

Shakespeare and Ivory Bomb Shelters

SOME NOTES ON SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTHDAY

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY

THE richest revenue of any art is the unearned increment it sometimes acquires from what happens later, of which the artist could have no specific foreboding. No matter how high the intention nothing could be written, *ad hoc*, so movingly to Now as "The Tempest." There indeed was "a kernel, sown in the sea to bring forth other islands."

"Tempest 1611" was probably taken by many of its earliest audience as a pleasing waggishness and "quaint device"; though I can imagine Beaumont and Fletcher going back to their joint lodging and telling the famous Mutual Wench (see Aubrey) that Will Had Something There. But the full measure of what he had needed more than three hundred years to reach its perfected felicity—or frequency. It had to wait for the invention of radio. I learned only the other day (*Studio Magazine*, January, 1941) that on the façade of Broadcasting House in London is a beautiful statue of Prospero and Ariel carved by the late Eric Gill.

Through the months of a damned and anxious winter "The Tempest" was my secret resource, my private War Relief. An ivory bomb shelter, you may suppose; but I found it not a flight from reality, rather a change of venue from one sort of reality to another not less actual; as it perhaps was for Shakespeare himself. I imagined myself a director staging the piece for immediate production, and I dare say I spent more time thinking about it, and transcribing it line for line in an abbreviated and practical script, than its author ever did. The conception of Ariel as an invisible radio-voice makes the fable instantly rational to our own habits of thought. Where Ariel's invisibility requires extra lines for that spirit, it was easy to supply them from the Sonnets, or such a stunning felicity as Glendower's lines (in "1st Henry IV")—

The musicians that shall play to thee
Hang in the air a thousand leagues from hence.

Indeed the analogies became so momentous that, as spring approached, I could think of the play only as "Tempest 1941." In the queerest way it always kept just ahead of the news. When the lend-lease bill was being argued I found the stage direction "A Ship at Sea; Afterwards an Island" the most literal and brief abstract of the Battle of the Atlantic. When an American luxury liner went mysteriously aground on a Florida sand-bar—a vessel, evidently, "of the *Littorio* class"—I thought of course of Shakespeare's bewitched shipload of fascists in the tropics. Whenever I carried firewood from the backyard pile I flattered myself as the "patient log-man"; and Ferdinand and Miranda easily reminded me of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, also humble refugees from courtly *comme-il-faut*. I could not even set about any routine job of journalism or lecture without saying grimly to myself, "Let's hang some trumpery on the line." I mention this remark of Prospero's because it was the only speech I am really sorry to lose in my shortened version. I lost it because I felt, at that point, my imagined audience had had all they could endure of Stephano and Trinculo—who were, as Shakespeare's stage direction so far anticipated modern argot, "all wet."

Like everyone else, I guess, I had



been thinking of "The Tempest" all these years as a philosophical allegory of the inward self—whether Shakespeare's or anyone's. I said enough about that notion of it in a book published ten years ago ("John Mistletoe") and have no taste to rehash it. But it needed another World War to show how fantastically apropos it is as political fugue. (Rauschnig in his latest book, "The Redemption of Democracy," has a powerful passage, pp. 98 ff., on the "Calibanism" of the totalized states.) It took the tragic capers of Mussolini, dressed like an organgrinder's monkey, to lampoon the astonishing parallels. I considered writing a marginal gloss, thinking of Coleridge's glorious argumentation running like the pilot's dory alongside the steep hull of the Ancient Mariner; but indolence persuaded me it would annoy the reader and cause a lot of typesetting trouble. It would begin something like this:—

A ship of state, carrying totalitarian leaders homeward after a politico-social junket in North Africa, is overtaken by sudden gale . . . which drives the vessel upon unknown dangers. . . . The behavior of passengers and seamen to each other at once suggests that this is not just a sea-sorrow but also a political fable. . . . And Miranda's first words enlarge the suspicion. It was a tempest raised by "art"—viz., a brainstorm or a passion in the mind, and its ravages were intellectual. . . . So Miranda, true to her name, is full of wonder. Reared in that innocent isolation she knows nothing beyond the island; remembers nothing of her infancy save the troop of tirewomen. . . . Of Mrs. Prospero we learn only the unrelished commendation "a piece of virtue." Pushing the heroine's mother out of the story is of course a frequent simplification in fiction; especially when the author favors the idea that a girl raised in a world of men will be cured of female pragmatism and so more lenient to man's goat-caprice. . . . Shakespeare has been accused cynic in his deletion of

grown-up women from his most original parable, but "What the Author Had in Mind" is less concern of ours. . . . The question is, What Has the Reader (or Spectator) in Mind? . . . And so Miranda, perhaps because it is the tropical siesta-time just after lunch, finds the Old Man's narrative something drowsy . . . until she herself comes into Prospero's story, which houses her curiosity at once. . . . On the island that Shakespeare is talking about, the lonely island of the individual mind, that is usually so? Drowsiness toward others' problems, prompt wakefulness when I come on the scene. . . .

During those winter days I several times relieved my mind by dictating extempore memoranda about the play. They are not polishable, but they are part of the record and I preserved them as an evidence of the kind of collaborative reading which I think should be encouraged.

Collaboration

The good reader collaborates with the author. This morning let's choose a colleague; let's choose Shakespeare.

It's over thirty years, I think, since "The Tempest" was last produced commercially (if that's the word) in New York. If I were a theatrical entrepreneur that is the play I would choose. It isn't even a play in our usual meaning of the word. The title itself is ominous and fearfully of Now. Let us imagine that we know nothing about this script, handed us this morning by our collaborator, and reexamine it according to our own necessity.

"Scene: a ship at sea; afterwards an island." The first question to ask, is this a real ship, is this a real island? Prospero's opening speech gives us our clue. After the storm and shipwreck he tells us, "There's no harm done." Obviously then it is not an actual ship, and the storm is a storm in the mind.

With that clue, then, we consider the first scene. At once we observe that the persons are of two kinds: the dichotomy suggested by Kipling as the Marthas and the Marys. The shipmaster and the bosun are sons of Martha, theirs is the job to navigate the vessel and save her if possible. The sons of Mary are the saloon passengers, a group of fascist aristocrats who swarm up on deck as soon as the ship is in danger and get in the way of the crew. There is some evidence that Shakespeare knew more than a little about ships, and we see at once that his sympathy is with the skipper and the bosun. Plenty of savory details could be noted about this brief little prologue but let us leave it at this: our collaborator begins by suggesting a definite social breach (he

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even uses that word in regard to the ship, "We split, we split") between earth's passengers and crew. It is suggested this first time on the lower level of actual handiwork and physical skill. Later he drives this fissure through the world of politics and of intellect itself. I wish there were time to insist upon the technical accuracy of the ship's handling: setting the "main course" for instance, is exactly what would need to be done to claw off a leeward shoal. But in the case of this collaborator we may take it for granted that his technical details are likely to be exact.

Scene 2: Even the most casual reader will notice the allusions to Prospero's "art." A prime purport of our collaboration must therefore be to enquire what is the nature of this art? The simple reader will say at once, oh some kind of magic. Aye, indeed, but for our present significance, what sort of magic? For the concepts of its earliest audience it is a magic which our colleague thought it necessary to symbolize by an actual garment—a "mantle." We ask ourselves, what would a mantle suggest to that audience? A mantle of darkness? A mantle of secrecy or solitude or invisibility? Note that in dealing with this collaborator we need always to ask questions that have two-way stretch. We can best learn what a passage really suggests to us if we can divine something of what it suggested to him.

There comes then somewhat lengthy dialogue between our magician Prospero and his daughter Miranda (and even their names may have meant something special) in which Prospero tells how the scholar who neglected worldly affairs was exiled from his dukedom and how with household goods and books he arrived at this island. Miranda (age 15, remember) rapidly wearies of the story and seems to pay no heed. One of the oddities of this island, frequently mentioned, is the drowsy quality of the air. No nembatal or other soporific is needed for the mind to lapse into dream. So we begin to get a little prickling in our mental thumbs: Good Lord, we say, is this whole scenery laid in some inner and sleepier region of the mind itself? Are these characters symbols of different ways of thinking that emerge only momentarily from an ocean of subconsciousness? So already we are alert to detect what kind of tricks is our collaborator playing. Perhaps the unspoiled young mind of Miranda knows at once that this reminiscence of Naples, Milan, usurping brother, &c., is just the old traditional hooey, the standardized plot which our friend used again and again. And so Miranda is again asleep when a

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The Saturday Review

The Breaking of Men

FLOTSAM. By Erich Maria Remarque. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1941. 436 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by BEN RAY REDMAN

THE jacket informs us that "a serial version of 'Flotsam' appeared in *Collier's* in 1939," that "the author devoted another year of his life to rewriting and revising it before he was ready to have it appear in book form," and that "the title of the motion picture based on 'Flotsam' is 'So Ends Our Night'." A reviewer who has not read the magazine story, nor seen what Hollywood has made of it, is in the perhaps fortunate position of being able to approach the novel without prejudices.

Remarque's subject is profoundly important and alive with tragedy: the fate of the exiles, the refugees, the many thousands who have been made homeless in recent years because of race or political sentiments. It is from Hitler's Germany that most of these unfortunates have been uprooted, and it is with Hitler's victims that "Flotsam" is chiefly concerned. In the foreground of the story stand the figures of Kern, Steiner, and Ruth Holland. Kern, barely twenty, half-Jewish, has been deprived of citizenship along with his father, politically denounced by a grasping business rival. Steiner, an "Aryan," having escaped from the concentration camp to which he was sent because of anti-Nazi activity, has been forced to leave his adored wife behind in Germany, with a plea that she will divorce him. Ruth is in flight as the result of a love affair that ended when she, a Jewess, was denounced as a defiler of the well of racial purity.

It is always in the company of one or more members of this trio that the reader follows the exile's road, crossing and criss-crossing borders, doubling back and forth, desperately, doggedly, through Austria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and France. But the reader is companioned, too, as are Kern and Ruth and Steiner, by exiles of every type and political complexion—Russian, Polish, Italian, Spanish, German—living somehow with all the odds against their living, without identification papers or the right to work, hunted by the police, thrust by night from one country into a neighboring country, only to come stealing back again through woods and rivers by the very paths along which they have been driven forth. Here is a new fraternity of outlawed men and women that is terrible to contemplate. And most terrible, perhaps, are the occasional ex-

amples of treachery and betrayal within the fraternity itself. But these are rare exceptions, one hopes, to the rule of brotherhood.

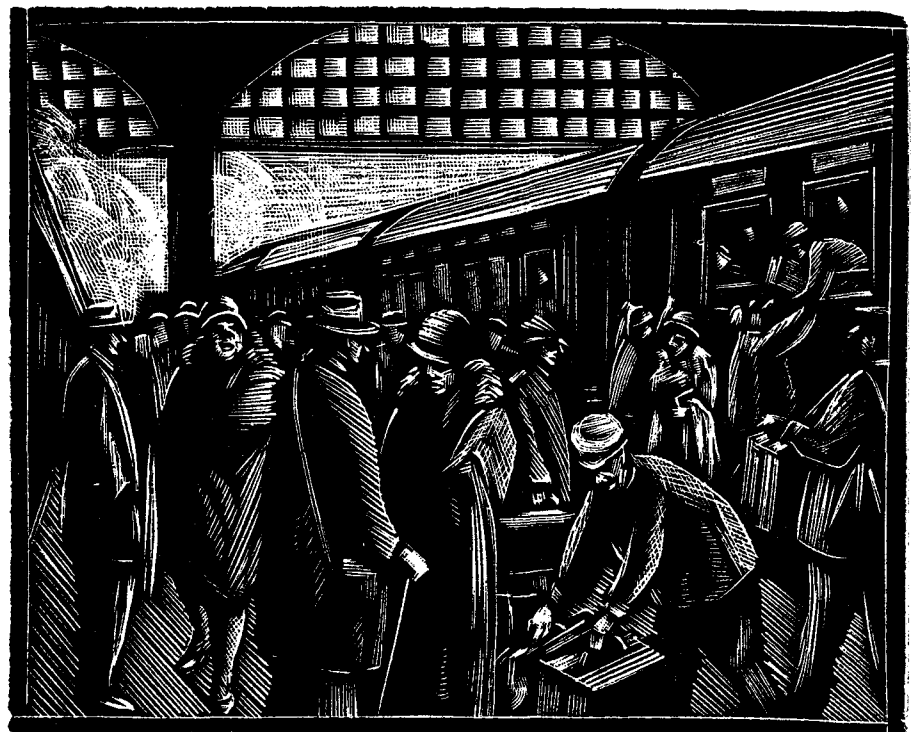
Remarque has fully depicted or briefly illuminated almost every aspect of the exile's life, with the very different responses of very different characters to a common fate. He has painted an animated, changing gallery of haunting portraits. The episodes that he has selected for the elaboration of his theme range from the horrible, through the monotonous, to the ludicrous; and he makes every one of them, of whatever kind, effective. He has been content to let his story speak for itself—or, rather, his many stories: there is no personal intrusion of an author moved to fury by his outrageous subject. Fury is there, but it burns beneath the surface. Shall we say, as a novelist's fuel?

That Remarque is a skillful and powerful writer has been demonstrated often, and in "Flotsam" it is demonstrated again. Yet one reviewer cannot escape the conclusion that the parts of "Flotsam," or some of them, are greater than the whole. The entire novel is less affecting than, for example, the single scene in which Steiner bids farewell to his wife after his escape from the concentration camp—yet the scene requires only four pages. The reason is that the novel does not build, does not gather power as it goes forward. It moves with-

out rising. Each episode is effective, but the effectiveness is not cumulative. Remarque has, I think, created a fictional pattern that exhibits more artifice than art, and owes much to cinematic technique. Time and again he lights the path of Kern and Ruth with hope only to thrust them back, time and again, into the darkness. Repetition, approaching monotony, dulls the reader's sensitivity, diminishes the intensity of his response on successive occasions. There can be no quarrel with the happy ending that is finally provided for the young couple, for life itself often provides happy endings. And Steiner's end is as fine and moving as it is inevitable. But one may suggest that the love story which figures so largely in "Flotsam" would have been more convincing and more stirring if all fleshly elements had not been so zealously excluded from its telling. I admit to having had a sensation of bafflement, feeling that the Kern-Ruth story was being only half told.

However, all this adds up only to the judgment that "Flotsam," as a whole, is not as great as its theme; and when one considers the greatness of the theme one need not wonder at any novelist's failing to realize its possibilities fully. Remarque's comparative success compels admiration.

Denver Lindley's translation is excellent, so far as one who does not know the German original can judge.



From "A Wanderer in Woodcuts," by H. Glittenkamp.