Some Recent Studies in Shakespeare and Jacobean Drama*

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THE OBJECT of this article is to examine a few recent books in this field not for themselves alone, but in order to obtain a view—so far as the limited and arbitrary selection validates such a view—of the general situation in such studies at the moment. Some simple distinctions need to be made : two books on Jacobean drama represent a far higher proportion of the year's output than two books on Shakespeare; yet even this is a fact that perhaps ought to be taken into account more often than it is. That Shakespeare out-tops knowledge is an axiom; we work with the object of being out-topped, and without considering that perhaps every other topic shares this quality. Iconoclasts are extremely rare, and the most drastic historical re-appraisals, involving the wholesale demolition of "major" authors, do not touch Shakespeare. In the universities, where we all teach him so unremittingly that if there were a point of satiety and revolt we should surely reach it, scholars show no disposition to agree with Mr. Pound that there should be a thirty-year moratorium in Shakespeare studies, "on the ground that acquaintance with [this subject] is already widely diffused, and that one absorbs quite enough knowledge of [it] from boring circumjacent conversation." Shakespeare has, in fact, long been a member of the class of sacred books; rabbinical minuteness and allegorical fantasy find ample accommodation in that numinous shadow, and no priest can be a priest too many.

The status of Jacobean drama is much less secure, much more subject to the winds of critical fortune. So far as I know there has been no history of this theme comparable to the studies of Professor J. E. Duncan and Mrs. Tillotson on Donne. We may think we know the broad outline of such a study, but it ought neverthe-

* Alvin Kernan, *The Cankered Muse: Satire of the English Renaissance.* (Yale Studies in English, 142.) New Haven: Yale U.P. $5.00.

Jonas A. Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy.* Cambridge: Harvard U.P. $5.00.

Shakespeare Quarterly, XI (1960), 1. New York: The Shakespeare Association of America. $2.50. (Annual subscription, $8.00.)

Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies.* Oxford: Clarendon Press. 42s.

William Rosen, *Shakespeare and the Craft of Tragedy.* Cambridge: Harvard U.P. $4.75.

less to be made. As I have argued elsewhere, the mistaken belief that Mr. Eliot was largely responsible for the modern "re-discovery" of Donne is chiefly important as testimony to a large, probably temporary, re-drawing of our literary-historical map to make it fit the theory that modern literature is engaged in an endless attempt to heal a historical "dissociation of sensibility"—the whole matter of the Donne revival is best understood as an effort of what I called, perhaps too loosely, "Symbolist historiography." Mr. Eliot's attitude to Donne has indeed been very ambiguous; and the same could be said of his approach to Jacobean drama, where his "Symbolist" interest—prefigured by that of Symons—is thwarted by his recognition of the element of crude realism the playwrights obviously valued. There are many indications that the period of Donne idolatry is passing or passed, but it has left us the lasting benefit of an incomparably fuller understanding of his work and his period than before. It is possible that this revision may be accomplished by a similar recession in the prestige of Jacobean drama, the great vogue of which has been roughly contemporary with that of Donne; it is a question whether there remain similar residual benefits.

These things matter, if only a little, to the dedicated scholar who chooses his field without consulting the fashions. (Consider how, in the past few years, young researchers have moved in flocks from seventeenth- to nineteenth-century topics.) Modern literary studies might be represented diagrammatically as built in three tiers (though the levels sometimes run into each other). The bottom tier is technical: bibliography, basic research of the Public Record Office kind, problems of canon and chronology, editorial techniques generally. The middle tier is topographical : the description, explanation, evaluation of works of literature. The top tier is cartographical. Here belong speculations of the broadest kind about the place of the Augustan or Romantic periods in literature; here are large generalisations about the Line of Wit or the Dissociation of Sensibility; here are the arguments for latent but ubiquitous symbolism, for sophisticated mythology; here is modern genre-criticism; here are those attempts to establish significant contours by linking points identifiable as, for instance, Baroque. And every impressive hypothesis at this level involves almost immediate consequences at the level just below; more remotely, it may influence the interests of workers even on the first level. One of the fascinating aspects of American literary history is that, deal-

ing with a relatively short time-span, it has also grown very quickly, and the third level has been developed along with the other two; so much so that at present most of the interest seems to be in attempts to establish third-level theories. This explains why the subject has an apparent vitality, a topical quality, lacking in English literary history with its deep foundations, its solid substructure of fact and received opinion; in English, major cartographical changes are slow to occur, and tend to last. And although the signs are few, I think one is in progress that involves a downward revision of the prestige of Jacobean drama; there is certainly a hardening of tone about Webster, but my evidence is really no more than "circumjacent conversation."

If this is happening, it must be admitted that the drama has been less fortunate than Donne; for important parts of the first-level task remain unattempted. This is clear if one considers the need for editions of major playwrights. Jonson, who in stature and in the traditional respect accorded him stands a little outside the class, has been magnificently served by his latest editors; and there are other notable editorial achievements. But Massinger, though an Oxford edition is once again in progress, still has no modern edition; Middleton, on whom an expert start was made, still languishes in Bullen, and Bullen's remains the standard text of Marston. Chapman needs more extensive editorial treatment than Parrott could give in small compass; there is a Stratford project but it lies far in the future. So far as I know the team of scholars—it will have to be as numerous as the Beaumont and Fletcher company itself was—does not exist that will edit Shakespeare's immediate successors. And so on. The worst sufferer, I think, is Middleton, because so much of his best work is neglected or inadequately studied; *The Changeling* and one or two other plays have absorbed too much attention. Even the canon is far from established; and it does after all matter, if one is evaluating a man's *oeuvre*, whether or not he wrote *The Revenger's Tragedy*. It occurs to me that the shabby and limited treatment accorded to Middleton may be a consequence of L. C. Knight's disapproval in *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*—still, in England at least, the most influential synoptic treatment of the field, and rightly so. But there seems to be occasion for another decisive book about Jacobean drama as a whole as well as for work on individual writers—a book to break up established habits of thought and show the period in a new light.

The two works here under discussion are not of such a kind, though Mr. Kernan's is about the whole field of Elizabethan satire, treating the drama only as an aspect of this. And he is interested in the whole genre of satire and its characteristic powers, a subject he approaches in a manner that can be briefly characterized as post-Frye, as well as with the performance of the despised Elizabethans and their immediate successors. Kernan considers satire under the three heads of scene, character, and plot. The first is disorderly, packed with stupid or depraved people and the ostentatious objects they covet—it represents a world of which *difficile est saturam non scribere* is always true. And the obscenity of the chosen scene breeds obscenity in the satirical *persona;* hence the characteristic blend of prurience and indignation in this figure from Juvenal on. (This is marked in "formal" satire, where the satirist speaks, rather than in what Kernan calls "Menippean" satire, which uses a fable.) As to plot, it is, in formal satire, wanting; the satirist lashes away, producing movement without change, and only in mixed kinds is this stasis broken and the characters precipitated into comedy, perhaps, or tragedy.

After this theoretical introduction Kernan tackles English Renaissance satire, its recurring satirical types (the native Piers, the imported Pasquil) and its attendant critical theory—the effects of the bad etymology then current, of which the most notable was the association of satire with drama. This, and the ambiguity of the satirical *persona*, distinguish Renaissance satire, which tends to inflate the speaker and hop indecorously in and out of the high style; Kinsayder in Marston is an example—melancholic and envious but honest, even heroic, the great corrector, himself accursed, of enormous times. He made the claim later made by Jaques, and was open to the same countercharges.

This figure became a stock theatrical type like the *miles gloriosus;* but the essential plotlessness of his situation, as Kernan acutely discerns, was an insurmountable difficulty in the theater. On this perception is based the excellent treatment of Jonson and his problems—his move from "formal" to "Menippean" and his attempt to counteract the necessarily intemperate railing of the satirical *persona,* and finally, a point which places this study in direct continuity with Mr. Barish's, the development of methods of linguistic satire to the point where the characters present themselves satirically without the aid of a stage-satirist. Kernan is at his best with Jonson, and with the long, cool view; he is less effective in close

analysis of verse. His account of *Timon of Athens* is much too narrow, and his slightly contemptuous dismissal of Middleton very disappointing, for *The Chaste Maid* would have yielded him as much at least as many plays he considers. This is a well-written book, though a shade too clinical; it may be significant that Mr. Kernan who, as I have said, writes best on Jonson, concludes that the drama proved the inadequacy of the satirists' view of the world, and accordingly argues for a judicial reduction of the prestige of a sizeable collection of Jacobean plays.

If the world continues its deadly "conspiracy of approval" and leaves Jonson alone, the scholars find him inexhaustible. It would seem that they often do best when severely limiting the scope of their enquiries; my own understanding of this playwright was greatly enhanced by the specialized studies of A. H. King and A. H. Sackton. Mr. Barish's is another such. It is very skilfully written, and considering the dryness of the subject most readable; the necessary technical analyses are handled with pleasurable success, and the exposition is fluent. Asserting a double polarity of dramatic prose, Barish calls the "logical" Shakespeare's norm, the "non-logical" or "baroque" Jonson's. "Baroque" he further subdivides, following Croll, into "curt" and "loose" anti-Ciceronian styles; the first excising "logical ligatures" and presenting the material "so as to minimize the sense of logical straitness" and the second involving Jonson in the labor of seeming to improvise, which was not his native skill. Croll's account of "asymmetry" may not, as Professor Williamson maintains, apply to Bacon, but it does define Jonson's prose so well that, says Barish, "one is tempted to use it to describe the topography of his mind"; and he makes the point brilliantly by a comparison between related passages in *The Advancement of Learning* and *Discoveries*, which shows how Jonson left "gnarled and knotted" the "clearspun weave" of the original. To achieve "looseness" Jonson polished to irregularize, contriving ataxic interruptions and changes of pace. And indeed, when one recalls Jonson's detestation of all looseness of expression, of aposiopesis for instance, it is of absorbing interest that he set himself these considerable rhetorical problems, just as he sets himself formal problems, out of respect for classical canons so deep as to be part of his personality. The price he pays is that he is more concerned with rhetoric and dialect than with men, assuming, as the world will not assume, that rhetorical disorder is an index of moral disorder. Hence his plays, as Barish puts it, bear little relation to those in which

posterity maintains an active interest: Shakespeare's "densely casual world and . . . dynamic conception of character." Jonson's is an art of unmasking, of casting out; Barish holds that the strength of his work lies not in the ethical normality it advocates, but in that inharmonious and vivid discontent that occasionally breaks through into the action, and is always present in the dramatic prose. Barish holds Jonson in lively respect, but shrewdly turns against him what I had formerly taken to be his strongest weapon, linguistic satire. Allowing his full credit for the scope and originality of this device, Barish then very convincingly finds in it the explanation of Jonson's missing the heights:

> Jonsonian drama takes as a major premise the total moral expressiveness of language, and activates the premise so as to create a short circuit between language and folly. But there are times when words sink in importance, or when they do, after all, say what we feel and mean, or when they fail us altogether. An art that cannot reckon with this elementary reality, even when it wants to, has plainly blocked itself off from one source of insight, and perhaps constricted the fullness of its own.

This comment, with all its disturbing implications, its denial of a prime humanistic tenet concerning language, seems to me to have maturity and scholarly weight. This very expert study will have a permanent bearing on Jonson studies, and ultimately upon that total reappraisal I have desiderated.

Passing from those who abide the question to him who is free, one expects Shakespearian contributions to be in the main technical or topographical. So vast an annual output cannot reasonably be represented by a couple of books, and I thought to sample the periodical contributions by taking a single random issue of *Shakespeare Quarterly*; one supposes it to contain less than 1% of the annual output of articles. However, it is impossible to believe that this issue represents the general level of Shakespearian activity; it is much too good. At the first or technical level there is an important article by Franklin Dickey on Collier's forged entries in the Stationers' Registers, and a moderate, sensible and skilful enquiry by F. D. Hoeniger—who thinks Day wrote II.i and II.iii of *Pericles*—as to whether we have not been too severe in rejecting textual parallels as a clue to determination of authorship. There are admirable interpretative articles, by Harry Levin on *Romeo and Juliet*, by R. H. West and Hugh MacLean on sexual pessimism and disguise in *Lear*. The only dubious piece is an analysis of Sonnet 146

by B. C. Southam, who thinks the Christian themes are ironically handled by the humanist Shakespeare, "pleading for the life of the body." The shorter notes and reviews are consistently good. Few learned journals are so handsome as *Shakespeare Quarterly,* and every year it publishes its indispensable bibliography. It knows how to avoid that stifling cosiness, the business of all being Shakespeare-lovers together, that is the principal trap for such a journal, a trap its nearest English equivalent does not always escape. If this issue were really representative of modern Shakespearian studies we should have cause for rejoicing.

Mr. Evans's book operates on a very narrow front; his purpose, which is to study "one of Shakespeare's notable dramaturgical characteristics—his uses of awareness and control" sounds tedious, and so it is, though less paralyzingly than might be supposed. He proceeds chronologically through the comedies, examining the ways in which Shakespeare "gives the audience an advantage in awareness" and grades his characters according to *their* degrees of awareness, so that in the end one has *"a structure of discrepant awarenesses."* Mr. Evans is much given to italic type and repetitive terminology, and his manner has other irritating features: throughout he uses "oblivion" and "oblivious" to mean "ignorance" and "ignorant"; he calls a licentious man a "licentiate"; he employs what is to me a new word, "slippage." These are not great matters, but may seem more important than they are in a book that keeps one's nose so close to the ground.

The main objection to Mr. Evans's procedures is that he tends to use the criterion of discrepant awareness as sole test of dramatic merit, without considering, to give a random example, that a television program like *What's My Line?* would, on this test, be found superior to *Troilus and Cressida.* And certainly he makes some very strange judgments. Another difficulty is that quite often Mr. Evans can only tell us in a strange language what we have always known, as when he explains that in *L.L.L.* IV.iii there are five levels of awareness, and that "the perfection of the jest is that we over-peer the topmost overpeerer." Sometimes this fantastication of the obvious reaches extraordinary heights, as when the scene in *The Merchant of Venice* between Young and Old Gobbo is said to be "based on an exploitable difference of awareness" because Old Gobbo is sand-blind, and Young Gobbo not. The degree of possible distortion is suggested by the argument that the last act of *The Merchant* obviously needed saving from anticlimax, and that this

was achieved solely by "exploitation of discrepant awareness" (we know who the lawyers really were, etc.) *Twelfth Night* represents the "summit" of Shakespeare's skill in artful discrepancy, and analysis of it is held to show what in my opinion is untrue, and falsifying: namely that the arrival of Sebastian is "no surprise" to Viola, whose professed incredulity is "incredible." The trouble is that Mr. Evans is exclusively interested in discrepant awareness and Shakespeare was not; the union of the twins in a "natural perspective" was to him something more than "closing a gap in awareness."

There are valuable insights in this book, for example this one: "almost invariably Shakespeare preferred to cast light forward on a scene to be played than to cast it backward on action already past" (though the adverb seems too strong). It is partly Shakespeare's desertion of this principle that makes Evans dissatisfied with *All's Well* and *Troilus.* To understand Helena, he says, one needs to be continually casting back to earlier scenes in the light of later; he dislikes her very much, "hard-eyed beneath her pilgrim's hood." (What kind of awareness does one need to see that?) The whole of *Troilus* is unsatisfactory, the result of an "inexplicably un-Shakespearian slippage of focus," "one great violation of Shakespeare's typical method." The exception is V.ii; nobody will disagree that this is a good scene, nor that it is about discrepant awareness, but it is not necessarily the former because it is the latter. *Troilus* simply will not surrender to Evans's strategy. *Measure for Measure,* less fortunate, is betrayed and taken prisoner, its presentation of Justice misrepresented and Isabella greatly deformed. Yet there are some delicate perceptions in the treatment of the Mariana plot.

Mr. Evans is most original on the Romances. In the first three Shakespeare withholds from the audience his customary assurance that all is, or shall be well; indeed the universe of *Pericles* is at first motivelessly malignant, so that the author himself grew disgusted with it and began, in Act III, to sow the seeds of benignity. In *Cymbeline,* most complex of all in its manipulation of discrepant awareness, assurance is again withheld, and indeed Shakespeare "*progressively deepens anxiety.*" III.vi and IV.ii are called "*the tallest peak in Shakespeare.*" But in *The Tempest,* all experiment with dramatic uncertainty abandoned, he returns to the old method; although it is still a world where the brute threatens the innocent, Shakespeare now gives supreme powers of assurance and awareness not to a god, as in *Cymbeline* but to a man. This destroys the

possibility of dramatic conflict, and what there is of this is benignly faked; the main interest is the sight of evil within the grasp of good.

There is no doubt that Mr. Evans sometimes gives a surprising view of the familiar, and challenges one to relate this to one's own probably less unconventional view. To that extent his book is justified; but it certainly has its ludicrous side and is placed very close to that vast limbo containing the blinkered, the monomaniacal, and what Arnold would have called the provincial, criticism of Shakespeare. Such works are written of no other English author.

Finally there is Mr. Rosen's book, another limited enquiry but neither so fanatic as Mr. Evans's, nor so urbane and well-written as Mr. Barish's. It "investigates how the point of view of an audience is established towards the protagonist" in *Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus*; and it does so sensitively but—and this is not a harsh criticism, since the great bulk of Shakespearian criticism lies under it—unmemorably. Mr. Rosen takes into account many other views but stands free of them in the end. He discourses on the manner of Lear's self-stripping, on the overthrow of degree and the conflict between generations, on the King's discovery that "there are no special laws in the universe for man." Much of this we have heard; but he concludes that the insight achieved by Lear is "not negotiable in this tough world," that the play is in no way Christian, but marvellously confronts terror. In his *Macbeth* chapter he shows us the import of something we may never have noticed: after the murder of Duncan the scenes alternate between a series in which "we are with Macbeth" and a series in which "we see him from the outside"—the judgments and emotions being now personal, now social. He deals very moderately with the extravagance of critics on *Antony and Cleopatra,* claiming that he can show from his technical study that Shakespeare did not want us to think of Cleopatra as "transfigured" or to confuse energy with moral stature. He has fresh things to say about *Coriolanus,* for instance on the iteration of the word "voices." Coriolanus is denied that personal dynamism usual in the tragic heroes; "his fulfillment in character . . . is always in terms of what has been presented beforehand in the form of prefiguring or debates on his worth." Mr. Rosen adds something to our understanding of the tragic structures by studying the "point of view"; and this was his object.

The Shakespearian critics here noticed make some new points, and demonstrate that ours is like former generations in supposing

that the best way to honor Shakespeare is by the labor of an age in piled stones. The other two write best about their best author, Jonson, and Mr. Kernan, who had most scope, is, for all the modernity of his method, not concerned with large or cartographical reassessments. A moratorium might after all be the best thing for Shakespeare studies, though we shall never get it; the need in Jacobean drama studies is quite different, and there is better hope of its satisfaction. The man who attempts it will perhaps be hampered by the lack of certain editorial aids; but a growing class of books, to which Kernan's and Barish's belong, will be invaluable to him.

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