MIRROR AND DREAM: SHAKESPEARE'S UNDERSTANDING OF A PLAY

Shakespeare's words compel our wonder. There is a twofold excellence in them. One is according to the poetic art and the purpose of the play. The other is outside the poetic art and serves no obvious dramatic purpose. In both, there is remarkable precision or brevity which reminds one of the words of Polonius - "brevity is the soul of wit" that is, of wisdom.

When Shakespeare in a few words sketches a character so vividly that we never forget that character who seems more real and interesting than those of daily life, as in the introduction of Falstaff in *Henry IV, Pt. I* (Act I, Sc. 2):

Falstaff: Now Hal, what time of day is it, lad?

Prince: Thou art so fat-witted with drinking of old sack, and unbuttoning thee after supper, and sleeping upon benches after noon, that thou hast forgotten to demand that truly which thou wouldst truly know What a devil hast thou to do with the time of the day? Unless hours were cups of sack, and minutes capons, and clocks the tongues of bawds, and dials the signs of leaping-houses, and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-color'd taffeta, I see no reason why thou shouldst be so superfluous to demand the time of the day.

or when in a few words he sets an emotional tone to a dramatic scene as in *As You Like It* (Act I Sc. 1):

Oliver: Where will the old duke live?

Charles: They say he is already in the forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him. And there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world.

or when he expresses in metaphor or simile the feeling natural to an event in a way that seems impossible to be improved upon, as in the words of Capulet when his daughter Juliet is found (apparently) dead in her bed on her wedding morn (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Sc 4):

> Death lies on her like an untimely frost
> Upon the sweetest flow'r of all the field.

In all this we recognize an excellence and brevity in Shakespeare's words that is according to the poetic art and which serves an obvious dramatic purpose.

But at other times, there is an excellence in Shakespeare's words which serves no obvious poetic or dramatic purpose. Two examples of this can be given here which will help to introduce what I intend to do in this paper. When Lucentio says to Tranio in *The Taming of the Shrew*, Act I, Sc. 3:

> And therefore, Tranio, for the time I study
> Virtue and that part of philosophy
> Will I apply that treats of happiness
> By virtue especially to be achiev'd.

he gives a remarkably precise statement of what ethics is about, as can be seen from the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle. And when Antony in his speech to the crowd in *Julius Caesar* (Act III, Sc. 2) says:

> For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth,
> Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech,
> To stir men's blood: I only speak right on.

he gives, as Kittredge notes, a complete enumeration of the qualities of a good orator, a compendium of the headings in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. (The order, of course, is somewhat dictated by the requirements of alliteration and meter.) Such precision and wise brevity seems more appropriate to the philosopher than to the poet or dramatist. I do not intend here to investigate the purpose of such precision except to say that it does not serve any obvious poetic or dramatic purpose and that I do not think that Shakespeare is trying to show off his learning. But I do intend to make use of this wise brevity in his words. If Shakespeare can speak so wisely about those arts or sciences that are close to the poetic and dramatic art, such as rhetoric and ethics, as we have seen above, we should not be surprised to find the same kind of wise precision when he speaks of the poet or the poetic art or the dramatic art or the play itself. Indeed a long experience of his plays and reflection helps us to understand and appreciate how wise are his brief words about the poet and the play and how fitting to our experience of those plays.

Any attempt to investigate Shakespeare's understanding of a play from his own words must begin somewhere. And perhaps no better beginning can be made

than in that play where Rolfe (in his preface to his edition of *Hamlet*) says that Furness does not exaggerate when he says:

> No one of mortal mould (save Him 'whose blessed feet were nailed for our advantage to the bitter cross') ever trod this earth, commanding such absorbing interest as this Hamlet, this mere creation of a poet's brain. No syllable that he whispers, no word let fall by any one near him, but is caught and pondered as no words ever have been, except of Holy Writ. Upon no throne built by mortal hands has ever 'beat so fierce a light' as upon that airy fabric reared at Elsinore.

This may be an exaggeration, but it is still a great testimony from someone who knew the writings on *Hamlet*.

But apart from the general excellence of Hamlet, there is good reason to begin an investigation of Shakespeare's understanding of a play from the words of Hamlet to the players in Act III, Sc. 2. This is an opportunity for Shakespeare to speak at length about the play and playing. Kittredge in his first note on Act III, Sc. 2, says:

> Hamlet's advice to the players has always been understood - and rightly - to embody Shakespeare's own views of the art of acting.

Further, it is here that he touches upon the very immediate end or purpose of playing and the play when he says:

> o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

And the end or purpose of anything is always what is most important about it.

Moreover, the beginning of these words find an echo in a couple of witnesses who were friends and fellow actors of Shakespeare and remembered in his will where he left them money to buy memorial rings and indeed the famous editors of the immortal Folio of 1623 - the single most important publication in the history of English literature, if not of world literature. I refer, of course, to Heminge and Condell, who in their Preface To the great variety of Readers at the beginning of the Folio say that Shakespeare was

Moreover, in speaking of the play as a mirror and an image and the actor as imitating men, Shakespeare is at the natural beginning of a consideration of the dramatic or poetic art as Aristotle noted in his book *About the Poetic Art*.

For these and other reasons, as well as a long experience of his plays, I am convinced that these words of Hamlet to the players are one place where one must begin to investigate Shakespeare's understanding of a play from his own words. I call the above words from *Hamlet*, Act III, Sc. 2 on the purpose of playing, a corner-stone passage. The word *corner-stone* indicates, of course, that I do not consider those words as giving, even briefly, Shakespeare's complete understanding of a play in general. There are two things essential to Shakespeare's understanding of a play which are not even touched upon in this corner-stone passage. And two things said in this corner-stone passage must be balanced by what he says elsewhere to avoid misunderstanding. After considering this corner-stone passage, I will briefly indicate the two things not touched upon in that passage and the two things that need to be balanced, one of which I intend to explore further in this paper.

In saying that "the purpose of playing...is. to hold...the mirror up to nature etc.," Shakespeare is clearly saying that the play is a likeness of something. For in a mirror, we have a likeness of something. This is also shown by his use of the word *image* which comes from the Latin word for likeness. Shakespeare would seem here to be in agreement with Aristotle who speaks of the play or drama as a *mimesis*, an imitation. Indeed, in the words to the players that follow this corner-stone passage, Hamlet criticizes some actors thus:

> O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly (not to speak it profanely), that, neither having the accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

Hamlet is thus seen to speak in these two passages, first metaphorically, calling the play a *mirror* because it is a likeness, and then second, an *imitation*, which is to speak properly or non-figuratively. One should note, however, that the word *imitation* in Shakespeare, or in the translation of Aristotle, does not have the narrow and somewhat bad sense that it does today. Our commercial society, for example, uses the word *imitation* for what is usually a cheap or inferior copy of the

original. But nothing prevents the word *imitation* in the sense in which Aristotle or Shakespeare use it from meaning a likeness that is in some way superior to the original. Again, imitation in Aristotle does not have the narrow sense of copy. Aristotle, for example, said in the book *About the Poetic Art* that the poet or dramatist can represent men as they are, or as they are thought to be, or as they ought to be. But because of the degradation in meaning of the word *imitation* in our culture, I use the word *likeness* which does not convey to our mind the idea of an inferior likeness.

For Shakespeare, then, the play is a mirror, a likeness. But a mirror or likeness of what? Returning to this corner-stone passage, we find an order that is not accidental, an order in the things of which the play is a likeness, an order which harmonizes with all our experience of his wonderful plays. Shakespeare says first that the purpose of playing is to hold the mirror up to nature; then second, to show virtue her own feature and scorn her own image; and third, to show the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. The word *scorn* here signifies by two figures of speech the opposite of virtue, namely, vice. *Scorn* signifies pride by metonymy for scorn is an effect of pride. And since pride is the queen of the vices, it can signify the vices by synecdoche. How careful Shakespeare is to avoid sounding like a teacher rather than a poet. Every intense student of Shakespeare's plays is aware how he constantly presents nature as the measure of what is good and bad in human action and character, or of what is virtuous and vicious in them. And in turn, Shakespeare measures the character of an age by the virtues or vices that predominate in it.

In beginning to consider Shakespeare's understanding of a play from his own words, we stated that this corner-stone passage is both incomplete and in need of balance. It is incomplete, I think, for two reasons. It says nothing about that in which the dramatist imitates and second, it says nothing about the emotional effect of the drama. Likewise, what is said in this corner-stone passage is in need of being balanced both as regards it being a mirror or imitation and also as regards what it is a likeness of. The words of Hamlet to the player and by himself in Act II, Sc. 2 of *Hamlet* supply both balances that are needed and one of the two essential things in Shakespeare's understanding of a play that are not touched upon in this corner-stone passage. Hamlet (in Act II, Sc. 2) speaks to a player about "an excellent play" which words are followed immediately by this description:

> well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty as cunning.

> I remember one who said that there were no sallets in the lines to make the matter savory, nor no matter in the phrase that might indict the author of affection; but he called it an honest method, as wholesome as sweet, and by very much more handsome than fine.

The first part of this passage on the excellence of a play balances, if not corrects, a possible misunderstanding that could arise from this corner-stone passage. When Shakespeare said that "the purpose of playing...is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature etc.", does he mean that character is more important, or more the end of the play, than the plot, as some have thought? But in Act II, Sc. 2, when Hamlet thinks of the excellence of play, he speaks of the plot rather than the characters. For it is the plot which is "well digested in the scenes" and "set down with as much modesty as cunning." The word *digested* is explained in the Yale Shakespeare as arranged, which clearly refers to the plot (as does, of course, scenes). Shakespeare himself couples indigested with deformed as in *Henry VI, Part III* (Act V, Sc. 6):

> an indigested and deformed lump

And consequently he would think of *digested* as going with *formed*. But the form of a play would seem to be its order or plot, just as the order of a treatise was called the *forma tractatus*. And Shakespeare himself would seem to use words in this way (*Richard III*, Act III, Sc. 1):

> We may digest our complots in some form

The phrase "well digested in the scenes", then, clearly refers to the excellence of the plot. Perhaps the use of the metaphor *mirror* in the corner-stone passage made it more natural to speak of virtue than action, but one should not conclude from this that Shakespeare sees character as more important than plot. (Aristotle also first distinguishes tragedy from comedy by the characters they represent even though he understands that the plot is more important than the characters.) For the corner-stone passage itself is followed, as we have seen, by one criticizing actors who imitate men in their actions as they are not. In this later passage, where Hamlet speaks properly (speaking of imitation) he seems to speak more of act:

> O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly (not to speak it profanely), that, neither having the accent of Christians, nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

In the opening words of the next phrase explaining the excellence of a play ("set down with as much modesty as cunning"), the words *set down* also refer to the plot. They are like the phrase Shakespeare uses in his Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet:* "where we lay our scene." A plot has some resemblance to an argument in logic where something is laid down or set down and something else follows (as in the definition of syllogism). Hence, the summary of the plot of a play is sometimes called the *argument* of the play. The next part of the second phrase that the play or its scenes were "set down with as much modesty as cunning," reminds one with its words "with as much modesty" of the words in the corner-stone passage "o'erstep not the modesty of nature." We may have something to say about the word *cunning* later when we have discussed the dream metaphor.

After speaking of the excellence of a play by its plot, Hamlet in this passage from Act II, Sc. 2, goes on to speak of its excellence by that in which it imitates. This is, of course, an essential part of Shakespeare's understanding of a play, a part not touched upon in the corner-stone passage. The words of a play should be "as wholesome as sweet" and "by very much more handsome than fine." We cannot enter here into a discussion of Shakespeare's profound understanding of what the words of a play should be by explaining these two key phrases.

It would requires a long discourse through Shakespeare's works to bring out his understanding of the emotions and their catharsis which is the second thing not touched upon in the corner-stone passage. We must also then set this aside for another time.

But Act II, Sc. 2 of *Hamlet* supplies another balance to the corner-stone passage when it calls a play a *dream*. When Hamlet upbraids himself alone at the end of the act for lacking the passion which the actor has in reciting the lines from a play, he calls the play a *dream* and a *fiction:*

> O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
> Is it not monstrous that this player here,
> But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
> Could force his soul so to his own conceit etc.

He calls the play a *dream* and a *fiction*. *Dream* is the metaphor and *fiction* is the proper or non-figurative word for what he wants to express here about the play. *Dream* balances *mirror* and *fiction*, *imitation* in the corner-stone passage. Shakespeare's care is remarkable in these two passages to express himself both with a metaphor and with the non-figurative word.

What is the difference between calling a play a *dream* and a *mirror?* A mirror is a work of reason and art. And we expect a mirror to show us as we are. And this is the good of reason: to know things as they are, to know the truth. But the dream is a work of the imagination, not measured by the real world through the senses. We do not look for truth from dreams. As the Poet says in *Sonnet 87:*

> Thus have I had thee as a dream doth flatter.
> In sleep a king, but waking no such matter.

And likewise, we do not look for truth from the imagination. Hence, Marcellus says in Act I, Sc. 1 of Horatio's disbelief in the apparitions of the ghost of Hamlet's father:

> Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
> And will not let belief take hold of him.

But in the play that is called a dream, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act V, Sc. 1), the often-quoted words of Shakespeare point to the imagination as more characteristic of the poet than reason:

> Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
> Such shaping fantasies that apprehend
> More than cool reason ever comprehends.
> The lunatic, the lover and the poet
> Are of imagination all compact.

It is not by chance that the lover is described as blind and that Homer represents the poet as blind - for both work out of their imagination. Hence, Shakespeare also calls the play a *fiction* for a fiction is something made up by the imagination and is not true. *Fiction* and *feign* come from the same root in Latin and Shakespeare also uses the word *feigning* describing poetry as not being a true thing. In *As You Like It*, Act III, Sc. 2, the following dialogue brings this out:

Touchstone: I would the gods had made thee poetical.

Audrey: I do not know what "poetical" is: is it honest
in deed and word? Is it a true thing?

Touchstone: No, truly, for the truest poetry is the most feigning;
and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear
in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign.

But if the poet is characterized by imagination more than by reason and "the truest poetry is the most feigning," then the play is more a dream and a fiction than a mirror and an imitation. Yet every reader of Shakespeare's plays knows also that they are a mirror and an imitation. As Heminge and Condell said, Shakespeare was "a happy imitator of Nature...a most gentle expresser of it." It seems then that for Shakespeare a play should be *both* a dream and a mirror. What does this mean? Perhaps it could be stated briefly by saying that the play should be an *imaginative likeness* of nature etc. An imaginative likeness is both a mirror and a dream. (But the *difference* is imaginative. Hence, the poet's work is perfected by the imagination.)

I think that all great poets have to some extent realized the necessity of making something that is at the same time both a mirror and a dream, and that lesser or defective poets have not seen the necessity of both. Consider an example of each of these. Knight quotes Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817, Vol. II, p. 15) in a supplementary note in the second volume of the *Imperial Edition of Shakespeare* (p. 671R):

> During the first year that Mr. Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry - the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colours of imagination.

These two cardinal points of poetry here correspond to mirror and dream, for the mirror involves "a faithful adherence to the truth of nature" and the dream brings in "the modifying colours of the imagination." But some poets and artists attempt to avoid imitation and end up with a lifeless work. An interesting passage in the dialogues of Paul VI with Jean Guitton (*The Pope Speaks*, Meredith Press, N. Y., p. 209) (Paul VI is speaking):

> And I myself also am troubled, my heart bleeds, when I see contemporary art detach itself from humanity, from life. Sometimes certain of our artists seem to forget that art must express things. Sometimes it is impossible to know what it says. It is the Tower of Babel, It is chaos, confusion...When I said this one day to some artist friends, they replied, "Whose fault is that? You impressed on us the rule of imitation. We are not imitators, we are creators."

Whoever these artist friends were, they obviously did not understand the two cardinal points of poetry, or the necessity of the play or work of art being an

imaginative likeness. The word *creation* is opposed to imitation, just as fiction is opposed to imitation. Because it is not based on things or reality, the work of the imagination, its fiction, is sometimes called a *creation.* Creation in its theological sense gives existence to what was nothing before creation. And in the passage on the poet, the lover and the madman being made of imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Act V, Sc. 1), Shakespeare says:

> And, as the imagination bodies forth
> The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
> Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
> A local habitation and a name.

When the Queen in *Hamlet* (Act III, Sc. 4) thinks Hamlet to be mad when seeing his father's ghost (which she does not see), she says:

> This is the very coinage of your brain.
> This bodiless creation ecstasy
> Is very cunning in.

The use of the word *cunning* here may help us to understand its use in the key passage from Act II, Sc. 2 (of *Hamlet*) about the excellence of a play whose plot Hamlet said was "set down with as much modesty as cunning." Seeing the connection of modesty with holding the mirror up to nature which is modest (truth also is modest), why should we not understand cunning as referring to the dream aspect of the play, its being a fiction or creation, a work of the imagination. The word *cunning* is used in more than one sense by Shakespeare. It is sometimes used in the sense of knowing and even applied to nature and to reason. But more often, Shakespeare uses it in the context of deception. If it is contrasted with modesty in this key passage on the excellence of a play, it makes sense to understand it as referring to the work of the imagination. The "lunatic, the lover and the poet are of imagination all compact." Just as ecstasy or madness is called *cunning* by the queen in her words to Hamlet, so also Shakespeare calls love *cunning* in *Sonnet 148:*

> O cunning Love! with tears thou keep'st me blind

Thus when Hamlet says the excellent play was set down with as much modesty as cunning, he is saying that it is as much a mirror as a dream. This is indeed the first part of Shakespeare's understanding of a play.

APPENDIX ON THE POET OR WRITER OF FICTION AS A DREAMER: FROM *SLEEPY HOLLOW* BY GEOFFREY CRAYON, GENT., IN THE COLLECTION *WOLFERT'S ROOST AND MISCELLANIES* BY WASHINGTON IRVING

Having pitched my tent, probably for the remainder of my days, in the neighborhood of Sleep Hollow, I am tempted to give some few particulars concerning that spell-bound region; especially as it has risen to historic importance under the pen of my revered friend and master, the sage historian of the New Netherlands. Besides, I find the very existence of the place has been held in question by many; who, judging from its odd name and from the odd stories current among the vulgar concerning it, have rashly deemed the whole to be a fanciful creation, like the Lubber Land of mariners. I must confess there is some apparent cause for doubt, in consequence of the coloring given by the worthy Diedrich to his descriptions of the Hollow; who, in this instance, has departed a little from his usually sober if not severe style; beguiled very probably, by his predilection for the haunts of his youth, and by a certain lurking taint of romance whenever any thing connected with the Dutch was to be described. I shall endeavour to make up for this amiable error on the part of my venerable and venerated friend by presenting the reader with a more precise and statistical account of the Hollow; although I am not sure that I shall not be prone to lapse in the end into the very error I am speaking of, so potent is the witchery of the theme.

I believe it was the very peculiarity of its name and the idea of something mystic and dreamy connected with it that first led me in my boyish ramblings into Sleepy Hollow. The character of the valley seemed to answer to the name; the slumber of past ages apparently reigned over it; it had not awakened to the stir of improvement, which had put all the rest of the world in a bustle...

As I have observed, it was the dreamy nature of the name that first beguiled me in the holiday ravings of boyhood into this sequestered region. I shunned, however, the populous parts of the Hollow, and sought its retired haunts far in the folding of the hills, where the Pocantico 'winds it wizard stream' sometimes silently and darkly through solemn woodlands; sometimes sparkling between grassy borders in fresh, green meadows; sometimes stealing along the feet of rugged heights under the balancing sprays of beech and chestnut trees. A thousand crystal springs, with which this neighborhood abounds, sent down from the hillsides their whimpering rills, as if to pay tribute to the Pocantico. In this stream I first essayed my unskillful hand at angling. I loved to loiter along it with rod in hand, watching my float as it whirled amid the eddies or drifted into dark holes under twisted roots and sunken logs, where the largest fish are apt to lurk. I delighted to follow it into the brown recesses of the woods; to throw by my fishing-gear and sit upon rocks beneath towering oaks and clambering grape-vines; bathe my feet in the cool current, and listen to the summer breeze playing among the tree-tops. My

boyish fancy clothed all nature around me with ideal charms, and peopled it with fairy beings I had read of in poetry and fable. Here it is was I gave full scope to my incipient habit of day-dreaming, and to a certain propensity, to weave up and tint sober realities with my own whims and imaginings, which has sometimes made life a little too much like an Arabian tale to me, and this ‘working-day world rather like a region of romance.