

The Bard's God

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If Gideon Rappaport's publisher had asked him what he envisioned his readership for this book would be, my guess is that he would have answered: anyone potentially likely to read Shakespeare—and could use a little help. For *Appreciating Shakespeare* is encyclopedic, encompassing everything from the simplest rhetorical devices to an answer to the question, "What is Art?" And that's only in the first part. Part Two consists of fairly brief—five to fifteen page—discussions of the most important plays, plus the sonnets. All of this offered by a man who has obviously spent much of his life studying and explaining Shakespeare . . . and loving it.

Rappaport wants to cover every conceivable aspect of the man and his work, from his schooling, his religion, his business acumen to how he wrote, his possible collaborations and how his plays were published and preserved. Whether it is quite so necessary to begin with the freshman elements of poetry—explaining what a simile or an iamb or a feminine ending is, or, when he turns to the sonnets, what a sonnet is—aside, he moves through the more esoteric rhetorical devices, like chiasmus or enjambment, to demonstrate, in speeches by Macbeth and Prince Hal, for instance, how these figure in shaping Shakespeare's dramatic language, sound enforcing meaning. Rappaport excels on the rhetoric.

He explains, too, the techniques that Shakespeare deploys in the creation of characters who are both believable as citizens of the real world, yet have a transcendent significance, concrete universals, as another critic calls them; and all the elements that go into the creation of the play itself—action, scene,

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plot, theme. At this point my first demurrer: Rappaport tends to view the plays—at least those he discusses—as perfectly unified creations, all elements seamlessly meshed: “In a Shakespeare play nothing is trivial because everything is part of a larger subject.” Now no one exceeds my belief in Shakespeare’s genius, only Beethoven and possibly Michelangelo comparable, but even Shakespeare nods. Leaving aside whole plays that are not top drawer, there are stretches in even the great ones that clunk. I think, for instance, of that nonsensical business in *Romeo and Juliet* (V, iii) where all have lamented (at tiresome length) her death—she’s really only drugged—leaving the musicians engaged for the wedding that won’t be to mess around for fifty lines of silly horseplay around her “corpse.” I can’t imagine the last time that’s been included in a performance of the play. Or the extensive quibblefest in *Measure for Measure* (II, i) where the malefactions of a bunch of nitwits piddles out at the length “of a night in Russia.” If it ever was, can that now be considered an integral part of the play? The belief that every moment in

every play constitutes an integral component of the whole mitigates against cutting anything in performance, like lopping off a body part; yet as a dramaturg (his word) Rappaport must know how essential—even desirable—trimming usually is. If all parts are equal, some are more equal than others.

Rappaport deplures, quite correctly, the sort of cuts and even revisions in modern productions to make them seem more relevant—or even palatable; but, having censured Olivier’s Freudianized *Hamlet*, he suggests that if you want to see Sir Laurence at his best, see his 1944 film of *Henry V*. If you were to, what you would see is less than half Shakespeare’s play (1,505 lines of the play’s 3,199), “tendentiously gutted,” I wrote in a *College Literature* review from 1978, “with recognizable hunks floating occasionally to the surface.” This sort of aesthetic hatchet job constituted Olivier’s contribution to the war effort, won, Rappaport claims, “partly because the words of this play lived in the minds and hearts of Shakespeare’s twentieth-century audience.” Apparently for some occasions, half loaves will do.

The ideological crux of Part 1, however, distinct from the rhetorical mechanics, resides in Rappaport's religious belief about Shakespeare's religious belief: he

articulate[d] in his plays a vision of Christianity that *any* Christian believer could embrace. We will probably never know exactly what Shakespeare believed in his heart about the differences in particular doctrines that divided one Christian sect from another. But no poet . . . has ever portrayed the universal, humane spirit at the center of the Christian religion so clearly or so movingly.

That would have to be decided *a posteriori*, not *a priori*, I would think, examining each play, but that statement does not really express the full nature and extent of what Rappaport means by Christianity. He takes pains

to distinguish how differently the Elizabethans viewed the world than we do, and their religious faith—he's following C. S. Lewis here—was still basically medieval, based on hierarchy (The Great Chain of Being), order, and degree. When this view was first propagated in E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* of 1943, it represented, as one historian put it, "the revolt of the medievalists," holding this to be the common *Weltanschauung* of Shakespeare's age. Accordingly, everyone at the time must have thought in this way, providing us with the key to understanding his plays.

In fact, however, this view represents the beginning point, not the end point, of Shakespearean interpretation, which rather must consider what he did, individually, artistically, with the received ideas. Helen Gardner noted at the time that Tillyard's tidy picture of the age

"cannot tell us how much of that picture had truth and meaning for any single Elizabethan. And even if we could discover

a kind of highest common factor of contemporary beliefs and attitudes, it could not tell us what any individual believed, and certainly not what Shakespeare believed. We do not know very much about Shakespeare outside his plays, but at least we know from them that he was not an average Elizabethan."

Shakespeare was, of course, familiar with the argument from degree, as it was sometimes called, using it in at least two of his plays, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Coriolanus*. The speech of Ulysses in *Troilus* stands, in fact, as one of its most commonly cited examples: "Take but degree away, untune that string, /And hark what discord follows." But neither it nor the Fable of the Belly argument in *Coriolanus* plays any significant role, exerts no effect on the course of the drama and is spoken by a character of questionable honesty. The divine right of kings, entailed necessarily from the Great Chain of

Being concept, obviously occupies a central place in the plays, but, particularly in the histories, to be questioned, undermined, rethought. Rather than seeing Shakespeare as the average Elizabethan, providing only what oft was thought if ne'er so well expressed, we might better agree with Friedrich Meinecke's astute observation: "The ability to think in terms of inner conflicts, violations and tragic problems presupposes a more modern and sophisticated mentality [than earlier thinkers] which perhaps only began with Shakespeare."

Part Two, consisting of twenty-two separate discussions of twenty-two separate plays, is impossible to review in any coherent collective way, so I'll concentrate on one example from each of the genres Rappaport identifies, beginning with comedy. No doubt *The Merchant of Venice* requires the greatest degree of reclamation from modern misreading. From the nineteenth century, when Shylock began to be seen as the center of the play and a victim, the focus on the play as Christian and comic began to be radically distorted; Rappaport, correctly, redresses that. For

instance, against the charge that the play is anti-Semitic—an anachronism, since that is a nineteenth century racial categorization—Rappaport concentrates on the other Jew in the play, Shylock's daughter Jessica, whose conversion to Christianity comes easily and joyously, an impossibility if the play were anti-Jewish. And even Shylock, shown the error of his ways and treated magnanimously by Antonio, considering, is converted, allowing for the joyfully celebratory Act V. (Sometimes when the play was performed as the tragedy of Shylock, the entire last act was eliminated.) Rappaport concludes: "The whole play is of a piece, a variety of dances to a single theme, ending in one of the loveliest scenes of harmony in all Shakespeare's works." Just so, can't be said too often.

One further point. In much modern criticism, even in student study guides, Portia, once universally considered one of Shakespeare premier heroines, now stands revealed a villain, a cruel trickster of Shylock in the trial scene. Her "quality of mercy" speech is seen as setting him up, but the speech is not intended

to save Antonio—who Portia alone knows is in no real danger—but Shylock, who is bringing condemnation on himself by insisting on the bond, saved from death only by the Duke's leniency. The Christianity of the play is secondary to the comedy, but essential to the happy ending.

The history plays are another matter altogether. I want to concentrate on the two parts of *Henry IV*, which for analytical purposes constitute a single play, but some mention of *Richard II* and *Henry V* which begin and end the tetralogy is necessary. Richard II believes himself king by divine right and acts accordingly, badly. His nobles, led by Henry Bullingbroke (Rappaport's spelling), rebel and depose him, and crown their leader as Henry IV: medieval theory giving way to Renaissance *realpolitik*. Henry, however, retains enough of the old view to announce at the play's end: "I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land/To wash this blood off from my guilty hand." (He never makes it.)

How, then, will Shakespeare (in Rappaport's Christian interpretation) make this wrong right? The answer: Prince Hal,

Henry V-to-be, the central character of *Henry IV 1* and *2*, “who embodies Shakespeare’s ideal of good kingship.” Shakespeare, however, is constrained by history, which recounts that Hal had a riotous and troubling history; the Bard turns that to account, brilliantly, from a dramatic perspective, presenting the Prince’s madcap youth as planned, a ploy, to make his conversion, when it comes, all the more remarkable. “I’ll so offend to make offense a skill,” he soliloquizes in the first act, “Redeeming time when men think least I will.” One might think that a risky proposition, but, one, it works, and, two, it allows for some of the greatest comic scenes in literature thanks to Hal’s fellow miscreant Sir John Falstaff. Rappaport views this as a kind of morality tale, in which the Prince learns to govern himself and thus his kingdom, banishing the figure of misrule, the fat old Falstaff, in a famous speech; “I know thee not, old man.”

The problem with this view, albeit generally held, is that it’s too simple. First, many readers find Hal’s ploy repellent, Machiavellian, a betrayal of

honest friendship. Second, *Henry V* is replete with negative instances of his behavior as king. In his dying declaration, Henry IV advises his son “to busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels” to stave off domestic troubles, which is exactly how *Henry V* begins. Says the opening chorus:

Then should the
warlike Harry, like
himself,
Assume the port of
Mars, and at his heels
(Leash’d in like hounds)
should famine, sword
and fire
Crouch for
employment.

Hardly, I should think, the image of the ideal Christian king. The very long, abstruse justification for war with France made by the Archbishop of Canterbury (which I doubt even the most knowledgeable Elizabethan could follow), in invoking the Salique law, actually proves not that Henry should be king of France but that he should not be king of England, although the Archbishop contends otherwise. (Payments have been made.)

Henry before Harfleur threatens the town with the most horrifying consequences—raped virgins, severed heads dashed against walls, naked infants spitted upon pikes—if they fail to surrender to him. Nothing of this speech appears in Olivier's patriotic paean, and Rappaport, always anxious to excuse even Henry's most egregious behavior, argues, well, they did surrender. If you put a gun to my head and demanded all my money, and I gave it to you, and you didn't shoot, could Rappaport in your defense argue that no crime had been committed? And Henry had, of course, brought his soldiers to France to engage in just the behavior with which he threatens Harfleur. At the Battle of Agincourt, a soldier reports, "the King most worthily hath caus'd every soldier to cut his prisoner's throat. O, 'tis a gallant king!" Well . . . Instances like these do not negate the heroic status of Henry V or the magnificence of his St. Crispian's Day speech, but they do complicate the image that Rappaport projects of him as the ideal Christian king. And, of course, the Chorus has to note, the ultimate deflation, that all he achieved in war is lost by his

son in the civil War of the Roses which wracked England for generations.

The third problem with Rappaport's reading is Falstaff. Falstaff is one of Shakespeare's greatest creations, along with Hamlet the most often discussed and written about. There can be no question that he is the reason the *Henry IV* plays are the most popular of the histories, or that he is one of his creator's most beloved creations: he is why I fell in love with Shakespeare. His role in these plays looms far larger than the king's. If he stands only as the Vice figure, there only to be overcome for Hal's reformation, why such an expenditure of comic genius? You could imagine Hal rejecting only a handful of his tavern reprobates, like Poins, if all you wanted was the morality tale, Hal without Falstaff. Rappaport's account is like having an elephant in the room and treating it like a chipmunk. I offer no alternate interpretation here—not going full Harold Bloom—but think that when Falstaff, playing Hal in the great tavern scene, says, "Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world," he has spoken something true.

The last of Shakespeare's great tragedies is *Antony and Cleopatra*, the most voluptuous of his plays. The great love story brings the opposites—Rome and Egypt, duty and love, reason and passion—to their peak expression, Rappaport shows, in their world-historical clash. But this is not enough. “The play is not explicitly Christian,” he notes.

Caesar, speaking about the *Pax Romana* to come, must have been heard by Shakespeare's audience to be speaking unwittingly about the birth of Christianity: “The time of universal peace is near” . . . Only the story to be told at Jerusalem, as Shakespeare believed and as his play hints, could unite such opposites in ultimate reality, and that story was to be crafted by the only hands greater than Shakespeare's at the art of incarnation.

Could *Anthony and Cleopatra* really have been hinting at the birth of Christ in such a way

that no Elizabethan could have missed it? I've not heard that one before.

But the tragedy I want to focus on is the one generally thought to be Shakespeare's greatest, *King Lear*. Tragedy in its Greek pagan origins unfolded men's destinies in this life, with no meaningful afterlife to redress the balance. Rappaport wants to insist that death is not the end of the story which exists in “the same divine will that governs reality through all time whether pre-Christians know it or not.” This is crucial for *Lear*, for there exists more *felt* suffering in this play than any other. (Others may have higher body counts.) Dr. Johnson recorded that so shocked was he by the death of Cordelia that he would never read the play again until he had to edit it. The cruelty of the king's two daughters and the treachery of the Duke of Gloucester's bastard son, in the play's double plot, drives the king to madness and the blinded duke to suicidal despair, who is saved briefly by his good legitimate son until “his flaw'd heart . . . Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,/ Burst smilingly.” Such an end Rappaport wants for *Lear*.

When in the last scene Lear comes in carrying the body of his one true daughter Cordelia, whom he had banished—in their reconciliation when Lear says she must have some cause to hate him, she replies with the most beautiful lines in Shakespeare, “No cause, no cause”—his despair is absolute: “Thou’lt come no more, /Never, never, never, never, never.” No more heartbreaking lines exist in Shakespeare. But Rappaport will not let Lear die in negation, so that his very last lines, “Look on her! Look her lips. Look there, look there!” represent his mistaken belief that she lives. That, of course, is the usual interpretation, except that Rappaport does not view Lear as mistaken: “If the Christian and Platonic view of reality is true, as Shakespeare believed . . . Cordelia’s soul is not dead but lives.”

At the end the usual tragic re-adjustment is in place: the wicked have been punished, right order restored, but the last lines of the play, spoken by Albany, state that “we must speak what we feel, not what we ought to say/ . . . we that are young/ Shall never see so much, nor live so long.” These are without the usual upbeat flourish

and have given many to feel that *King Lear* has descended so far into the nether world of pain and cruelty that the usual resolution is inadequate for so bleak a tale. Not Rappaport: “Thanks to the combination of Shakespeare’s insight about the human condition and his gift for poetic dramatization, this play is able to incarnate in our experience the invisible reality of God’s love for man.” Whether that view arises from the actual conditions of the play or from the religious beliefs that Rappaport imposes on it remains for the reader to decide.

The Tempest is considered Shakespeare’s last independent, complete play, often his valedictory, compact but complex. It can be seen as a reversal of *King Lear*, the destructive politics of that play checked by Prospero’s white magic in this. Rappaport insists on certain Christian elements here—Ariel’s obedience to Prospero “representing the Augustinian principle that perfect freedom lies only in perfect service to God”—but the emphasis in his discussion (I think) reflects the purely human virtues of forgiveness and faith. Only a virtuous man can access white magic, distinct from the Faustian

black magic, and Prospero is such a man, “with divine approval commanding good metaphysical powers by force of his own virtue informed by mystical knowledge.” He can thus prevent the murderous plans of Antonio and, in the subplot, of Caliban—and forgive them: “Yet with my nobler reason, ‘gainst my fury/ Do I take part. The rarer action is/ In virtue than vengeance.” Repentant, they will be forgiven. Thus Prospero’s magic converts a tragic situation into a comic one, in that all ends well.

But why then does he abjure “his rough magic” and drown his book “deeper than ever did plummet sound?” Rappaport asks this question, which every reader must, and gives several answers. (W. H. Auden, in his sequel *The Sea and the Mirror*, has Antonio renege on his reformation, which more hard-minded readers might have suspected.) His ultimate answer is that Prospero’s renunciation is “a demonstration of the essential virtue of humility.” To have held it longer would be the Faustian temptation, playing God.

Appreciating Shakespeare, as I said at the beginning is encyclopedic. There is a tremendous

amount of useful information, rhetorical, linguistic, historical. The notes to each of the sections in Part Two prove Rappaport an assiduous and perceptive scholar. Above all he presents Shakespeare as a great moralist, the greatest ever in drama. My reservations are two: he has a rather oversimplified view of the Elizabethan age, which can lead to oversimplified interpretations; and he manages to find the hand of God in almost every play. *Titus Andronicus?*