

SHAKESPEARE'S BOARDS

BY W. J. LAWRENCE

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POPULAR impressions are never scientifically accurate, and the prevailing idea that an Elizabethan theatrical performance demanded excessive powers of make-believe is about as far from the mark as a popular impression well could be. It denies to Shakespeare's stage the extraordinary complexity which proved its glory. Not by one principle but by a jumble of principles was it ruled. Paradox makes for equipoise, sanity; and by the abrupt antithesis of its conventions it was thrillingly paradoxical. Ever striving after the real, it had perforce, through its limitations, to make constant resort to the ideal. In idealism it has not since been approached, nor in realism (challenging statement!) has it been transcended. Viewed from the standpoint of an age of pictorial backgrounds, it could present nothing and yet presented everything. It materialized the immaterial and made the visible invisible.

With all his resourcefulness there were problems that baffled the Elizabethan producer, and these he left by tacit understanding to be solved by the poet's pen. Backgrounds which conveyed a hundred different impressions to a hundred different minds, were imperishably built up in a mosaic of scintillating phrase and glowing imagery. But if the prime conveyance of atmosphere was the poet's prerogative, none the less was it the producer's duty to prolong its vibrations. He could not show the helpless vessel on angry waters, but once the mariner was wash-

ed ashore, he could — and did — send him before the audience dripping wet. The mysteries of night eluded his simulative genius, but he was skilled enough in pyrotechnics to be able to startle you with a blazing star.

The truth is that on Shakespeare's boards realism and idealism were so intermingled that it is difficult to determine precisely what was left to the imagination and what was not. One thing is reasonably certain: realism when resorted to had to be of the fullest and most satisfying order. Less of the *deceptio visus* was possible in the days when the stage was a platform jutting out into the auditorium, and when sundry spectators were seated upon it, than in these days of a strict demarcation. Whether memorized or not by the players, letters read out in the course of the action had to be written out in full, and occasionally the producer had to be careful what kind of ink he used. In the *Spanish Tragedy*, of Kyd, there is a scene in which a letter flutters down from above to Hieronimo's feet. It is a warning from the imprisoned Bell Imperia, written in her own blood, and begins: 'For want of ink, receive this bloody writ.' A prompter's note in the margin of the quarto, 'red ink,' shows the care taken in these matters. Here there is no mistaking the meaning, but one is puzzled to know whether these marginal warnings are always to be taken literally. In Chapman's *May Day*, where Quintiliano takes out the 'two brace of angels' and gives them to In-

nocentio, the concurrent instruction reads 'a purse of twenty pound in gold.' If current coin of the realm were really used, then the force of realism could no farther go.

It is only once in an æon the impossible happens. Not since Shakespeare's day has the stage been able to reconcile elements fundamentally incompatible. The Elizabethan producer was a past-master of the science of the illusion of sounds, that subtler kind of realism which, when deftly procured, proves such a quickener of the imagination. As practised by him it reënforced the pen-picture sketched in by the poet and gave it color. Thunder, the muttering of the storm and the whistling of the wind, the singing of birds, the lowing of cattle, the baying of hounds, the pealing and tolling of bells, the galloping of horses, the boom of cannon and the rattle of musketry — all were well and truly imitated. In *Hamlet* as Shakespeare wrote it, and as it was played until the middle of the eighteenth century, a cock crew to herald the dawn whose coming hastens the ghost's departure. To-day at this juncture it is the eye, not the ear, that is appealed to; but the Elizabethan producer, though he could conjure up mist and bring down rain, stood aghast before the problems of sunrise and sunset.

Symmetrical as its sounds, it was unfortunate that the Elizabethan audience should have been as paradoxical as its stage. If it could take the eagle's flight with the poet into the empyrean, it could also drag him down into the mire. Nothing was too spiritual and nothing too gross for its appreciation. It responded to pathos and yet was pitiless. The stage preceded the playhouse, and by dint of its inheritance the English theatre-stage was steeped in mediævalism. Anxious as it was to become Liberty Hall, to keep open house for the new humanism, its guardians, the pub-

lic, saw to it that it did not wholly dissipate its patrimony. Hence it was that Elizabethan tragedy was remarkable for its barbarism. There is a type of neurotic Shakespearolatry which strives to put the ugly thing aside; but to those not afraid to look, the fact is as patent as it was to Voltaire. Much as we may deplore the expenditure, it was the price paid by the poet, and paid inevitably, for the suffrages of his public. Hearing could be gained for the higher thought only by catering to the lower instincts. Brutal and bloodthirsty at base, the Elizabethan crowd could only be appeased by scenes of battle and atrocity. The influence of its clamor is to be detected in the blinding of Gloucester, and in that horrifying episode in the early German version of *Titus Andronicus* (surely a reflex of Elizabethan taste and Elizabethan methods), where Titus cuts the brothers' throats and holds them to bleed to death, drip, drip, over a basin. What we need to grasp is that in staging these effects very little was left to the imagination. The audience demanded blood, and real blood, and got it. It was generally calves' or sheep's blood, blood that did not readily congeal, and the container was a small sponge concealed in the hand.

There was scarcely any limit to the horrors with which the insatiate mob was fed, and few were the tragedians who escaped paying tribute. It is a sorry spectacle this, of Chapman making Cato pluck out his entrails or Webster bringing Virginius on the stage after the sacrifice of his daughter, with his knife and arms all bloody. All such episodes were accompanied by a forbidding realism. The Greek sense of decency was lacking. If a nice distinction was made between hangings and beheadings, it was because the stage trick-and-shuffle-board of the time permitted of an illusive representation of

the one and not of the other. It was risky to tamper with the executioner's axe. But even in such cases the gloat-ing stinkards were not baulked of their prey. Lady Jane Grey disappears to trace her faltering steps to the block, and immediately her severed head is brought in. A meed of long-delayed admiration must at last be awarded to the Elizabethan property-man for his artistic powers in modeling in *papier mâché* with faithfulness to the life (and death), so many heads of such diversity. For, be it remembered, the head had to resemble the player, just as the player had to be careful in making up to resemble the head. And their number!

Few pause to think how many were used by Shakespeare alone. In *Macbeth* and *King John* the latter-day producer, in deference to our susceptibilities, dodges the issue. Let him but give us the second part of *King Henry VI* without cut or evasion, and the truth of Voltaire's dictum will be established.

But, when all is said, we have little cause to lament that Shakespeare was cast to play the ungrateful rôle of the diamond on the dunghill. Of the humiliations of his environment we get a revealing glimpse in the *Sonnets*, but despite those humiliations how serenely he shone!

PSYCHO-ANALYSIS ATTACKED

BY GEORGE MATHESON CULLEN, M.D., B.Sc.

[Dr. Cullen, a graduate of the Universities of Edinburgh and Paris, was formerly in charge of the Royal Infirmary and Royal Maternity Hospital, Edinburgh. He has since joined the Brothers of St. Vincent de Paul.]

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*De tous les animaux qui s'élèvent dans l'air,
Qui marchent sur la terre ou nagent dans la mer,
De Paris au Pérou, du Japon jusqu'à Rome
Le plus sot animal, à mon avis, c'est l'homme.*

*(Of all the animals there be
That walk the earth or swim the sea,
In Paris, Rome, Peru, Japan,
The stupidest, I think, is man.)*

In all-ages the folly of mankind has been the wonder of the philosopher and the butt of the satirist. And yet probably never before has man played such fantastic tricks before high Heaven as in this our day. A sad commentary indeed on the results of half a century of

free education! The fact is that this blind worship of knowledge, without any compensating cultivation of wisdom and virtue, has led to a cataclysm of war such as has never previously been experienced, and has set up a mad brewage in the mind of man which threatens the annihilation of our civilization. Even in the sphere of knowledge itself, anarchy has appeared, and it would seem that there is no kind of lunacy which will not be welcomed if it but masquerade in the garb of science. For proof of this no more telling example can be chosen than the extravagance,