

A NOTE ON
COLERIDGE AND THE ACTING OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

By

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Scholars and critics of Coleridge generally assume, far too readily I think, that he was hostile to the idea of performing Shakespearean drama on the stage, and indeed to acting in general. Of course, there is some justification for this widely accepted opinion in Coleridge's own writings. In *Omniana*, for instance, we read an account of a visit he once made to the theatre to see *The Beggar's Opera*, in which we are told of the 'horror and disgust' aroused in him by the performance of a work that had always 'delighted' him with 'its poignant wit and original satire'. The 'immorality' of the work, which had not given him 'any offence' in reading, became palpable in the stage representation, and it was then, he wrote, that he 'learnt the immense difference between reading and seeing a play'. A play acted seems to be more real than a play read *silently*.

Even the sound of one's own or another's voice takes them (i.e. the thoughts of which a play consists) out of that lifeless, twilight realm of idea, which is the confine, the *intermundium*, as it were, of existence and non-existence. Merely that the thoughts have become audible, by blending with them a sense of *outness* gives them a sort of reality.¹

Here, it is true, Coleridge deprecates the representation of what is immoral, and in no way refers to Shakespeare. But the distinction between the world of the stage and the mental world is significant, and in this fragment of Coleridge's we notice the highest point of awareness of, and withdrawal from, the world of the senses. But is this the whole story?

1. *Omniana or Horae Otiosiores*, ed. Robert Southey, 1812, 1, pp. 20—22.

In his writings on Shakespeare Coleridge clearly does not reveal any deep interest in the theatrical productions of his plays. In this respect he differs from either Lamb or Hazlitt. Of course, he cannot be charged with initiating the attitude that made of Shakespeare's works objects for the study alone, for the attitude existed long before his time, and we know, for instance, of Dr. Johnson's hatred for the stage: 'A play read affects the mind like a play acted',¹ Dr. Johnson writes in the *Preface to Shakespeare*, and Boswell reports him as saying that 'many of Shakespeare's plays are the worse for being acted.'² Yet, strangely enough, the complete denunciation of the stage representation of Shakespeare at any time came, not from Coleridge, but from Lamb and Hazlitt. In spite of his enthusiasm for the stage, in his essay 'On the Tragedies of Shakespeare considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation' Lamb declared that 'the plays of Shakespeare are less calculated for performance on the stage than those of almost any other dramatist whatever'.³ Again he said that

Lear is essentially impossible to represent on the stage. But how many dramatic personages are there in Shakespeare which though more actable and feasible (if I may so speak) than Lear, yet from some circumstance, some adjunct to their character, are improper to be shown to our bodily eye ... what we are conscious of in reading is almost exclusively the mind, and its movement.⁴

Clearly the critic shrinks from the world of the senses, from seeing 'an old man tottering about the stage with a walking stick etc ...' pass for Shakespeare's Lear, from having a 'fine vision' materialized and brought down to the standard of flesh and blood'.⁵ Similarly Hazlitt states categorically that

Poetry and the stage do not agree together. The attempt to reconcile them fails not only of effect, but of decorum. The *ideal* has no place upon the stage,

1. *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Sir Walter Raleigh, Oxford, 1946, p. 20.
2. James Boswell, *Life of Dr. Johnson*, Everyman's Library, I, p. 368.
3. *The Works of Charles Lamb*, ed. William Macdonald, 1903, III, p. 20.
4. *Ibid.* III, pp. 33—34.
5. *Ibid.* III, p. 19.

the imagination cannot sufficiently qualify the impressions of the senses.¹

For this distrust of the senses Coleridge, who attacked materialism in all its manifestations, and scoffed at what he called the 'despotism of the eye' in Hartley's psychology,² seems to me to be chiefly responsible. He himself said that 'so little are images capable of satisfying the obscure feelings connected with words'.³ Yet there are several points which need clarification in Coleridge's attitude to the stage representation of Shakespeare's plays, and it does seem to me unfair to declare summarily and without any qualification, as Miss M. C. Bradbrook does, that 'Coleridge, Hazlitt and Lamb all three rejected the stage'.⁴

Coleridge does not reject the idea of representing Shakespeare on the stage as such, but only a *particular mode* of performing the plays. In his view, dramatic poetry is not essentially incompatible with stage representation. In fact, we know that among his numerous long cherished but unrealized projects was a long essay on 'Dramatic Poetry exclusively in its relation to Theatrical Representation'.⁵ What Coleridge objects to is the naturalistic style of performing Shakespeare, which treated his poetic drama as if it were the same kind of thing as the contemporary realistic play. Indeed in his preoccupation with the lasting element in Shakespeare's works, Coleridge sometimes goes so far as to say that the stage Shakespeare wrote for is really 'that of the universal mind'.⁶ But such a statement, in spite of the absurd exaggeration it contains, should not be taken to mean that Coleridge did not recognize the fact that Shakespeare wrote for a 'particular stage'. Coleridge undoubtedly benefited from the facts about the Elizabethan stage conditions, which had recently been unearthed by the late eighteenth-century scholars. Capel and Malone had already pointed to the bareness

1. *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, V, p. 234.

2. *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Shawcross, I, p. 74.

3. *Ibid.* II, p. 142.

4. M. C. Bradbrook, *Elizabethan Stage Conditions*, Camb., 1930, p. 12.

5. Letter to John Murray, May 8th, 1816. *Unpublished Letters of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, II, p. 168.

6. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T. Rayson, I, p. 4.

of Shakespeare's stage, and its freedom from the modern elaborate paraphernalia of scenery and decor, as well as to the fact that the appeal of the plays was made mainly to the ear and the imagination. Coleridge, therefore, felt justified in believing that the plays were acted originally as dramatic poetry. He realized the essential difference between the stage, and consequently the manner of acting, of Shakespeare's time and his own.

The circumstances of acting were altogether different from ours; it was much more of recitation, or rather a medium between recitation and what we now call recitation. The idea of the poet was always present, not of the thing to be represented. It was at that time more of a delight and employment for the intellect, than an amusement of the senses.¹

But this was possible only when the theatre "had no artificial, extraneous inducement — few scenes, little music... Shakespeare himself said: We appeal to your imagination". Again he said of Shakespeare's plays,

How different from modern plays, where the glare of the scenes with every wished for object industriously realized, the mind becomes bewildered in surrounding distraction; whereas Shakespeare, in place of ranting and music, and outward action, addresses us in words that enchain the mind, and carry on the attention from scene to scene.²

Coleridge may have tended to minimize the importance of the visual appeal of Elizabethan stage performances, but there is no doubt that he believed that the peculiar structure of the Elizabethan stage and the manner of Elizabethan acting emphasized the poetic nature of drama. It is not true, therefore, to say, as Miss Bradbrook does, that he 'condemned Shakespeare's age and stage by implication'.³ On the contrary, he himself explicitly said that if Shakespeare 'had lived in the present day and had seen one of his plays represented he would the first moment have felt the shifting of the scenes' and 'he would have constructed

1. *Ibid.*, II, p. 85.

2. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 279-280.

3. *Op. Cit.*, p. 14.

his plays on a different model.' But Coleridge was grateful that Shakespeare lived at a time when theatrical conditions were more favourable to poetic drama, for he would much rather have poetic drama than mere stage plays in the modern naturalistic style.¹ Through the lips of a satirical portrait of a defendant of the contemporary practices of the stage he said in the second of his 'Satyrane Letters':

And what is *done* on the stage is more striking than what is acted. I once remember such a deafening explosion, that I could not hear a word of the play for half an act after it; and a little real gunpowder being set fire to at the same time, and smelt by all the spectators, the naturalness of the scene was quite astonishing.²

The naturalistic performance of Shakespeare's plays, which relied more upon scenery and external appearance than upon poetry, was then one reason why Coleridge was averse to the contemporary stage representation of them. But there were other reasons as well. Coleridge objected to the one or two stars performances of Shakespeare, which seemed to have been common in his days. He deplored the custom of giving the important roles to celebrated and gifted actors and actresses like Kemble and Mrs. Siddons, while assigning the minor parts to extremely incompetent persons, who were singularly incapable of reciting poetry, and 'who owed their very elevation to dexterity in snuffing candles'.³ The result of such a custom was a serious distortion of the pattern of the plays, since Shakespeare 'shone no less conspicuously and brightly' in the minor characters. Indeed it would seem that the public in its turn came to expect this type of performance, as the contemporary criticism shows. Even intelligent theatre critics like Lamb and Hazlitt wrote their essays, not on the production of a certain play, but on this or that eminent actor in this or that important role. But this, according to Coleridge, was evidently the wrong approach to the plays. He lamented the fact that few people went to the theatre 'to see a play, but to see Master Betty or Mr. Kean, or some individual in

1. Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, II, pp. 85, 97 and 278.

2. *Biographia Literaria*, II, p. 163.

3. Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism*, II, p. 97.

some *one part*'.¹ Again he complained that 'those who went to the theatre in our own day, when any of our poet's works were performed, went to see Mr. Kemble in *Macbeth*, or Mrs. Siddons's *Isabel*'.² What Coleridge obviously wanted to see was an integrated and unified production, a thing which the theatres of his time did not provide. And when we recall the mangled versions in which the plays were acted, we cannot wonder that they should be condemned by a critic who valued above every thing else the organic unity of a work of art. For one, who strongly believed that 'the fairest part of the most beautiful body will appear deformed and monstrous, if dissevered from its place in the organic whole',³ it was quite natural to write:

To the disgrace of the English stage, such attempts have indeed been made on almost all the dramas of Shakespeare. Scarcely a season passes which does not produce some *ύβερρον πρότερον* of this kind in which the mangled limbs of our great poet are thrown together in most admired disorder.⁴

We must remember that it was not until 1838 (i. e. after Coleridge's death) that Macready restored, for instance, Shakespeare's *Lear* and *The Tempest*, or rather produced them with a minimum number of alterations.⁵

Coleridge's view of Shakespearean acting, in fact, forms an inseparable part of his general Shakespearean criticism. What he wanted in the first place was Shakespeare's own works, and these interpreted by a group of uniformly competent actors in such a way that the pattern of the plays should not be distorted. The plays should be represented primarily as poetic drama, without any of the pernicious and prosaic effects of naturalism. 'A good actor, comic or tragic,' he wrote,

1. *Coleridge's Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. T. M. Raysor, p. 339.

2. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, II, p. 97.

3. *Biographia Literaria*, I, p. 162.

4. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, II, p. 350.

5. See *Shakespeare Adaptation*, with Introduction and Notes by Montagu Summers, 1922 pp. vii, cv.

is not to be a mere copy, a *fac simile*, but an imitation of Nature ... A good actor is Pygmalion's statue, a work of exquisite *art*, animated with and gifted with *motion*; but still *art*, still a species of *poetry*.¹

But in order to ensure the intimate atmosphere appropriate for the exercise of the imaginative power in an audience the performance should take place in a fairly small theatre.²

Finally a word perhaps should be said here for the benefit of those who tend to think that Coleridge was an inveterate hater of the stage.

On his return from Germany Coleridge was full of enthusiasm for Lessing's critical powers. Not only did he for long contemplate the writing of his biography, but he also intended to follow his example in England. In January 1800 he wrote to Thomas Wedgewood from London, telling him that he then spent his evenings in the theatres, because he was about 'to conduct a sort of Dramaturgy or series of essays on the Drama both its general principles and likewise in reference to the present stage of the English Theatres' to be published in the *Morning Post*.³ We do not know if he had actually written any, but if he had, then our loss would be indeed great, judging at least by the excellent sample of his contemporary dramatic criticism, which he published in *Biographia Literaria* on Maturin's play, *Bertram*.⁴ This, to say nothing of his own attempts at writing plays, may be sufficient to refute any notion that Coleridge was not interested in the theatre as such or that he had a strong aversion for the stage. And in the body of his criticism there are to be found here and there indications (they may be of little importance in themselves, still they are there) that he did go to see Shakespeare on the stage, as well as suggestions as to how parts should be acted, or lines should be delivered.⁵ I

1. *Letters of S. T. Coleridge*, ed. E. H. Coleridge, II, pp. 622-623.

2. *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, II, p. 279.

3. *Biographia Epistolaris*, ed. A. Turnbull, I, p. 187.

4. See E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 1938, p. 122: 'If he wrote any, they have not been identified.'

5. See, for instance, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, I, pp. 31, 83, 107 and 122.

shall end this short note by quoting one example. It occurs in the course of his defence of Prospero's words to Miranda after his removing the spell he has cast upon her:

The fringed curtains of thine eye advance,
And say what thou seest yond. (*The Tempest*, I.ii. 408 — 6),

Prospero, Coleridge says,

has just told Miranda a wonderful story, which deeply affected her, and filled her with surprise and astonishment, and for his own purposes he afterwards lulls her to sleep. When she awakes, Shakespeare has made her wholly inattentive to the present, but wrapped up in the past. An actress, who understands the character of Miranda, would have her eyes cast down, living in her dream. At this moment Prospero sees Ferdinand, and wishes to point him out to his daughter, not only with great, but with scenic solemnity, he standing before her, and before the spectator, in the dignified character of a great magician. Something was to appear to Miranda on the sudden, and as unexpectedly as if the hero of a drama were to be on the stage at the instant when the curtain is elevated. It is under such circumstances that Prospero says, in a tone calculated at once to arouse his daughter's attention,

'The fringed curtains of thine eye advance'
And say what thou seest yond.'

Turning from the sight of Ferdinand to his thoughtful daughter, his attention was first struck by the downcast appearance of her eyes and eyelids; and, in my humble opinion, the solemnity of the phraseology assigned to Prospero is completely in character, recollecting his preternatural capacity, in which the most familiar objects in nature present themselves in a mysterious point of view.¹

Nobody can justly complain that such criticism is completely oblivious of stage or dramatic considerations.

1. *Ibid.* II, p. 180