

HOW HUMOR BLENDS WITH TRAGEDY (AS IN LIFE)

Hamlet a Humorist, Antony Full of the Joy of Life

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES
By Sir Herbert Tree

ONE of the most alarming signs of insanity, it has often seemed to me, is that of writing to the newspapers to prove that Hamlet was mad, and that Bacon wrote Shakespeare. Yet the same writers who scorn the idea that Hamlet pretended to be mad generally assert with equal vehemence that Shakespeare pretended to write the works of Bacon. I am satisfied that many of the learned commentators have been kept out of lunatic asylums only by the energy which they have expended in the harmless occupation of discussing these two kindred subjects in print. In many cases it has proved a most valuable safety-valve.

Though the subject of the Shakespeare-Bacon controversy is somewhat musty, I will ask you to bear with me while I wander down a by-lane of parenthesis in order to prove at least to my entire satisfaction that, tested by the touchstone of humor, the Bacon theory vanishes into the air. If there is one quality which characterizes the writings of Shakespeare more than another it is humor. He cannot resist it—it is irresistible. Humor, like murder, will out. Had Bacon humor? I think not.

Bacon had learning, Shakespeare not much. But he had instinct. Some people are born educated: Shakespeare inherited the knowledge of his forefathers, and he possessed an unexampled power of assimilating all that came in his way. He made precisely the mistakes that Bacon would never have made. Book learning is not wisdom. Shakespeare himself ridicules this most whimsically in "Love's Labour's Lost":

Study is like the Heaven's glorious sun
That will not be deep-searched with saucy looks:

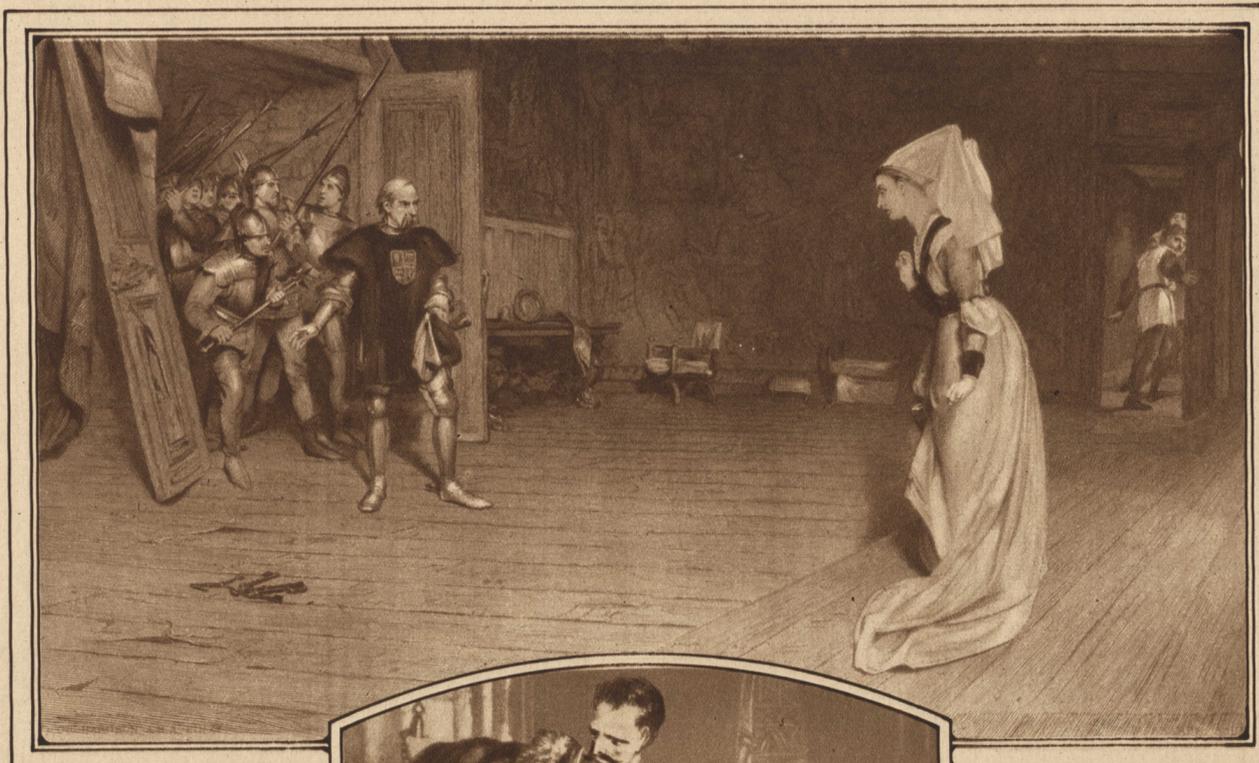
Small have continual plodders ever won
Save base authority from others' books.

The King replies:
"How well he is read to reason against reading!"

How small a thing is education save for those who have the imagination to illumine it! Too much reading is certainly a hindrance to the development of the imagination. Instead of giving birth to original thoughts, the man who has only reading comes to think by quotation—he relies on the cold storage of memory.

Many years ago I met at the house of a friend an eminent cryptographer who had written a work proving by algebra that Bacon wrote Shakespeare. I made so bold as to ask him whether Bacon wrote the Shakespeare sonnets. He replied that his case rested on that certainty. I pointed out to him that while it was conceivable that Francis Bacon, for political reasons, did not wish to acknowledge the authorship of the plays, it was inconceivable that in the outpourings of his soul in the sonnets he should call himself "Your own sweet Will," constantly punning on the Christian name of his paid "ghost," the vulgar poacher and butcher-actor!

Again, "look here upon this picture and on this." Could he who had proved himself a heartless advocate who sacrificed the Earl of Essex, and after the grave had closed over him published a vile attack upon his dead friend and benefactor, "like



The fierce soldier Talbot sardonically bantering the Countess of Auvergne as he takes her prisoner I. Henry VI, Act II, Scene IV.

wrath in death and envy afterward," could he whose meanness was aggravated by respectability, who had paddled long in the putrescent puddles of politics till right and wrong were merged in the melting-pot of expediency—could he have written the sonnet beginning, "Tired of all these, for restless death I cry"?

Is there in any of Bacon's works one hint of the sweet humor, the noble scorn, the glowing melancholy which breathes throughout the works of Shakespeare? I think not. Writers more dissimilar than these two cannot be found. There is one thing quite certain: that if Bacon wrote Shakespeare, then Shakespeare must have written Bacon!

Of all writers he whose works are most charged with an all-informing, all-pervading humor is William Shakespeare, alike in his comic as in his tragic creations. In "Hamlet," for instance, the firmament of tragedy is made blacker by the jewels of humor with which it is bestarred. Bear with me while I linger for a while on this theme, which is as dear to me as any. The first words Hamlet sighs forth are in the nature of a pun:

"A little more than kin and less than kind."

The King proceeds:
"How is it that the clouds still hang on you?"

"Not so, my lord, I am too much in the sun," says Hamlet, toying with grief. Again, after the ghost leaves, Hamlet, in a tornado of passionate verbiage, gives way to humor. Then he proceeds to think too



Hotspur. Let me not understand you, then; speak it in Welsh. I Henry IV, Act III, Scene I. Painted by Richard Westall

He Was Many, Being All

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES
By Benjamin De Casseres

ÆSCHYLUS was sublime, Homer was godlike, Sophocles was inexorable, Aristophanes was satanic, Rabelais was grotesque, Dante was grave, plain, St. Augustine was lyrical, Ibsen was dramatic, Cervantes was humorous, Molière was human, Heine was throbbing-throated, Balzac was mystical-realistic, Swift was misanthropic, Nietzsche was torrential, Byron was melancholic and cynical. Shakespeare was all of these.

His mind was the council chamber of all the titans of literature past and to come. In his brain the past came to puberty. Homer was homeric, Æschylus was æschylean, Rabelais was rabelaisian, Dante was dantesque. But Shakespeare was not Shakespearean.

He was an All. It may be said of him what Descartes said of the universe, that he was a sphere with its very centre everywhere and its circumference nowhere. Gods, worlds, ideas, intuitions, and embryos of beings-to-be swam in his brain like deep-sea Infusoria.

He was the completest human being of which we have any knowledge. Like a substance of infinite protean capacities, he lived all his incarnations at once. We know so little about him because in this human being there was no "him." He was Many, being All. He had the impersonality of divinity, and, being impersonal, he knew nothing of good or evil. He rammed his body up to the navel in old Mother Earth, and still his Third Eye flamed from Arcturus.

What was Shakespeare's religion, his beliefs? His life was lived. He left no record of the why or how. No confessions, no "technique of my art." To him life was an adventure. His plays and poems came from the sweat of his soul. Did he know anything else? Why should he? He was the only pagan who ever lived because he identified himself with the World-Will. And, like Spinoza, he knew that the World-Will was in the alepot and in the eyes of woman as well as in the transatomic dimensions. He ate, drank, begat, accouched a fictional universe, and passed.

Will Shakespeare, the intermittent drinker; Will Shakespeare, the snarer of lassies; Will Shakespeare, the pot-house debater; Will Shakespeare, the sometimes obscene; Will Shakespeare, full of tares and blemishes—what we can piece together of you reveals to us a man as human as Christ. You were one of us, a radiant god who kissed matter passionately because you despised the spiritual jick-stittles. You were a man? You were THE Man. You were that unique—the perfect equilibrium of mind and matter, of sense and supersense.

The pink-tea zanies of culture, the scholastic nizzies, the milkshops of morality, the winged cows of taste, the orthodox dunder-pates, the pretty fellows of literature, the professional jobbernowls—how do they "explain" you, "Will"-of-the-World, old tossopot. Pierrot-Parabrahma?

Dickens's works are the immortality of the disinherited. Balzac wrote the dic-

No, no, I am but shadow of myself; You are deceived, my substance is not here. Painted by W. Q. Orchardson

precisely on the event. But for his humor Hamlet would have killed the King in the first act. It was this very humor, this seeing all sides of a question, which may be said to have been Hamlet's undoing.

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."

He cannot help dallying with humor in his searching cross-examination of Polonius. Again, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern does he indulge his elfin spirit; then away runs his imagination to delight in a dissertation on the players' calling. His contemplation of life becomes almost more important than its actuality—he himself has his fling at the actor's art. Immediately after, in the speech beginning "Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I," he stops to laugh at himself and the bloody business of life. He sees too much, and, seeing too much, he does too little. "A great man's memory," he says in the acted murder scene, "A great man's memory may outlive his life by half a year, but by'r Lady he must build churches then!" Then, instead of killing the King right off, he revels in the mimicry of madness. His imagination with his humor in attendance is his Nemesis. Even in the graveyard scene he must perforce sit on the perilous safety-valve of his humor. He knows his own weakness. His humor did not, unhappily, stop short of himself. There is almost a divinity in his blague when he addresses Yorick's skull. He had too much of that of which the slaughtering conqueror has too little. Even in dying he breaks into a sweet irony of humor in meeting the "fell serjeant death." "The rest is silence." Hamlet ends as he began.

In conclusion, I will content myself with contrasting as typical examples of the year and of humor two of the world's greatest men—Shakespeare and Napoleon, the arch creator and the arch destroyer. Shakespeare enriched the world, Napoleon impoverished it. Which is the greater, the giver or the taker-away? The poet or the Emperor? The man of humor or the man of worldly ambition? Shakespeare with humor or Napoleon without? The latter died in exile and misery, while Shakespeare, who was content to employ his genius in comparative obscurity, died at Stratford-on-Avon in sweet content, let us hope.

in humor's minor key. Here is the humor of tragedy with a vengeance. Poor Hamlet, too much humor hadst thou for this harsh world!

But, indeed, most of Shakespeare's great male creations are gilded with humor, conscious or unconscious: notably Shylock, Falconbridge, Caliban, Timon of Athens, Henry V., Hotspur, Marc Antony, and the two Richards. Richard II. is, I cannot help thinking, the literary progenitor of Hamlet. In both these characters there is much of Shakespeare's own contemplative, versatile nature. There is in both of these the same wayward humor that peeps out in Feste, the fool of "Twelfth Night." Here, again, in a comedy character is the wood note sad and wild of Shakespeare. "Come away, come away, death," sings the Clown—it is humor in tragedy and tragedy in humor.

Throughout "Richard II." there is this same melodic humor. When Richard is utterly crestfallen and self-vanquished he revels in humor, laughing at himself and his state. After railing against the false friends who have betrayed him, he sinks down upon the grass to make sport of the divine right of Kings. Here assuredly again we have the importance of humor in tragedy.

Macbeth, another great tragic figure, is devoid of those glimpses of humor so dear to the poet. But we have again a notable instance of the importance of humor in tragedy in the introduction of the drunken porter to add a deeper hue to the terror of the scene and endow it with relief.

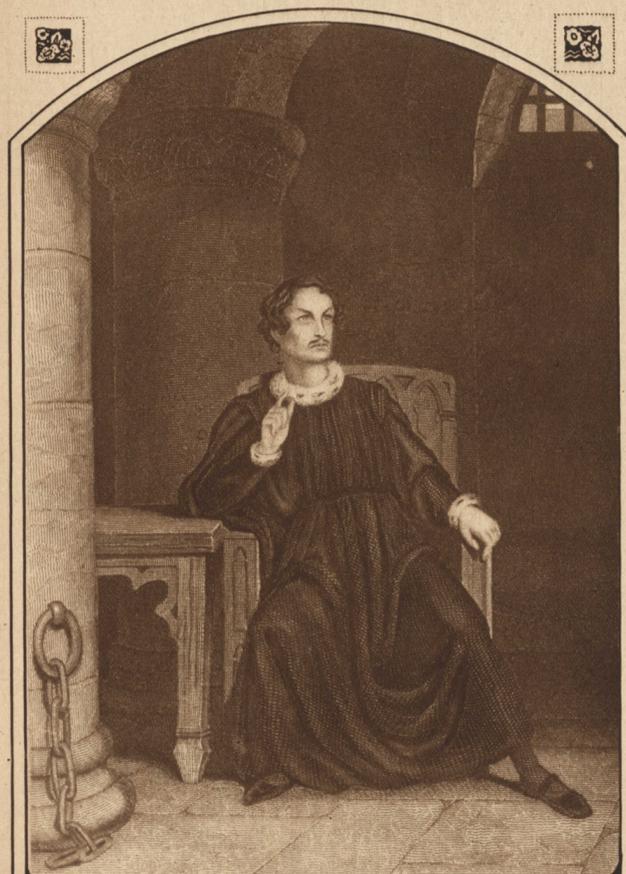
There is another example in "Romeo and Juliet" of the value of humor in tragedy. I refer to the death of Mercutio. Speaking of his death wound, Mercutio says: "'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man. I am peppered, I warrant, for this world. A plague o' both your houses! They have made worms' meat of me. I have it, and soundly, too; your houses!" and Mercutio dies with a laugh. I may also instance the tragic fall of that emperor of humorists, Falstaff. After the King had degraded Falstaff publicly and had gone on his way, the fat knight, whose life was wrecked, merely turned to Master Shallow and said: "Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pounds." Then, too, we have Marc Antony, whom Shakespeare endows with rich humor. In "Antony and Cleopatra," he, of course, has the joy of life to a criminal extent.

And in the play of "Caesar" what an understanding of the mob does Antony reveal in his dealing with the motley crowd! To Brutus, to Cassius, and to Caesar Shakespeare purposely denies the gift of humor, though Casca has it richly. Indeed, Shakespeare appears to have a grudge against the conqueror, Caesar, whom he makes a conceited and bombastic person, good enough perhaps to conquer the world, but sitting intellectually below the salt of humor. This hatred of the tyrant by the poet is not unnatural.

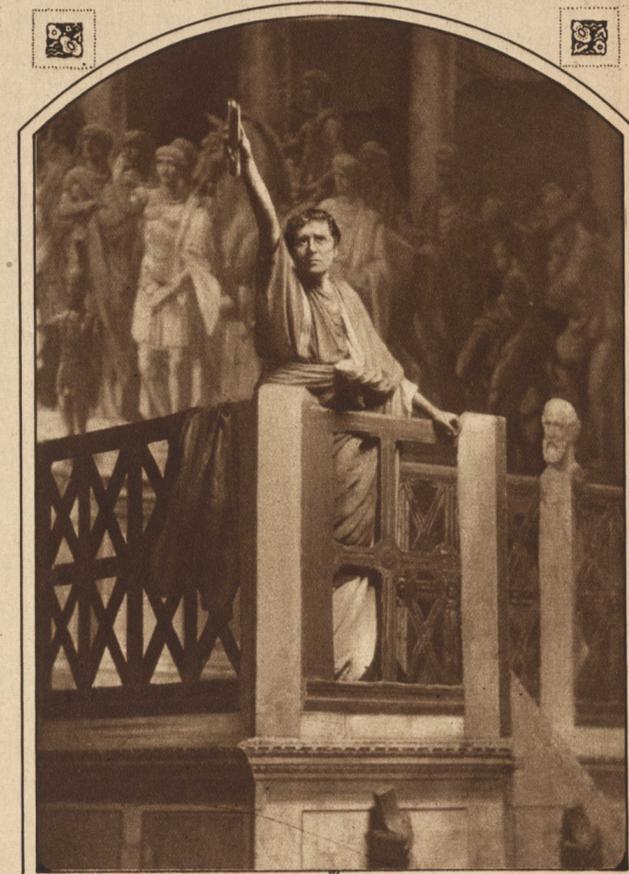
After Caesar's death Antony lovingly mourns over his dead friend; the conspirators turn on him; but for all the passion of his grief above Antony's head there hovers the imp humor, and, aided by this second consciousness, he wilyly plays upon the murderers of Caesar as he subsequently plays like an artist upon his instrument the mob, or as an adroit conductor will dominate his orchestra. Antony wins by humor, while Brutus wins by the want of it, for he deceives even himself—he wins by blind steadfastness of purpose, by character, and character is destiny. Shakespeare, the all-sided, recognized and admired the strong, single-purposed man of action.

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William C. Macready as Richard the Second, whom Sir Herbert Tree calls "the literary progenitor of Hamlet"



Sir Herbert Tree as Mark Antony in Julius Caesar, "playing like an artist upon his instrument the mob"