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Shakespeare the Artist

That Shakespeare is an artist hardly needs asserting in the present day. It is true that his art was probably far less self-conscious than that of Milton or of Tennyson, that it was probably more intuitive than aforethought. The distinction, however, is probably not so important as it seems. A great artist does not need rules or conscious analysis to tell him what is good and what is evil. Any analysis that may be necessary may be done sub-consciously.

As an artist Shakespeare is concerned almost wholly with the artistic worth of humanity. He is never preoccupied with that beauty of 'nature' which haunts so insistently the minds of modern poets. He uses it sometimes with the hand of a master, but his thought is centred on humanity and he passes on. He rarely takes pains to emphasize the picturesque aspect

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of things, even of the situations he himself created. He creates the picture, and leaves it without comment. The mysterious beauty of that watch on the battlements of the castle of Elsinore, the cold, the silence, the hushed voices, 'not a mouse stirring' save for that 'portentous figure', the 'prologue to the omens coming on' - all this is left to speak for itself.

What Shakespeare loves as an artist is power-intensity in human character. It may be power of intellect or moral power, or power of passion or of grace, or the intensity of the exquisite as in Ariel, or power of love as in Imogen, or power of wit as in Benedick, or intensity of stupidity as in Sir Andrew Aguecheek, whose silliness approached the sublime, but it is always the intense, the perfect in some kind, that he dwells upon, and makes central

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Splendid and puissant personalities are the primary material of his tragedies, giants of wit or silliness of his comedy. If we put aside the morbid, there is only one form of the extreme in human character which he never makes use of, and that is the extremely brutal. The merely bestial he disregards entirely. Yet his characters, splendid or extreme as they are, are never extravagant or abnormal in their nature, they are rather perfected types of the normal. We may fairly say that Shakespeare sought for the highest expressions of the normal in humanity. But mere mediocrities Shakespeare makes little use of. He relegated them to the background, and used them as foils and explanatory notes. Mediocrity may be complex, but Shakespeare had not the modern love of the complex as such, though he masters it when

he pleases. But he prefers a complexity that is not common place, like that of Hamlet. Mediocrity may be tragic or pathetic, but Shakespeare prefers the pathos of Othello and the tragedy of Lear. The man who is dull but not dull enough to be altogether laughable, the man whose summed virtues make up respectability, whose actions are reducible to fear, who can neither dare nor enjoy freely, is not a subject of Shakespeare's art. He is included but passed over.

The end.

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