



Shakespeare Matters

"The Voice
of the
Shakespeare
Fellowship"

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"Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments..."

Winter 2002

The Ashbourne Portrait: Part II

*Costume dating debunks
Folger's Hamersley claim*

By Barbara Burris ©2001

"The emperor walked in the procession under his crimson canopy. And all the people of the town, who had lined the streets or were looking down from the windows, said that the emperor's clothes were beautiful. 'What a magnificent robe! And the Train! How well the emperor's clothes suit him!' None of them were willing to admit that they hadn't seen a thing; for if anyone did, then he was either stupid or unfit for the job he held. Never before had the emperor's clothes been such a success."¹

In the area of costume the Ashbourne portrait of Shakespeare has long been a Stratfordian version of "The Emperor's New Clothes." Art experts who have examined the painting including Wivell in 1847, Spielmann in 1910, and the art experts the Folger Shakespeare Library has consulted since 1931, when they purchased the portrait, have not expressed what they must have seen, that the costume is that of a nobleman from the 1570s. Like the emperor's counselors, who out of fear for their reputations and positions, concealed what they really saw and pretended to "see" the emperor's invisible "clothes," these art experts have ignored and concealed evidence in this painting that contradicts the Stratfordian mystique and claims for Sir Hugh Hamersley. They have ignored evidence in the painting and the costume that as experts they must have seen and in any other circumstance would have used without any qualms in a rational dating of the portrait.

Only the well known art expert M. H. Spielmann, who examined the painting in 1910, cautiously remarked upon discordant elements in the painting that contradicted the official view of a Shakespeare portrait of the Stratford man. These dissonant elements included the problems with the inscription, nobleman's dress, neck ruff, age of the sitter and similarity of the costume to the Earl of Morton who died in 1581, thirty years before the 1611 date on the painting.² But, like the emperor's counselors, Spielmann hesitated to draw the logical conclusions from his observations. Instead he fell in step with the Jacobean dating of the portrait that fit the Stratford man. Yet it was Spielmann's reference to the similarity of the Ashbourne costume with the costume of the Earl

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First Fellowship meeting held

Board elected; meeting dates, program schedule established



Dr. Charles Berney,
Fellowship President

On a cold day in late October, members of the Shakespeare Fellowship met for the first time in the warm and welcoming home of Isabel Holden of Northampton, Massachusetts. Some had arrived from Boston, some from New York and Connecticut. I had come from Toronto. Just shortly after the tragedy of September 11th, it wasn't a time conducive to traveling, but nonetheless, twenty of us still managed to make the trip.

After coffee and greetings, we removed to the living room and began to talk, with Chuck Berney taking the chair. We were thrilled to learn we already had 100 members—we now have over 150—and were even happier to receive our first issue of *Shakespeare Matters*, which—slick and

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On Shakespeare's portrayal of the moral life

By John Baker

Recently I picked up a copy of a nearly century-old book on Shakespeare, Frank Chapman Sharp's *Shakespeare's Portrayal of The Moral Life* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1902), and it reminded me yet again of the timelessness of Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies. Regardless of where one stands on the authorship debate, it is always useful to remind one's self about the man who authored these remarkable works, what he was up to, and why it matters even today, four centuries later.

Since moral philosophy does not change, the book is as valid today as it was a century ago, perhaps more so, since modern philosophers don't seem to think as clearly as Sharp. Moreover the subject, Shakespeare's works, have not changed at all, unless one counts the new texts and manuscripts—such as the Dering and

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Baker (continued from page 1)
Cardenio—as part of the canon.

Many of us don't know what philosophy is, let alone what moral philosophy is. So lets start with philosophy. It asks three questions about the world: What is real? How do we know it? What does it mean to me? The three branches are: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Ethics is that part of philosophy which deals with making moral choices and with organizing choices in terms of moral values.

Values can be viewed as "intrinsic" or "extrinsic," meaning internal and unchanging, or situational and pragmatic.

It is clear from this that Shakespeare's plays are predicated on "situation-based ethics," and focus our attention on characters not only capable of changing, but in fact undergoing dynamic change. Othello's "intrinsic" goodness which his wife recognizes and marries, is changed by his behavior into an evil she does not know or understands, "Husband?" she cries.

Indeed millions of us—fundamental Muslims and Born Again Christians, to name just two groups—suppose religion is a philosophy and that ethics must be based on a religion taken on faith. Shakespeare rejects this view. His characters are not black and white, but are realistic personalities struggling within themselves for the "right" course of action, as exemplified by Hamlet's dilemma.

Recall the story of how Dante was located while masked in a large crowd of playful revelers. The searchers were instructed to interrogate revelers with the question, "Who knows the good?" To which Dante promptly answered, "He that knows evil."

It turns out that Shakespeare presents us in his plays with marvelous examples of evil.

Once we know evil we can say to ourselves that we don't want to be like Macbeth, or Hamlet or Othello—not to mention Iago, or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. If we are women, we can learn from the "mistakes" of Desdemona. A passive ignorance is Desdemona's problem. If she had actively combated Othello's growing fears, she might well have changed her own destiny. Failing in this, she could have opted out.

So, from a study of Shakespeare the wise in the audience will know evil and be more able, in the moral course of our lives, to guard against it in our search for our unique personal good. We will also be strengthened in our basic understanding of

human nature, for Shakespeare is a source book of human nature, as many have pointed out.

Consider that Shakespeare does not hold up examples of good men and good women for us to dote upon, emulate or to model our behavior upon, as the old "morality" plays did.

Why?

Because Shakespeare was a true Platonist. He expected us to find good on our own, particularly once he'd pointed out

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what was bad, à la Dante.

As it turns out, for Shakespeare good is more personal than evil. What is good for one may not be good for another. This is because we are so unique, due to what Robert Ardrey calls "the accident of the night" and others call the wisdom of God. Thus the positive fulfillment of our uniqueness takes many diverse turns and cannot properly be addressed by an *a priori* philosophy.

On the other hand, evil is a commonality: it is the lowest level to which all of us may fall. This is why there isn't much difference between murderers and traders, but there is a great deal of difference between drivers.

Ok, so Shakespeare's moral teachings consist primarily in dramatizing how people become evil and, in a few cases, as with Lear, Othello and Hamlet, how they attempt to extricate themselves afterwards. Othello in killing himself freed himself from what he had become. His action runs counter to "God's canon against self slaughter," which one should point out, and is good proof that the author wasn't Catholic.

Finding moral advice in Plato and Shakespeare is thus difficult. Often it is hidden and not completely obvious. Consider Sharp's observation tucked away near the end of his study (221) which runs like this:

In interpreting the plays themselves we may be less rigorous. Each of them is a group of problems or puzzles, set for the spectator's pleasure and profit.

Did you get that, gentle reader? It's important.

Each play—indeed each scene and each line and, yea, often, each word—is a puzzle set for the spectator's pleasure and profit. And Sharp means, "moral profit." We become better persons, more human in Bloom's sense, from seeing, reading and reflecting upon these great dramas.

Sharp continues,

The answers lie deep where the superficial and the indolent shall never find them...[for] the dramatist is subtle and will let no one win the prize who is not willing to observe carefully, to think patiently, and to pay for more than one ticket of admission.

Isn't that lovely? Doesn't it make you marvel at both Sharp and Shakespeare? Doesn't it bring a smile to your face and a bounce to your walk? Can you not see the Author chuckling and waiting expectantly for your return? Where he intends to hook you again. Always the old cobbler, waiting to work upon us all, to mend our souls with his magic, as the opening aural puns in *Julius Caesar* suggest.

Sharp holds out one conciliatory fig:

But it lies in the very nature of the game [i.e., the one between the Author and the reader/spectator] that the solution must not be beyond the reach of human ingenuity.

While this is true, and important, despite all of Sharp's wisdom, he misses the moral point entirely, even when he is so close to it. Sharp should have asked himself: "Why does Shakespeare engage his audience in this game?"

None of us venture into the Author's realm to be surprised. So the Author's intention cannot be either suspense or the character's unfolding that drives suspense, but rather the engagement of his audience in questions of a moral nature. Thus the author is clearly interested, as any social or political or moral philosopher, in the journey of souls within his audience as effected by his ministrations.

The Author is grooming us to become better citizens. Grooming us toward superior discernment. Causing us to exercise our moral facilities in making good judgments rather than bad ones.

Only the twisted can see Othello and want to be like Iago. Rather the ordinary sees Othello taken down by jealousy and resolves not to follow a similar course. This collective resolution, among English speaking peoples, has changed the course of western civilization. Women are more than stomachs and wombs and they are not the property of their husbands, as Emilia so eloquently stipulates.

Interestingly more of Shakespeare's women are good role models than his males, or so I suppose without counting. Even Emilia and Desdemona can be emulated, though guardedly so, because both met tragic fates, where prompt earlier action would have averted it.

Before I close, I want to direct our attention to what Sharp says about the absence of accidentals in Shakespeare. Because of the Stratfordian dogma he's a bit apologetic about it. He writes,

I know the casual reader of the plays will smile at this statement: but here are no accidents in the great tragedies. Least of all in *King Lear*. In the compass of thirty-two hundred lines is told a story almost as full of incident as *War and Peace*, crowded with characters as clearly conceived and as completely developed as those of the Russian novel. These wonderful results are accomplished by an employment of suggestion that has no parallel in literature. The effect of every word is carefully measured; it always reveals something; it may reveal much.

To prove this Sharp directs us to Kent's "innocent looking phrase," early in *Lear* which explains, when we reflect upon it, Kent's own tragedy:

Royal Lear,

Whom I have ever honour'd as my king,
Loved as my father, as my master
follow'd,
As my great patron thought on in my
prayers. (I,i,141)

Sharp argues,

...as a prosperous nobleman, Kent has never had any occasion to doubt the existence of Providence. Evil he must have seen, but he has never known— or at any rate realized—its worst possibilities. Then comes overwhelming misfortune to one he loves, coupled with the revelation of malignant wickedness of those whom he has personally known. As a result, God has gone from his world. The sufferings and the heartlessness in his master's family cost him not only his life, but also his religious faith.

What Sharp is pointing out is that if the casual reader had missed this line about Kent's "prayers" tucked innocently way in the first part of the play, the reader would have *missed* the entire point: Kent is destroyed both in body and in soul by the events of this play. Broken. So it may be said that the entire play turns on one word. There are many such turns in *Lear* and in the other great plays as well.

Sharp is right, each word is considered and weighted. As he notes, we have been

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given clues towards our interpretations of the plays. And the answer, Sharpe explains, does not lie beyond human understanding:

Therefore, in [these] properly constructed dramas the most probable explanation of an action or character, even if it be only barely probable, is the true one. This holds even where the number of our data is ridiculously small, for we must believe we were given all we need. Not so in life. Nature has entered into no tacit agreement with us to preserve all that is required for the answers to our questions, and to provide a corrective for misleading facts.

Which is why we need moral philosophy to sort our way through the maze.

For me the vital point follows closely from this. Yet Sharp misses it entirely and argues that we simply can never know the mind of the Author, whereas we can and indeed must know the mind of Kent and Hamlet:

I do not claim that the plays reveal absolutely nothing about the mind and the experience which were their sources; here and there we may undoubtedly detect the man in the pattern he is weaving. But I do maintain that the preceding paragraphs, or the material as yet presented by any other student of Shakespeare, is totally inadequate for the construction of a theory of his positive theological beliefs....this secret we may never hope to pierce.

In this I believe Sharp—and all Stratfordians—have made a fundamental error. The fact is that the mind behind these plays constructed them not for his own amusement, in which case his ultimate intention could not be glimpsed, but for us. With this knowledge in hand, we can pierce this veil. This man believed, wholeheartedly, in the future of mankind. He loved us one and all and he gave of himself, of his time and of his creativity, freely, over and over, so that we might become better persons.

So we can understand his "positive theological beliefs." They weren't religious, they were moral or humanistic. They rest on the Platonic foundation that we can improve our own lot, but only through great effort and what might be called the didactical exposure to evil.

For, as Glaucon notes in the *Republic*, his soul is not harmed when Socrates is with him, even though he is taken into the presence of "evil."

So it is for those careful readers who will pay more than one price of admission to Shakespeare: their souls are in good hands and the process of close scrutiny to his text will prove positive. His text will prove positive. The Author was a man who knew evil and wanted to share this knowledge with us, so that we might avoid it, and through this avoidance live a better life.

So we can say, unequivocally, that Bloom, not Sharp, was right. We do know the moral underpinnings of these works: they were positive. As has been their effect on mankind. The supposition that they were written for momentary pence is ridiculous beyond description. Plays devised for entertainment are suspense driven, not morally driven, as Emerson noted. The fabric of these plays is far more complex than needed for mere entertainment and the Author's labors, thus, far greater than would have been called for.

These plays represent a labor of love and the object of that love was a better future for mankind. He did not like serfs nor servitude and wrote in order that we might be free and better masters of our own fates than the twisted kings who had ruled us for all too long. In his brave new world only the repatriated exile might rightly rule. Just as in Plato, it was the philosopher who returned to the cave who knew what to do.

John Baker researches and writes on Marlowe as Shakespeare. He's on the web at: www2.localaccess.com/marlowe/default.htm