

INTERPRETER OR ORACLE?

THE CROWN OF LIFE : ESSAYS IN INTERPRETATION OF SHAKESPEARE'S FINAL PLAYS, by G. Wilson Knight (Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 18/-).

In this book Mr. Wilson Knight has returned to the interpretation of Shakespeare. After *Principles of Shakespearean Production* he ranged widely over the rest of English literature in *The Burning Oracle* and *The Starlit Dome*. Later his rôle as apocalyptic prophet was extended on patriotic lines and we were given the Messages of Shakespeare and Milton for democracy at war. More recently even the pretence of critical control has been abandoned and the literary texts have been treated simply as material from which to extract the prophetic wisdom: in *Hiroshima* this is almost admitted in so many words. The cloudy verbosity of these later works may be left to fade into oblivion as soon as possible, but *The Crown of Life* seems to be offered as criticism, and it is a sad example of the deterioration brought about by bad habits persistently indulged—sad, because there is also sufficient genuine insight to remind us that Mr. Knight also wrote *The Wheel of Fire*.

Not that even *The Wheel of Fire* was free from disquieting signs that its author's mind was functioning under an altogether inadequate critical discipline. Nor are they lacking in the even earlier essay *Myth and Miracle* (1929), now reprinted as the first chapter of this book. It contains a brief statement of the principles later expressed more adequately in the introductory essay on Shakespeare Interpretation in *The Wheel of Fire*, and an outline of the significance of the last plays as a group. But there are already a number of wide gestures in the direction of Tolstoy, Goethe, Dostoievsky and Keats, and such comments as this:

'It need not be a progress stretched across a span of years: in Shakespeare I have traced an exact miniature of the succession of great plays to follow in the thought-sequence of one speech in *Richard II*; and the same sequence is separately apparent in some of Tennyson's early poems'.

The main objection to Mr. Wilson Knight's methods of interpretation is precisely that whatever there may be in common between the thought-sequences of *Richard II*, the mature plays and early Tennyson, it is clearly not experience concretely realized in verse. For the most elementary sensibility to language and its uses it is the *difference* between these works that counts—the obvious conclusion being that Mr. Knight is not concerned with particular realization at all, only with quite superficial resemblances of sense,

subject-matter or 'symbolism' (using the word to mean a straightforward mechanical correspondence).

This lack of critical discipline often shows itself as a downright insensitiveness to style, and nowhere more clearly than in discussion of passages of doubtful authenticity. One sympathizes with his reluctance to follow Robertson and the editors in blaming the Interpolator for every passage they dislike, but elaborate defences of the Hecate scenes in *Macbeth* and the earlier parts of *Pericles* are simply the opposite extreme. Differences of rhythm and movement seem to weigh far less with Mr. Knight than resemblances of imagery or 'symbolism'. It may be arguable that there are Shakespearian phrases in the first two acts of *Pericles*, but he shows an altogether inadequate appreciation of the world of difference in movement between, say, the shipwrecked *Pericles*' lines at the beginning of Act II and the great storm-speech which opens Act III. Indeed, he says of the former, 'The accent is clearly Shakespearian'. For the vision in *Cymbeline* he makes out a tolerable case; though, Shakespeare's or not, I doubt whether it will bear the weight of significance which his interpretation gives to it. But the most astonishing of all is the claim for the complete authenticity of *Henry VIII*. Anxious to fit the play in as the final goal of the Shakespearian progress, the culmination of the design, he is driven to explain away the limp 'Fletcherian' verse: this, we are told, is a new mode evolved by Shakespeare specially for the expression of religious conversion and analogous experiences! He seems to think that the case against the greater part of the play rests chiefly on pseudo-scientific 'verse tests', but anyone who can believe that Cranmer's last speech is by the poet who about the same time was writing *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* will believe anything. Perhaps it is significant that throughout the book there isn't a single reference to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, a professed collaboration between Shakespeare and Fletcher in which the obviously Shakespearian passages are as unlike the 'Fletcherian' parts of *Henry VIII* as possible: for example, compare the following:

. . . she shall be—

But few now living can behold that goodness—
A pattern to all princes living with her,
And all that shall succeed: Saba was never
More covetous of wisdom and fair virtue
Than this pure soul shall be: all princely graces,
That mould up such a mighty piece as this is,
With all the virtues that attend the good,
Shall still be doubled on her; truth shall nurse her;
Holy and heavenly thoughts still counsel her;
She shall be lov'd and fear'd; her own shall bless her;
Her foes shake like a field of beaten corn,
And hang their heads with sorrow; good grows with her.

(*Henry VIII*, V, v, 20-32).

The more proclaiming
 Our suit shall be neglected: when her arms,
 Able to lock Jove from a synod, shall
 By warranting moonlight corslet thee, O, when
 Her twinning cherries shall their sweetness fall
 Upon thy tasteful lips, what wilt thou think
 Of rotten kings or blubber'd queens? what care
 For what thou feel'st not, what thou feel'st being able
 To make Mars spurn his drum? O, if thou couch
 But one night with her, every hour in't will
 Take hostage of thee for a hundred, and
 Thou shalt remember nothing more than what
 That banquet bids thee to!

(*The Two Noble Kinsmen*, I, i, 175-186).

The different intention of the two passages is surely insufficient to account for such a complete difference of rhythm.¹ There are times when one is inclined to suspect that Mr. Knight actually prefers the 'Fletcherian' type of verse: that may seem unfair, yet what is one to say to the remark on Tennyson's dramas in *Hiroshima*?

'The blank verse, unlike Hardy's, is as dramatically forceful as Shakespeare's and Byron's, and to be rigidly distinguished from the simple falling rhythms of his narrative manner'.

Elsewhere in this book he warns us against 'regarding tormented rhythms as a poetical goal'. In general this may be sound, but only concrete examples could make it clear whether or not Mr. Knight is merely echoing the conventional objections to Shakespeare's later style. Certainly his appreciation of Posthumus's account of the battle in *Cymbeline* does rather less than justice to that fine piece of dramatic verse.

There are other instances, too, of something surprisingly like a reversion to nineteenth-century attitudes: Mr. Knight seems at times unduly worried by anachronisms; occasionally parts of the scene-by-scene analysis are not far removed from Dowden ('But Buckingham, I think, fingers in his convulsive passion a cross worn on his breast; and it is this that accuses not only him, but all his predecessors in passion . . .'); while parts of the panegyric

¹Part of the argument is that the verse of *Henry VIII* is above Fletcher's normal standard: Mr. Knight quotes a passage from *Bonduca* as a fine exception. It seems to me typical, and not least in its unconscious echoing of Shakespeare, a point which he seems to have missed:

Farewell all glorious wars, now thou art gone
 And honest arms adieu: all noble battles
 Maintain'd in thirst of honour, not of blood
 Farewell for ever.

on Imogen would almost fit into an essay by Hazlitt.

All the same, the book is not negligible, and those who felt that the best of Mr. Knight's early work came nearer than most existing criticism to the full poetic experience of mature Shakespearean drama will find illuminating passages in all of these essays, except possibly that on *Henry VIII*. There, indeed, a tone of strained exaggeration suggests that most readers are unlikely to find the argument convincing: there is 'nothing more remarkable in Shakespeare' than the 'three similar falling movements' of Buckingham, Wolsey and Katharine; 'never was Shakespeare's human insight more consummately used' than in the Old Lady's satirical comments on Anne Bullen's rejection of ambition; 'no words in Shakespeare' are 'so deeply loaded with a life's wisdom' as Cranmer's prophecy. The account of *Pericles* deals effectively with the last three acts (it is the peculiarity of Mr. Knight's analysis that it improves in direct ratio to the strength of his text) and brings out clearly the new interests which took possession of Shakespeare's mind in the late plays. "Great Creating ۞ ۞": an essay on *The Winter's Tale* is, I think, the best in the book. If it has not the economical force of Mr. Traversi's essay it completes that account with a wealth of suggestive analysis, especially of the first two acts and the last scenes. The chapter on *Cymbeline* is less convincing as a whole: the suggestions of nationalist and patriotic themes, with a careful distinction between classical Rome and Renaissance Italy, are interesting but they will hardly bear the emphasis laid on them; similarly Mr. Knight seems to me to exaggerate the significance of the theme of royalty and the importance of the vision. But here again there are incidental passages of effective analysis. *The Tempest* offers obvious opportunities for the discovery of esoteric significance, and here accordingly we find references to the work of Colin Still and parallels with sixteenth-century Chinese fables and Nietzsche. Nevertheless there are valuable pages of comment more closely related to the text.

It is extremely unfortunate that the genuine insight and real originality of Mr. Knight's best work on Shakespeare should be so inextricably interwoven with his prophetic rhapsodies: as it is, one can see only too clearly why the academically conservative should believe in sticking to Bradley and Granville-Barker. The trouble is not merely that he is tactically an embarrassing ally and that with each new extravagance the daughters of the Philistines triumph, but also that his work cannot be recommended to the critically immature without the most careful warnings and elaborate reservations. The valuable part of his work has been and will continue to be influential, but he will probably have to be content for its influence to be largely unacknowledged and indirect.

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