RISE AND FALL IN SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC ART; A PAPER READ AT THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE SHAKESPEARE ASSOCIATION AT KING'S COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON, ON OCT. 27TH, 1922

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BY

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RISE AND FALL IN SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC ART

I

THE presumptuous foreigner, attempting to speak of Shakespeare's art to English students, must needs feel somewhat like Ulysses between Scylla and Charybdis. He is in danger either of being admitted to be right enough, but obvious, commonplace, tedious—nay, irrelevant—or of being found interesting, even original, but hopelessly wrong.

I need scarcely say that I prefer Charybdis to Scylla: I had rather be contradicted than ignored, and I shall certainly be happy to stand corrected, particularly in the matter of Shakespearian chronology, with which I may occasionally seem to be playing havoc. All I can plead in extenuation of my dealings with it, is a conviction that Shakespeare's plays, like the works of similarly productive modern masters, must have originated in his mind, and may to some extent even have been actually produced by his pen, in groups of more than one at a time—that, in a word, Shakespeare, at different points of his career, may have had two (or more) 'irons in the fire' simultaneously.

Another important reservation which must be made before I come to my proper task, concerns that wildly debated subject, the Shakespearian canon. Here I cannot possibly hope to be in agreement with a great many of my English readers. Of recent years there has been a movement towards what even a sympathetic critic described as the 'disintegration of Shakespeare,' and what is perhaps more strictly defined as a strenuous segregation of an apparently large mass of non-Shakespearian

matter in the plays from an apparently small kernel of Shakespearian work with the true golden ring of Shakespeare's poetry in it. Now the author of this paper happens to have received his early Shakespearian training under the influence of a great continental scholar, Professor W. Creizenach, the author of *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*, the fifth volume of which (the last one the author lived to publish) carries the history of Elizabethan drama down to the end of Shakespeare's career (published 1916). Professor Creizenach, like many scholars outside England, did not think Shakespeare infallible as a poet, as some of his more fervent English admirers seem apt to do. I must freely admit that I, likewise, think it by no means unworthy of the genius of Shakespeare that he should—like so many other great modern poets of whom we know this for certain—have occasionally imitated the style of other writers, particularly at the beginning of his career.

Thus, while far from the exaggeration of German romantics, who foisted a large mass of notorious Apocrypha on Shakespeare, I confess myself content to rank with those who have recently been ridiculed as declaring: 'The Folio is good enough for me, thank you.' I certainly believe that Shakespeare had a hand in all the thirty-six plays of the First Folio, as well as in *Pericles*. So far there would seem to be little scope for sharp disagreement; it is only when we come to the 'how much' or 'how little' that greater differences arise. Nobody could deny that in the Shakespearian plays as we have them, there is residue, or dross, from older dramas worked upon by the poet. But, on the other hand, some weaknesses of the early plays at least can be interpreted as being due to the unsteady hand of a novice rather than to that of another author. Thus, some of the poor stuff of *Henry VI* might possibly be put down to the desire of a young author to emulate the popularity of Peele as a chronicle-history writer

rather than to the authorship of Peele himself. It is likewise possible to see imitation of the blood-and-thunder style of Kyd in *Titus Andronicus* and more successful imitation of the courtly wit of Lyly in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The star of Marlowe distinctly shines over two plays, *Richard III* and *Richard II*—and it has not quite ceased to fascinate the writer of two others, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Nobody has dreamed of ascribing the two later plays to Marlowe: need we necessarily go to the length of believing any of the two former ones to be entirely, or mainly, by him?

And to pass from the beginning to the end of the poet's career: might not the noticeable changes in the tone, and even in the versification of some of the last plays in the Canon be considered as due to the weakening of Shakespeare's own hand with advancing years; may not the ageing man have yielded to the fascinating *stil nuovo* of fresh and successful younger writers like Fletcher? Did not Goethe, in a similar way, in his later age, come for a time under the spell of his younger contemporaries of the Romantic School?

Finally, as to the middle and height of Shakespeare's work, inconsistencies and puzzling brokenness in such plays of middle date as *Troilus* or *Timon* might be partly accounted for by temporary breakdown of Shakespeare's creative power under the strain of his greatest work, or to the peculiar conditions of the moment at which the plays were taken in hand by him.

The mention of fatigue as a factor to be reckoned with, brings me to my principal argument.

When engaged, about 1912, in the preparation of my Polish edition of Shakespeare, I once had the privilege to discuss Shakespearian problems with a distinguished English scholar, and happening to mention the traditional 'four periods' of Dowden's scheme of Shakespeare's development, I was met by the words: 'Oh! I am tired of those four periods.' This casual

remark suggested the endeavour to form a view of Shakespeare's poetic career which would embrace the whole of it under an aspect of stricter unity.

Such a view, in a sense, exists. Broadly speaking, we all certainly conceive the total of Shakespeare's work as a wave slowly mounting and growing in might, filling the ear with a world of varied music at its majestic height, and then grandly ebbing away, 'too full for sound and foam.' But this widest generalisation cannot give satisfaction to the more zealous student, enamoured as he is of the 'infinite variety' of Shakespeare's achievements. It is not as *a* wave, but as wave*s* that he will be apt to see the work of the poet. He will notice rise and fall more than once in its course: he will be led to think of it in terms of an alternation of success and failure, of effort and exhaustion, of stress and pause.

This may be objected to at the very outset as an endeavour to 'make patterns' of a poet's career in a spirit of rigid determinism or doctrinaire mania for regularity. But it should be remembered that such an interpretation of any man's work in any field has a solid basis in a law of nature: even great geniuses, the most self-willed of all our self-willed race, are subject, as common mortals are, to the law of fatigue. Work and rest alternate in man's life as necessarily as day and night follow each other in the life of the earth. And work undertaken *invitâ Minervâ*, in a time fit for rest after a great effort, means temporary failure.

In his masterly study of the great tragedies, Professor A. C. Bradley observed a regular succession of great and insignificant scenes within each play—implying almost conscious relaxation after effort, like the succession of accented and unaccented syllables in human speech, which was noticed as an elementary rhythmical necessity by Professor Otto Jespersen. Professor Bradley furthermore observed, as a common feature of the four

great tragedies, a drag in the fourth act of each after the culminating dramatic effects of the third. This is usually masked by some lyrical or other *intermezzo*, or marked by absence of the hero from the stage: Ophelia's madness fills the gap in *Hamlet*, the Rodrigo incident in *Othello*, the Macduff episode in *Macbeth*, the Gloucester scenes in *Lear*.

It was tempting to extend this observation to plays considered in their entirety, and to their grouping. If we could succeed in establishing rise and fall as the rhythm of Shakespeare's whole poetic career, we might hope, in doing so, to catch the very pulsation of his creative mind, the throbs and pauses of the life-blood of his art.

II

SUCH an attempt is made here. It must of necessity take the form of a cursory survey of Shakespeare's entire course of poetical production.

From the evolutionary point of view adopted in this survey, Shakespeare's poetical production very naturally begins on the low level of youthful incompetence. The fairly smooth if uniform versification of that Senecan school-exercise in tragic drama, *Titus Andronicus*, and of that Plautine school-exercise in comedy, the *Comedy of Errors*, in both cases shows a literary beginner's determined seriousness. There are flickerings of a great flame rising in the humanised villany of Aaron the Moor, and in the indomitable imperiousness of the crimeful Scythian Queen; similarly, some of the speeches, especially in the women's scenes, of the *Errors*, presage the sweet intoxication of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

These literary exercises may have been followed, for relief, by Shakespeare's most primitively boisterous farce, *The Taming of the Shrew*, that most unsophisticated practical joke of his dramatic career. In a summary, physical way the young poet here did away light-