And consequently he would think of digested as going with form. But the form of a play is its order or plot, just as the scholastics called the order of a book the *forma tractatus*. And Shakespeare himself speaks this way in *Richard III*:

We may digest our complots in some form.<sup>17</sup>

And in *King John*:

Be of good comfort; for you are born  
To set a form upon that indigest  
Which he hath left so shapeless and so rude.<sup>18</sup>

The phrase *well digested in the scenes* then clearly refers to the excellence of the plot.

---

<sup>15</sup>Supplementary Notice to *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Imperial Edition of Shakespeare's Works, Vol. I, p. 35

<sup>16</sup>Act V, Sc. 6

<sup>17</sup>Act III, Sc. 1

<sup>18</sup>Act V, Sc. 7, lines 25-27 (Note 26-27 indigest ...rude. So is Ovid's description of chaos: "Quem dixere Chaos, rudis indigestaque moles." Chaos has for us the sense of something disordered unlike the plot which should be ordered. The Yale Shakespeare note on *digested* is this "*digested: ordered*")

Likewise, in *Henry VI, Part III*, Clifford says to Richard (the hunchback, with a withered arm, the future Richard III);

Hence, heap of wrath, foul indigested lump,  
As crooked in thy manners as thy shape.<sup>19</sup>

A *heap* has no order. And since order is one of the three main species of the beautiful, the foul is disordered. (Richard also lacks the other two species, lacking in symmetry and moderation - hence, *lump*). *Order*, is defined by before and after and these define beginning, middle and end which the plot of a play should have. The scenes of a play, then, are undigested, when they lack order and arrangement, a beginning, middle and an end.

But a plot not only has a beginning, middle and end. It also should have a tying of a knot(or knots) and an untying of the knot (or knots). In *Twelfth Night*, when the knot has been tied, Viola remarks:

O Time, thou must untangle this, not I  
It is too hard a knot for me t'untie.<sup>20</sup>

Aristotle notes in his book *About the Poetic Art* that many poets or playwrights are better at tying the knot or knots than in untying them:

Many weaving together well, untie badly. It is necessary to do both well.<sup>21</sup>

The scenes of a play are well digested when the knot or knots are untied well.

We cannot here go through Shakespeare's plays one by one to show that their scenes are well digested in this sense. But we can touch upon some testimonies to one example of this in the late play *Cymbeline*.

Hazlitt, the famous critic, speaks of the plot of *Cymbeline* thus:

The business of the plot evidently thickens in the last act: the story moves forward with increasing rapidity at every step; its various ramifications are

---

<sup>19</sup>Act V, Sc. 1

<sup>20</sup>Act II, Sc. 2, lines 40-41

<sup>21</sup>*About the Poetic Art*, Chapter 18, 1456a 9-10

drawn from the most distant points to the same centre; the principal characters are brought together and placed in very critical situations; and the fate of almost every person in the drama is made to depend on the solution of a single circumstance - the answer of Iachimo to the question of Imogen respecting the obtaining of the ring from Posthumus.<sup>22</sup>

Nosworthy, a recent editor of the play, in a note on this amazing last scene, has written that

This scene is incomparable in its technical virtuosity. Wendell enumerates twenty-four distinct denouements, "which in my opinion o'ervalues it something." Nevertheless, about a dozen of them are of sufficient magnitude to be termed denouements.<sup>23</sup>

No wonder when Shakespeare is untying from twelve to twenty-four knot in one stroke or as Hazlett says "the fate of almost every person in the drama is made to depend on the solution of a single circumstance - the answer of Iachimo to the question of Imogen respecting the obtaining of the ring from Posthumus", Nosworthy can speak of the scene with this image:

...in the final scene, the clouds disappear with a swiftness that is almost explosive.<sup>24</sup>

#### SET DOWN WITH AS MUCH MODESTY AS CUNNING

The opening words of the next phrase *set down* also refer to the plot. They are like the phrase *where we lay our scene*. which Shakespeare uses in his Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* A plot has some resemblance to an argument in logic where something is laid down or set down, and something else follows (as in the definition of syllogism). Hence, the summary of the plot of a play is sometimes called the argument of the play. In the *The Merry*

---

<sup>22</sup>*Characters from Shakespeare's Plays*, 1817, quoted *Cymbeline*, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, edited by J.M. Nosworthy, Harvard University Press, 1953, p. xli

<sup>23</sup>*Cymbeline*, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, edited by J.M. Nosworthy, Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 172

<sup>24</sup>op. cit., p. lxxvii

*Wives of Windsor*, where plots are laid within the play, we find such words as

Good plots! they are laid<sup>25</sup>

and:

I will lay a plot to try that.<sup>26</sup>

And just as in a syllogism, when the premisses have been laid down, reason goes forward to a conclusion, so in the *The Merry Wives of Windsor* it is said:

But let our plot go forward.<sup>27</sup>

But what does Shakespeare mean by saying that the plot must be set down *with as much modesty as cunning*? What is this *modesty* and *cunning* that must be balanced?

One sense has been touched upon before when Hamlet advised the players:

o'erstep not the modesty of nature; for anything so  
overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end,  
both at the first and now, was and is,

to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen, the play or plot should be as much an imitation of nature as something made up by the imagination. The Queen says to Hamlet when he sees the ghost that she does not:

This is the very coinage of your brain:  
This bodiless creation ecstasy  
Is very cunning in.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>Act III, Sc. 2

<sup>26</sup>Act III, SC 3

<sup>27</sup>Act IV, Sc. 4

<sup>28</sup>*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 2

<sup>29</sup>*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 4

*Ecstasy*, which here means madness<sup>30</sup>, reminds us of the key passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* comparing the lover, the madman and the poet because they all work out of the imagination. The poet is like the madman and the lover in being all compact of imagination. Hence, the cunning of the imagination in making up the plot and characters, this "bodiless creation", must be balanced by the imitation of nature. The word *creation* also has become common now in speaking of the poet when he invents as if it were out of nothing rather than imitating what he has seen. We see the word *creation* in the these words from *Macbeth*:

A false creation, proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain.<sup>31</sup>

In the magisterial words from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, lovers and madmen are said to have "such seething brains". But notice also the word *false* modifying *creation*. False imagination is the chief cause of error on the side of our knowing powers. The cunning of the imagination in creating must be balanced by the modesty of nature and truth. For truth, as well as nature, is modest

A second sense of this phrase is in regard to beauty. The three greatest forms of the beautiful are order, symmetry, and the limited or moderation or modesty as the chief philosophers, Plato and Aristotle teach us. In the *Philebus*, Plato says:

For moderation and symmetry everywhere are found to be beauty and virtue.<sup>32</sup>

And Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* teaches us that:

---

<sup>30</sup>Hamlet goes on to say:

Ecstasy!  
My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,  
And makes as healthful music. It is not madness  
That I have utter'd: bring me to the test,  
And I the matter will re-word, which madness  
Would gambol from.....

<sup>31</sup>Act II, Sc. 1

<sup>32</sup>Plato, *Philebus*, 64E

The greatest forms of the beautiful are order and symmetry and the limited...<sup>33</sup>

The beauty of a play, then, is not only in the order and symmetry of the plot which are the result of the cunning of reason and imagination, but also in its moderation or modesty.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle gives us a clue to perhaps the most profound way of understanding *with as much modesty as cunning*. In the "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder", Jonas Oldacre is described by one person as "malignant and cunning"<sup>34</sup> and by another as "crafty, vicious, malignant."<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, so cunning and crafty was Oldacre that he almost succeeded in deceiving the great Sherlock Holmes himself. As Holmes says, Oldacre's plan "was a masterpiece of villainy...It was a net from which it seemed to me...that there was no possible escape."<sup>36</sup> Yet Oldacre's plan does fail in the end to deceive Holmes. And why? Because as Holmes says, "he had not that supreme gift of the artist, the knowledge of when to stop."<sup>37</sup>

Knowing when to stop is important in all great art, in painting and music as well as in fiction. One of the greatest paintings of all time, and according to some, the greatest of all, is Titian's painting of the Assumption which dominates the Church of the Frari in Venice. The student of art, H. H. Powers, speaking of this masterpiece has written:

---

<sup>33</sup>*Metaphysics*, Book Thirteen, 1078b 1-4

<sup>34</sup>"The Adventure of the Norwood Builder "from *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Garden City Publishing Co., Inc. , N. Y., 1938, p. 583

<sup>35</sup>*ibid.*, p. 590

<sup>36</sup>*ibid.*, p 592

<sup>37</sup>*ibid.*, p. 592

It is difficult to know which to admire most, the masterly psychology of this grandest of dramatic interpretations or the perfect mastery of color and shadow by which this interpretation is effectively expressed. Let us repeat, it is the greatest dramatic painting...In dramatic painting Titian knew how to conceive and to execute. Above all he knew where to stop.<sup>38</sup>

Mozart is both praised for knowing when to stop and speaks himself of the golden mean. In a letter of 28 December 1782 to his father, 1782, complained of an onerous task he was asked to perform and spoke of the mean:

...I am engaged in a very difficult task, the music for a bard's song by Denis about Gibraltar...The ode is sublime, beautiful, anything you like, but too exaggerated and pompous for my fastidious ears. But what is to be done? The golden mean of truth in all things is no longer either known or appreciated. In order to win applause one must either write stuff which is so inane that a fiacre could sing it, or so unintelligible that it pleases precisely because no sensible man can understand it[The golden mean, the truth, is no longer recognized or valued. To win applause one must write stuff so simple that a coachman might sing it, or so incomprehensible that it pleases simply because no sensible man can comprehend it.]<sup>39</sup>

Alfred Einstein adds to this that

Mozart added that he would like to write a short introduction to music, with musical examples, to make clear his esthetic ideal: the golden mean, avoiding both the trivial and the precious. His opinions sound like those of an old man, singing the praises of bygone days. But they are the views of a musician of eternity.<sup>40</sup>

Einstein gives an interesting anecdote about Mozart and the Emperor, Joseph II:

---

<sup>38</sup>H. H. Powers, Ph. D, *Venice and Its Art*, Macmillan Company, New York, 1930, pp. 322-323

<sup>39</sup>Quoted by Alfred Einstein in *Mozart, His Character, His Work* (Oxford University Press, Eight Printing, 1977 - copyright, 1945), p. 95:

<sup>40</sup>*Mozart, His Character, His Work* (Oxford University Press, Eight Printing, 1977 - copyright, 1945), p. 95

*Die Entführung*... "Too beautiful for our ears, and far too many notes, my dear Mozart," Joseph II is supposed to have said after the first performance, on July 16, 1782; whereupon Mozart is said to have replied, "Exactly as many, Your Majesty, as are needed."<sup>41</sup>

Karl Barth has strongly emphasized this moderation of Mozart:

Mozart makes music, knowing everything from a mysterious center, and thus he knows and keeps the boundaries on the right and on the left, upward and downward. He observes moderation... He was (and I quote Grillparzer's beautiful words) the musician "who never did too little, and never did too much, and who always arrived at but never went beyond his goal" <sup>42</sup>

But if the chief gift of the artist is knowing when to stop as the author of the Sherlock Holmes' stories has told us and hitting the golden mean is the perfection of art as Mozart taught, and Titian "Above all... knew where to stop", then likewise the playwright must set down or lay down his scenes with as much modesty as cunning

### AS WHOLESOME AS SWEET

In these words, Shakespeare is saying that a play should have as much a good moral effect as be pleasant. *Sweet* is a common metaphor for pleasant and *wholesome* is used by Shakespeare for what is reasonable and therefore virtuous. In *Coriolanus*, Menenius urges Coriolanus to be reasonable and control his anger in speaking to the crowd:

You'll mar all:  
I'll leave you: pray you, speak to 'em, I pray you,

---

<sup>41</sup>*Mozart, His Character, His Work* by Alfred Einstein (Oxford University Press, Eighth Printing, 1977 - copyright, 1945), pp. 457-458

<sup>42</sup>In *The Freedom of Mozart*

In wholesome manner.<sup>43</sup>

[Hudson Shakespeare note. 56. *wholesome*: reasonable.]

And Guildenstern begs Hamlet (pretending to be mad)

...make me a wholesome answer<sup>44</sup>

Sidney (a near contemporary of Shakespeare) in his *Apologie For Poetrie* says that

...poesie is full of vertue-breeding delightfulness" and that it "doth intende the winning of the mind from wickedness to vertue: even as the childe is often brought to take most wholsom things by hiding them in such other as have a pleasant tast...So is it in men most of which are childish in the best things.

Notice the words *wholsom* and *pleasant* and compare with Hamlet's words "As wholesome as sweet"

As we can see from Sidney, the health of the emotions is as much an end of the poetic art as the health of the body is an end of the medical art. If the doctor were to try to make his patient sick or to kill him (as in abortion or euthanasia), he would not only be an evil man, but he would also be a bad doctor, acting contrary to the end of the medical art.

We should ask a question about these words with an analogy to food. Food should be both tasty and healthy. But both are not the concern of the same art. The art of cooking aims at tasty food while the medical art aims at healthy food. Although the cook should make healthy as well as tasty food, it is not as cook or through the art of cooking that he knows which foods are healthy or more healthy. Likewise, a work of fiction should be both wholesome or healthy for the soul and sweet or pleasant to the senses and imagination. Someone might think that the poet as poet or through the poetic art aims only at the sweet or pleasant. And Shakespeare often speaks of this goal.

---

<sup>43</sup>*Coriolanus*, Act II, Sc. 3, Menenius to Coriolanus:

<sup>44</sup>*Hamlet*, Act. III, Sc. 2, 328

The last lines of *Twelfth Night*:

A great while ago the world begun  
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain;  
But that's all one, our play is done,  
And we'll strive to please you every day.

And the Epilogue spoken by the king in *All's Well That Ends Well*:

The king's a beggar, now the play is done:  
All is well ended if this suit be won,  
That you express content; which we will pay,  
With strife to please you, day exceeding day:  
Ours be your patience then, and yours our parts;  
Your gentle hands lend us, and take our hearts.

And the Epilogue spoken by Prospero in *The Tempest*:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown,  
And what strength I have's mine own,  
Which is most faint. Now, 'tis true,  
I must be here confin'd by you  
Or sent to Naples. Let me not,  
Since I have my dukedom got  
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell  
In this bare island by your spell,  
But release me from my bands  
With the help of your good hands!  
Gentle breath of yours my sails  
Must fill or else my project fails  
Which was to please.....

It is more known to us and more openly spoken of by the poet that he is trying to please us. But is it accidental to the poetic art that the fictions it makes be wholesome? Is this something the poet does only if he happens to be a good man or is directed by ethics or politics or some other knowledge?

When Thomas Aquinas places the book *About the Poetic Art* among the works of Aristotle, he states that

Poetae est inducere ad aliquod virtuosum per decentem  
representationem.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup>In *I Posteriorum Analyticorum*, Proemium, n. 6

Thomas does not speak of what is accidental in such contexts. And when Aristotle defined tragedy, he put *catharsis* in its very definition. But no definition should be from the accidental. The word *catharsis* is carried over from the body and the medical art to the emotions and the poetic art. As the catharsis or purgation of the body restores it to health, so the catharsis of the emotions puts them in a more healthy disposition.

If the poetic art is then proportional as regards the soul, or our senses and emotions, to *both* the art of cooking and the medical in regard to food, the play should be *as wholesome as sweet*.

Perhaps we should reason from the more known that the playwright aims to imitate in a way pleasing to his audience to the less known that he is trying to have a wholesome effect upon the audience's emotions and lead the hearers into something virtuous.

Can the playwright's imitation or likeness be pleasing if it does not bring out the difference between good and bad men, and between good and bad actions? The poet cannot imitate well without representing the natural as natural and the unnatural as unnatural, and the virtuous as virtuous and the vicious as vicious. The pleasure of recognition is impossible without a good imitation. So when the poet represents virtue as virtue and vice as vice, we are naturally attracted to the former and repelled by the latter. And when these are seen in their true colors, the good is naturally attractive and the bad repulsive. Hence, the conscience of the king is caught in the play within the play.

There is a play tonight before the king;  
One scene of it comes near the circumstance  
Which I have told thee of my father's death:  
I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,  
Even with the very comment of thy soul  
Observe mine uncle; if his occulted guilt  
Do not itself unkennel in one speech,  
It is a damned ghost that we have seen,  
And my imaginations are as foul  
As Vulcan's stithy. Give him heedful note;  
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,  
And after we will both our judgments join

In censure of his seeming.<sup>46</sup>

And in the Bible, David condemns himself in the story told by Nathan.

And since the playwright aims more at the universal than the singular, this is especially true. For the judgment of reason is suspended more in the singular which is attractive to the senses and engages the emotions. For as Boethius teaches us, a thing is singular when sensed and universal when understood. A man can know in general that adultery and fornication are bad, but be tempted in regard to this woman who appeals to his senses and emotions. Aristotle observes in the book *About the Poetic Art* that fiction is more philosophical than history because it more about the universal:

Hence, poetry is more philosophical and noble than history. for the poem says more the universal, but history the singular.<sup>47</sup>

When the playwright represents well the bad more universally than in the singular, the bad is not attractive.

But is it accidental to a good imitation that it leads us into something virtuous through a suitable representation? It is natural to learn at first by imitation. Hence, it is natural for men to be inclined by imitation to virtue.

We should also remember the beginning about pleasure which Aristotle touches upon in the book *About the Poetic Art*. One should not, he says, seek the pleasure of comedy from tragedy, but that which is proper to it:

But this is not the pleasure from tragedy, but more that proper to comedy.

48

And this is true of everything that is sought because of some pleasure. Each thing has its own pleasure. This is true of food as well as of everything else. It takes much experience of things and appreciation of them before we can judge what pleasure is proper to each. The chief pleasure from tragedy and comedy is from the catharsis or purgation and purification of the

---

<sup>46</sup>*Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 2

<sup>47</sup>*About the Poetic Art*, Chapter 9, 1451b 5-7

<sup>48</sup>*About the Poetic Art*, Chapter 13, 1453a 35-36

emotions. This is why Aristotle has put the catharsis of pity and fear in the definition of tragedy. Comedy purges our mirth and hope while eliminating the harmful passion of melancholy. The catharsis of the emotions leaves them in a more reasonable disposition. Hence, in aiming at the pleasure of catharsis, the good playwright is making the play as wholesome as sweet.

We can object to pornography in fiction not only as a good man or as a father or as a citizen, but also as a mistake regarding the pleasure proper to tragedy.

John Masefield writes in his Introduction on Shakespeare and Stratford that:

We know now that Shakespeare...had a righteous mind. The beauty of the right course, the evil of the wrong course, is clear in each play. From the very first, there is an insistence upon truth, of every kind, as the life in human affairs, the enduring thing.<sup>49</sup>

When Pius the XII became Pope, he made sure that his Shakespeare volumes were brought into his new quarters. The favorite poets of Paul VI were Dante and Shakespeare. In his conversations with Guitton, Paul VI spoke of the plays of Shakespeare as a moral education.

The words of Shakespeare are pleasing because of their meter, rhyme and alliteration, and even more so on account of the metaphors, similes and other figures of speech contained in them. There are also particular charms in his arrangement of words that are hard to describe, however they are sensed or felt.

AND BY VERY MUCH MORE HANDSOME THAN FINE

---

<sup>49</sup>General Introduction on Shakespeare and Stratford, *Three Tragedies, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Macbeth*, Dodd, Mead & Company, N. Y., 1965, p. xii

These words refer to the excellence of style. Style is an elusive thing, difficult or impossible to teach. It is inborn in the good writer, as our best stylist and writer, Washington Irving, has taught us. (Irving replace Addison as the model of English prose style.) It is difficult to define the excellence of style which Aristotle said should be clear, but not mean. The good speaker or writer must speak or write in a way that is above our ordinary way of speaking and writing. His language must be more elevated than our daily speech, yet not so as to be unclear.

Before we try to explain these words, a few examples from others. In his edition of *Hamlet*, Rolfe quotes Delius who says that *handsome* denotes genuine, natural beauty and *fine*, artificial laboured beauty. Kittredge simply says that *more handsome than fine* means elegant, but not gaudy or over-decorated. The Yale Shakespeare edition explains *handsome* by saying that its beauty was not that of elaborate diction or polish, but that of structure and proportion. We can see something of what these authors are trying to get at in the literary criticisms written by Washington Irving. In a review of a volume of poems by Edwin C. Holland, Irving wrote:

But the chief fault which infests the style of the poems before us, is a passion for hyperbole, and for the glare of extravagant images and flashing phrases. This taste for gorgeous finery and violent metaphor prevails throughout our country, and is characteristic of the early efforts of literature. Our national songs are full of ridiculous exaggeration, and frothy rant and commonplace bloated up into fustian. The writers seem to think that huge words and mountainous figures constitute the sublime. Their puny thoughts are made to sweat under loads of cumbrous imagery....We would advise these writers, if they wish to see what is really grand and forcible in patriotic minstrelsy, to read the national songs of Campbell and the "Bannock-Burn" of Burns, where there is the utmost grandeur of thought conveyed in striking but perspicuous language.

It is much easier to be fine than correct in writing.

A rude and imperfect taste always heaps on decoration, and seeks to dazzle by a profusion of brilliant incongruities. But true taste evinces itself in pure and noble simplicity, and a fitness and chasteness of ornament. The Muses of the ancients are described as beautiful females, exquisitely proportioned, simply attired, with no ornaments but the diamond clasps that connected their garments; but were we to paint the Muse of one of our popular poets, we should represent her as a pawnbroker's widow, with

rings on every finger, and loaded with borrowed and heterogeneous finery.<sup>50</sup>

Irving makes a similar criticism in his comments on a poem by Robert Treat Paine:

The "Invention of Letters" is another poem, where the author seems to have exerted the full scope of his talents. It shows that adroitness in the tricks of composition, that love for meretricious ornament, and at the same time that amazing store of imagery and illustration, which characterize this writer. We see in it many fine flights of thought, and brave sallies of the imagination, but at the same time a superabundance of the luscious faults of poetry; and we arise from it with augmented regret that so rich and prolific a genius had not been governed by a purer taste.<sup>51</sup>

Irving points out the contrary in the speeches of George Washington and in the acting of certain actors and singers. Washington wrote to Hamilton about the style he sought in his Farewell Address:

"My wish is, that the whole may appear in a plain style; and be handed to the public in an honest, unaffected, simple garb."

and Irving commenting on the speech writes in the same place:

The address certainly breathes his spirit throughout, is in perfect accord with his words and actions, and, "in an honest, unaffected, simple garb," embodies the system of policy on which he acted throughout his administration.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup>Washington Irving, "Edwin C. Holland", in "Biographies and Miscellanies", *The Works of Washington Irving*, Kinderhook Edition, Edited by his Literary Executor, Pierre M. Irving, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1866, pp. 397-399

<sup>51</sup>Washington Irving, "Robert Treat Paine", in "Biographies and Miscellanies", *The Works of Washington Irving*, Kinderhook Edition, Edited by his Literary Executor, Pierre M. Irving, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1866, p. 382

<sup>52</sup>Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington*, Part Fifth, Chapter Thirty, pp. 348-349:

A striking example of this is found in Washington's address to his soldiers tempted to armed redress of their injuries after the war when their pay etc. was in arrears. Here is Irving's account:

Major Shaw, who was present, and from whose memoir we note this scene, relates that Washington, after reading the first paragraph of the letter, made a short pause, took out his spectacles, and begged the indulgence of his audience while he put them on, observing at the same time that *he had grown gray in their service, and now found himself growing blind*. "There was something," adds Shaw, "so natural, so unaffected, in this appeal, as rendered it superior to the most studied oratory; it forced its way to the heart, and you might see sensibility moisten every eye."<sup>53</sup>

We see similar comments by Irving when writing about excellent actors or singers. In a letter to a friend, he writes the following about the acting of Grisi in the *Barber of Seville* playing Rosina:

Her acting, like all great achievements of art, is worthy of especial examination. It is a perfect study. Like all great achievements of art, it is delightful from its simplicity.<sup>54</sup>

And in writing of the performance of the Shakespearean actor Cooke:

One of his best performances may be compared to a master-piece of ancient statuary, where you have the human figure, destitute of idle ornament, depending upon the truth of anatomical proportion and arrangement, the accuracy of character and gracefulness of composition; in short, a simple display of nature. Such a production requires the eye of taste and knowledge to perceive its eminent excellences; whereas, a vulgar spectator will turn from it to be enraptured with some bungling workmanship loaded with finery and drapery, and all the garish ornaments in which unskillfulness takes refuge.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup>Washington Irving, *Life of George Washington*, Part Fourth, Chapter Thirty-One

<sup>54</sup>From a letter of Washington Irving to J. P. Kennedy, Nov. 22, 1854

<sup>55</sup>From a letter of Washington Irving to Brevoort, April 11, 1811

But some examples from Shakespeare will best help us to understand what he means by *and by very much more handsome than fine*. Each example is a couplet or two lines

First let us take two couplets in which Shakespeare's characters note the break of day, the beginning of morning:

The first is from *Romeo and Juliet*:

Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.<sup>56</sup>

The second is from *Hamlet*:

But look, the morn in russet mantle clad  
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.<sup>57</sup>

How would you express in a way that is more handsome than fine the fact that vibrant young people will grow old and die. Listen to how Shakespeare does it:

Golden lads and girls, all must  
As chimney sweepers come to dust.<sup>58</sup>

How would you have Horatio speak as his friend of friends Hamlet dies? Listen again to Shakespeare's words:

Now cracks a noble heart! Good night, sweet prince  
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.<sup>59</sup>

How would you express the feeling and thought of a father when his only daughter, a beautiful young girl, is found dead on her wedding morning. Listen once more to the words of the Poet:

---

<sup>56</sup>*Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Sc. 5

<sup>57</sup>*Hamlet*, Act I, Sc. 1

<sup>58</sup>*Cymbeline*, Act IV, Sc. 2:

<sup>59</sup>*Hamlet*, Act V, Sc. 2

Death lies on her like an untimely frost  
Upon the sweetest flow'r of all the field.<sup>60</sup>

In each of these couplets, we recognize an excellent brevity and a noble simplicity.

All things considered, one is inclined to agree with our first great author Washington Irving, himself a master of English style, in his judgment of Shakespeare's words:

During his last days Irving told his biographer that "SHAKESPEARE has a phrase for everything." Considering Shakespeare and "one or two others; it seemed idle for anyone else to pride himself upon authorship."<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup>*Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Sc. 4

<sup>61</sup>*Washington Irving, Moderation Displayed*, by Edward Wagenknecht, p.