

## SHAKESPEARE AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

*SHAKESPEARE AND ELIZABETHAN POETRY* by M. C. Bradbrook (Chatto and Windus, 15/-).

Miss Bradbrook's *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* points up the double difficulty in discussing Shakespeare's work to-day—the difficulty of keeping relevant control over the non-Shakespearean material (so often necessary to an examination of particular points of his dramatic and poetic art), while ensuring that this material leads on to further elucidation and evaluation of the plays. In spite of illuminating remarks and suggestions from Mr. Eliot and the abundance of studies of various phases of Shakespeare's work, we still need a closely examined definition of what Shakespeare criticism can best do to-day by a closer integration of expanding scholarship with distinctly literary criteria. The genuinely interested reader (who looks for something to guide, to 'inform', to focus interest on the plays as poetic drama) will be readily in sympathy with her desire to go outside the 'growth and growing specialization of modern research', which is too facile an invitation to the uncritical student to accumulate a mass of irrelevant information. However divergent the reader's conclusions may be from hers, he will welcome the enthusiastic and close attention she has given to the general body of poetry written between 1580 and 1600, and will find in the acknowledgments, comments and documentation of her Notes (pp. 240-272) a *vade mecum* of most of the important approaches to Shakespeare to-day. Her wide and careful reading is all the more valuable because it does not distract her from attention to the poetry itself.

From the modest tone of the Preface, Miss Bradbrook seems to welcome beforehand the qualifications and strictures which her method of presentation so often invites. The main difficulty for the reviewer and the non-specialist reader whom she has in mind is to discover just what she wishes to emerge from the abundant similarities and disparities she notices in so many poets. There is an undesirable kaleidoscopic effect, particularly in Chapters I-IV, in which a great variety of quotations and references is flashed before the reader in quick succession and in rather hazy focus. From the wealth of passages drawn on there emerges very little in the form of judgments on the quality of the poetry. It is always ungracious to expect a writer to have written another book; but one feels that another method than the chronological examination of Shakespeare's early work would have served better to 'pull the question together for reconsideration', (p. viii) especially since she does not formulate the 'question' itself. A single theme, such as Shakespeare's ability to make the best of two worlds, the court and the popular theatre,

would not have been a specialist study (in the derogatory sense), and would have both thrown the details into clearer perspective and sent the reader back to the plays with increased insight.

There is thus a disproportion between her modest aim, (her 'kite-balloon') and her sub-title, *A Study of his Earlier Work in Relation to the Poetry of the Time*. This 'relation' is defined neither in extent nor in kind, and becomes a general invitation to indicate *any* kind of resemblance or diversity—in attitude, interest, language or device—that has occurred to her in her wide reading. The big question for specialist and non-specialist alike is not whence did Shakespeare derive hints or materials, but what did he do with them, what did they become in the hands of his expanding genius? Beyond discussion in rather conventional terms of characters and plot, she offers very little to indicate wherein Shakespeare's superiority lies. She is most circumspect in indicating her own sources, but she appears to owe more than she suspects to the director-producer approach of Granville-Barker—an approach which necessarily implies a careful follow-up of attention to inflection, speed, emphasis, etc., in actual rehearsal, and which should be supplemented in literary criticism by a corresponding detailed attention to the poetry as poetry.

There are many places in the book where the 'relation' of Shakespeare to his contemporaries begins to come into close focus and to demand careful examination, but from these the writer slips away with some quite non-committal remark like 'Percy seems almost a first study of Coriolanus' (p. 204), or 'such a scene [from *Cynthia's Revels*] recalls rather the foppery of Osric than the wit-combats of Navarre, and his court' (p. 219), or '*Lucrece* is comparable with Daniel's *Rosamond's Complaint*' (p. 104). She says (p. 132) that 'Shakespeare is of course far more skilful than Kyd; his writing is tighter and more elaborated, his dramatic climaxes more powerful, and the integration of speech and action is beyond the earlier writer'. But it is by defining 'tighter', 'skilful', 'integration', in terms of the verse itself, that the most effective supplement can be made to the merely scholarly approach. She adds that the 'colouring of the play [*Richard II*] came through Kyd from the mediæval Complaints and from the *Mirror for Magistrates*'—without examining what these sources became in Shakespeare's hands. Similarly she denotes the sonnets as the place in which 'Shakespeare developed his sensibility' (p. 146), and says that the images used by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth 'emanate from a single mind writing in a single mood' (p. 88) with no suggestion of the complexities underlying such terms as 'sensibility', 'image', 'single mood'; she consequently conveys little guidance towards estimating the fineness of the artistic mind at work in the passages she uses. Unless the non-specialist she has in mind possesses an unusual critical acumen, such general remarks are not likely to carry him from the book to the plays except by warming him at the fire of her enthusiasm.

Unintentionally, she lays a number of traps for the unwary, as in presenting structure (p. 136) as an arrangement of characters

and scenes without warning that a similar arrangement of characters and scenes (in her abstract sense) might occur in a quite incompetent poet; she speaks of the 'simple trick of contrasted plot and subplot' (p. 154); she suggests, merely as an example of the ability to distinguish between life and art, that 'Hamlet is surprised that the First Player should work himself up to real tears in the scene of Priam's death' (p. 91). By saying 'the gain was almost incalculable when Shakespeare turned from the courtly world of the sonnets . . . and subdued himself to what he worked in' (p. 91), she obscures a point of capital importance in studying Shakespeare's growth—that as he went along, he transformed what he had previously learnt and did not merely turn away from it. Similarly, Shakespeare's contribution to dramatic criticism in the Prologue to *Henry V* is misleadingly described as 'sophisticated' (p. 93). And the less experienced reader is likely to miss the profound and many-sided practical insight into politics which the Histories suppose and present if told that 'Shakespeare avoided both judgment and dogma and kept to the "high road of life"' (p. 92). The relation between Cordelia and her sisters is blurred by calling it a 'simple and complete opposition' (p. 95). The Shakespearean use of dramatic pattern is misconstrued in a limiting fashion by saying that '*Richard III* is Shakespeare's most patterned play' (p. 129).

There are three larger issues on which her selection of evidence is likely to mislead. First, by stopping short at *Twelfth Night*, she produces an impression that the work prior to 1600 is a completed achievement from which Shakespeare simply 'turned' to other tasks—the sense of continuity and growth between 1590 and 1608 is obscured. Her almost complete neglect of the later plays is the more to be regretted since so many of her points could be made more pointed by showing in more detail the direction in which we now know Shakespeare was developing even before 1600—detail for which room could be found by omitting some of the less important work of the 80's and 90's. Secondly, in presenting examples of the 'relation' of Shakespeare to others, she conveys little sense of the abundant and varied vitality of the age out of which the poetry grew. The very scanty references to the life of the nation and the strong emphasis on the court and on literary 'species' (e.g., Ovidian romance, revenge tragedy and satiric comedy) tend to produce a general impression of an Elizabethan Bloomsbury, of a clique of writers living apart from the ordinary concerns of their time, and drawing their themes, interests and significant approval from each other. This impression is deepened by Miss Bradbrook's idealized treatment of Sidney; as a man or a poet, Sidney can hardly have impressed Shakespeare or even Spenser, who possessed considerable critical ability and who knew rather penetratingly the realities of the court circle to which they catered. She does indeed offer interesting evidence on the ways in which the Elizabethan audience would have understood the plays, and she has some illuminating suggestions on how the character of Prince Hal should be read; but most of what she says on Elizabethan opinions takes us only a very short distance

towards deciding what our own opinions to-day should be. Thirdly, while the Italian Renaissance is often mentioned, she does not grapple with the question: How much did the Italian influence amount to? Was Shakespeare a more civilized, a more complete poet or dramatist for having come in contact with the Italians? In what sense was there a Renaissance in Italy? (Dawson, Gilson and Marrou—the last lecturing in Oxford only last year on ‘Humanisme et Patristique’—have fairly well shown that ‘Renaissance’ is almost meaningless when applied to Italy unless we push it back to about the sixth century; this evidence she dismisses by saying, on page 9, that it ‘was in Italy . . . that a new and secular doctrine of the world grew up, to nourish the great artists and poets of the Renaissance’.) Her dismissal of native mediæval influences as of little importance (pp. 14-15) seems to impose some obligation to explain why the continental influences had such enriching and stimulating effects. On the basis even of some of her own authorities (e.g., Hardin Craig and William Farnham), the Tudor writers can hardly be described as ‘building from the debris of mediæval tradition’ (p. 15). No doubt the Morality tradition was dead by Shakespeare’s time, but the folk life from which that tradition (and so much else) drew vitality was not dead or reduced to debris. The mediæval world was not a ‘unity’ (p. 1); even its metaphysical or ‘world-picture’ was never really unified, as the Scotist-Thomist (and other) controversies show. To present the Middle Ages as achieving a static ‘integration of thought and life’ while allowing an ‘absolute cleavage between human values and eternal values’ is to present the mediæval mind as a very fragile and even inhuman synthesis which, even to ‘an age like ours’, can not be ‘particularly fascinating’ (p. 3). Until we see how far the mediæval world was from integrating thought and life, we miss the sense and range of its ‘fruitful tensions’, and cannot accurately assess the kind of help it gave to writers from Marlowe to Bunyan. She follows conventional literary history too closely in speaking of Magnanimity (p. 151) as merely a Renaissance literary creation without noticing the deeply serious content, the relations to ordinary conduct, which the notion derived from mediæval theology. In the same way, Langland’s ‘anguish’ is misrepresented as lying ‘precisely in that he did not find the unity for which he sought’ (p. 4); on Langland’s suppositions, unity could not be found in the temporal sphere at all. The mediæval love of allegory (pp. 6-9) is discussed as a mere convention of scholars and artists without mention of its deep roots in mediæval convictions quite outside learning and art. Her Introduction (which has little perceptible relation to the rest of her book) makes it clear that critics starting from pre-Elizabethan points should have in mind a general map of the mediæval world and a precise definition of the part of that map from which they work.

The limitations Miss Bradbrook has imposed on herself reduce her in too many places (e.g., pp. 147-9, 158, 229-31) to discussing the plays as they might be known through Lamb’s *Tales*. This can hardly be what she has in mind in defending her book as an

'old-fashioned Victorian attempt to give a comprehensive account of a great subject'.

The above points are offered not so much as disparaging criticism but as suggestions for defining more closely the 'question' of Shakespeare's relation to his contemporaries and predecessors, as outlines of a cautionary appendix to a book which she calls an 'interim report'. It is impossible to take a carping attitude towards a book which has so modest an aim, so transparently sincere an interest, and so varied a survey of twenty years of great poetry. She is always perspicuous, and, as in previous books, she takes every precaution to ensure that her impressions arise from a constantly renewed contact with the texts themselves. While her method is most suited to the Histories, her wide reading and collating of texts provide the reader with both an economic means of distinguishing many of the Elizabethan cross-currents, and a number of serviceable starting points for understanding what it was (besides superlative genius) that helped Shakespeare to work out the lines along which his talents could find their fullest expression.

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