

# SHAKESPEARE'S TAKE ON HUMAN WISDOM

by

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In universities and elsewhere, might we study Shakespeare to learn about wisdom and how to grow wiser? I say yes, though in the language of one of Shakespeare's greatest fools:

And thus do we of wisdom and of reach,  
With windlasses and with assays of bias  
By indirections find directions out. (HAM 2.1.63\*)

Although Polonius' "wisdom" here amounts merely to devious cunning, he nonetheless indicates Shakespeare's own way of revealing wisdom to us: indirectly, by showing us on his "great stage of fools" (LR 4.6.183) so much of folly. While Erasmus wrote earlier *The Praise of Folly* and Burton later *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Shakespeare's work falls between them as virtually *The Anatomy of Folly*, from which ironically we may infer something of what wisdom is and why it is so rare. Since Shakespeare is not an essayist but a playwright, he does not tell but show, thus we must learn not by precept but by instance and example. Examples of folly and error predominate in his plays, as they do in life as we know it, yet occasional sparks of wisdom shine out against the general gloom of human inanity and insanity.

Assuming with Nicholas Maxwell that wisdom is "the capacity to realize what is of value in life, for oneself and others" (understanding "realize" as both *comprehend* and *bring about*), then we may see why wisdom is so hard to come by. Too little do we know what's good for us or others or how to make it happen, which makes us fools, as Shakespeare knew long since. Add to that the innate perversity St. Paul saw in us, which even when it knows what's good to do refuses to perform it. Or, in Portia's wry words to Nerissa: "If to do were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels had been churches, and poor men's cottages princes' palaces" (MV 1.2.12). The testimony is long and strong that being wise goes against our grain, and that even if we can agree that this or that decision produces the most value, we may still fail to execute it well and faithfully. In this skeptical light, I shall consider Shakespeare's take on human wisdom and our poor prospects of achieving it. Though I wish things otherwise and hope for better, I still must register this long-respected "wisdom" of our master bard in finding us committed more to

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\* All quotations of Shakespeare are cited from G. Blakemore Evans, ed. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997).

folly than its opposite. About human folly there's much to learn from Shakespeare, play after play, for, as Puck declares, "Lord, what fools these mortals be!" (MND 3.2.115). But what about wisdom, folly's opposite—does Shakespeare show us that and give us any clues about living wisely?

Though he's never didactic, can we nonetheless deduce from his writing whether we mortals have any hope of escaping our innate proclivity to foolish error and of following a path toward wisdom? I think so, if only in flashes and glimpses easily missed by those with no eyes to see nor ears to hear. In each of his plays elements of wisdom may be detected, often ironically in those characters who appear most foolish—his motley fools and jesters—sometimes in simple and lowly characters, now and then in pure-hearted paragons, and more complexly in shrewd, intelligent, and insightful ones (presumably most like Shakespeare himself), whose wisdom is hard won and imperfect, and therefore more admirable and inspiring.

First, be clear: wisdom for Shakespeare has far more to do with the heart than the head. Though it is prudent to be canny and not gullible, and it is astute to be alert to the dangerous ways of the world (the flesh, and the devil), what is still more essential is a true and faithful heart, radiant with love, care, and devotion, brimming with compassion and forgiveness. Those among Shakespeare's characters who are most bright, clever and cunning (such as Bolingbroke, Iago, Edmund, and to a degree Jaques and Puck) are typically bereft of fellow feeling, devoid of generosity, and radically unnatural in their unkindness (since kinship is the essence of nature). Therefore, when we search out wisdom in Shakespeare's plays, we seek not for hard heads so much as soft hearts, though preferably both—those qualities best exemplified in Viola, Rosalind, Desdemona, Cordelia, Kent, and incipiently in Prince Hal.

## SHAKESPEARE AWAKE

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
You must ask for what you really want.  
Don't go back to sleep.  
People are going back and forth across the doorsill  
Where the two world's touch.  
The door is round and open.  
Don't go back to sleep.

—Jelaluddin Rumi

Shakespeare fathomed our normal human penchant to sleepwalk through our lives, to stumble about in a fogbound world of dreams and delusions, oblivious of that grander reality accessible only to awakened consciousness. His plays mostly portray human beings in our typically benighted state of semi-consciousness, committing the common errors of blind waywardness and suffering the consequences, sometimes comic,

sometimes tragic, of our befuddled foolishness. Our folly was his business. “Lord, what fools these mortals be” might well have been a motto hung over his writing table.

The irony implicit in all his work, and what in part makes it immortal, is that Shakespeare was himself awake and wrote from a perspective that both mocked and lamented the follies he depicted. If the Buddha, the Awakened One, had been a dramatist, his plays might have been like Shakespeare’s plays, revelations to those with eyes to see and ears to hear of the stumbling pageant of human error—our fickleness, inconstancy, mutability, and treachery. We are would-be angels who descend to bestiality. Yet Shakespeare was one who could not only write like an angel but see like one. His perspective is one of higher awareness, expanded consciousness, the viewpoint of seers and sages illumined by a transcendental gnosis that visionary mystics share. To see the world of mortal turmoil not from a dull sublunary vantage point is to see things steadily and see them whole, as Shakespeare quintessentially did.

Even we who have not his eyes and clarity of mind may still catch glimpses of the profundity of his insights as we experience his plays. If we cannot fully grasp the wisdom he possesses, we can better recognize our own folly by his fools and learn to laugh at it or mourn the miseries it brings. We may grow wiser by observing the spectacle he displays of dull Othello, obtuse Macbeth, perplexed Prince Hamlet, and love-blind King Lear. We may catch something of ourselves in asinine Bottom, mad-brained Mercutio, wild Kate, daft Orlando, buffoonish Falstaff and protean Cleopatra, among so many other characters uniquely stamped and stained: Beatrice and Benedick, Shylock, Iago, Brutus, crook-backed Richard, melancholy Jacques, primordial Caliban, and Juliet’s garrulous nurse. They constitute a full catalogue of fools, a motley menagerie of lunatics and dunces of all colors and degrees. Among them we’ll find images of family and friends, acquaintances and strangers and, most strangely, us, if we look truly enough into our own blinking idiocy—though that image is the last we’ll recognize, so folly-free do we think ourselves to be.

We are deluded, though, as Shakespeare knows, and thus he gives us plays, for plays are dreams we enter in to see perspectively. Viewed one way plays are artifacts, illusory spectacles we stand apart from with god-like objectivity, appraising them externally. Viewed another way they’re dreams that seem but fantasies, exposing occult truths. The dreams of Shakespeare’s dramas work to wake us to our slumbers, to break the dark barriers of fortified unconsciousness and let in wisdom’s light. If Erasmus before him came to praise folly, Shakespeare came to bury it, but not by homily or invective, not as a preacher or a rhetor, but as a maker of mirrors by which, in Hamlet’s words, he meant to show “virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.22-23).

## **SHAKESPEARE’S PERPLEXED PERSPECTIVES**

When Cleopatra imagines looking at a picture of Antony, she sees in him a two-fold image depending on the perspective she takes:

Though he be painted one way like a Gorgon,  
The other way 's a Mars. (ANT 2.5.116)

How (she wonders) can he be simultaneously two such opposite entities? Yet what Cleopatra sees in her lover is an emblem of what we all see in the world when we experience its duplexity; its duplicity; its two-fold, oppositional, oxymoronic nature.

The world we know—life from the human perspective—seems constituted of opposing truths. Duality, bi-polarity, is its nature, sometimes manifesting itself in right/wrong, angel/devil, white/black, up/down pairs of either/or choices with positive/negative values. Then our choice seems clear if not easy. More perplexing, though, is the riper recognition that both sides of any pair we see contain positive and negative values, attractors and repulsors. Rather than the simple binary duality, we confront the complementarity of interweaving of pairs such as the yin/yang symbol ☯ and teaches us the nature of the universe and us, macrocosm and microcosm.

Each of us is compounded of yin forces and yang forces, just as our bifurcated bodies stand upon two legs on which we stride alternately and on which our body either totters or balances. A good life is a difficult balancing act of learning to equilibrate between both contending goods and contending evils, and learning to cleave to some middle way between the extremes of mighty and beguiling opposites, each one a Mars and Venus, and each a Scylla and Charybdis. Such is the complex Way Things Are, and *Antony and Cleopatra* is Shakespeare's poetically dramatized *De Rerum Natura*.

## WHAT DID SHAKESPEARE BELIEVE?

My thesis about Shakespeare and religious wisdom is that, as with so many other perspectives you might assume in regarding his plays: depending on where you're standing and your angle of vision, you will see whatever you are looking for. In that respect, Shakespeare's work is like the world itself. Not only is all the world a stage, but all his dramatic stages are worlds that each of us occupies in his or her own way.

Specifically, if you are Catholic you will detect Catholicism in his plays. Likewise Calvinism, Anglicanism, paganism, animism, spiritualism, agnosticism, or atheism. If you are a student of occult Gnosticism or Kabbalahism or ancient Egyptian mystery schools or Rosecrucianism, Shakespeare will also provide you with evidence of his having been there and done that. As my own acquaintance with Taoism has grown, for instance, I've spied the Taoist sage in the Bard; in fact, I've written an essay called "The Tao of *Hamlet*."

Therefore, if any writer has claim to be called "universal," Shakespeare is a top nominee and partly for this reason: that his representation of human character, human nature, and human circumstance in the universe accords itself with all of our brave efforts to comprehend the Way Things Are. Like the universe itself, Shakespeare's plays present us with a spacious mirror. They "hold as 'twere a mirror up to nature" (HAM 3.2.22) and

we, being part of nature, see ourselves both reflected and projected. We see the universe we think we see. We see ourselves as we think we are. Shakespeare gives us ample scope to find in his representations the validation of any worldview we bring to him. Just as does the world. This argues then for Shakespeare's Cosmic Consciousness, his mystical intuition of the way of the universe, an apprehension that transcends or underlies any particular religious or secular perspective and may be called Divine.

## **TREACHERY IN SHAKESPEARE**

Though I can make a good case that Shakespeare—the author of thirty-seven plays, two narrative poems, and 154 sonnets—is renowned today because of his uncanny sagacity and his metaphysical insight into the human condition, reflecting the perennial philosophy of seers and sages, I can also argue that he was fascinated with the lowest of human behavior as well as the most ethereal.

The lowest of human behavior, as exemplified archetypally by Adam and Eve (and Lucifer before them) is treachery: breaking the bond of loyal obedience. The opposite of treachery is fidelity. Thus a traitor is an infidel, a faithless forsaker of the natural bond of love, trust and kindness binding all men as brothers, all humankind as kin, for so we suppose ourselves created at our beginnings: bound blissfully in amity and concord. Thence comes Eden, our mythic image of a primordial paradise, a state of perfect love in which our species was created but which we then betrayed. In Dante's Hell, the lowest ring confines the traitors, Judas most notoriously.

Shakespeare seems, if his sonnets may be read autobiographically, to have had, early in life, a nasty experience of treachery involving a triangular sexual relationship among the Dark Lady, the young man, and himself (not to mention Shakespeare's own infidelity to his wife in Stratford). In this imbroglio he has supped full of envy, jealousy, anger, bitterness, self-recrimination and remorse. Enough, I would say, to feed an animus in every play he wrote, a festering spirit of betrayal infecting and embittering at least one character if not legions of them—so much so that I am tempted to designate treachery as Shakespeare's master theme or most obsessive preoccupation.

### **“TREACHERY! SEEK IT OUT” (HAM 5.2.312)**

Traitors, treason, betrayal, treachery—what motif or motive cuts more trenchantly through all of Shakespeare?

Start with the great four. In *Hamlet* a brother betrays his brother, the king, by adultery and fratricide. In *King Lear* two daughters betray their father, who has himself, through proud obtuseness, betrayed another daughter; and then there's the dastardly bastard Edmund. Iago, feeling himself betrayed, seeks vengeful treachery upon Othello, Cassio, and Desdemona. And most blatantly, most like to Lucifer's rebellion against the Most High, Macbeth betrays the gracious Duncan, his kind king and kinsman.

Even in ostensible comedies, treachery abounds. Angelo betrays Isabella, Proteus ignobly betrays Valentine. Duke Frederick ousts Duke Senior, his brother. And Helena betrays her bosom friend Hermia, who betrays her father in running off with Lysander (as does Juliet with Romeo).

While these flagrant examples spring immediately to mind, lesser treacheries can be teased from almost every work of Shakespeare's, beginning with the sonnets, presumably his most personal poetry. If their speaker is Shakespeare, the married man and father from Stratford who dallies with that Dark Lady in London, who in turn turns to the admirable young man adored by Shakespeare, then we find treachery lodged in his own heart and life. "Treachery! Seek it out," shouts Hamlet at the last, only to be told by the conniving Laertes: "It is here, Hamlet, thou art slain."

Treachery is here, everywhere, in Shakespeare's mind. His brain beats on it constantly, as does Prospero's during his twelve years of exile, preparing for improbable revenge. To wonder *why* is futile, but to notice *that* is fruitful, since Shakespeare's obsession or experience must resonate with ours. This issue of defiled loyalty and honesty must sit in the middle of our souls, an archetypal problem none can avoid and that Shakespeare had the dark insight to found his works upon.

First Lucifer turned apostate against God, then Eve and Adam followed suit, turncoats and promise breakers, reneging on the faith they had professed and sworn to keep. And so it is for all of us, we must conclude, or Shakespeare lies. His wisdom is to know our secret hearts, even though we don't confess that Thing of Darkness that possesses us: the tendency to turn and turn again against what love and loyalty bid us do.

#### **"COMPOSED AND FRAM'D OF TREACHERY" (ADO 5.1.249)**

Glance again, for instance, at some of the most notable tragedies. *Richard III* begins with Richard contriving his own brother's death, his first treacherous step toward seizing the crown. In the end he finds even himself ironically a traitor to himself, seeking revenge: "myself upon myself" (R3 5.3.186). In *Richard II* Henry Bolingbroke betrays his king and usurps the throne. Romeo and Juliet betray their families who have, in their feud, betrayed the civility of Verona. Julius Caesar's "Et tu, Brutè?" encapsulates the central treachery of that tragedy. In *Hamlet* Claudius has betrayed the bond between not only brothers but subjects and kings, committing both fratricide and regicide. Cressida notoriously betrays the love of Troilus. Iago (himself feeling betrayed both professionally and emotionally by his general) betrays Othello. King Lear, like Richard III, becomes a traitor to himself, abandoning both sanity and sagacity to turn against his dearest, most deserving supporters: Cordelia and Kent. Macbeth and his lady are blatant, if not unabashed traitors against Duncan, who deserves their three-fold loyalty as king, cousin, and guest. Broken trust between Antony and Cleopatra, as well as among the tenuous Roman triumvirate, drives that tragedy. Coriolanus turns against his countrymen and is betrayed himself by his perfidious allies. And Timon of Athens is embittered by the treacherous ingratitude of those he thought his friends.

What theme is more central and constant in Shakespeare's works, alas, than inconstancy, than treachery?

In his 154 sonnets, his two narrative poems, and his 37 plays, the primal human theme of betrayal recurs insistently, agonizingly, no doubt inevitably. For how could Shakespeare have achieved his godlike status as a dramatist and poet, had he not tapped into the most profoundly troubling and persistent of human experiences—our sad propensity to betray love proffered us in all good faith, to be disloyal to our benefactors, to turn against what succors us? This is our most vicious vice.

Assimilating Shakespeare's poetic power into his own genius a generation later, John Milton in *Paradise Lost* explored directly the central myth sustaining Shakespeare's insight into human aberration, though a myth the playwright merely drew from and alluded to but never represented: Lucifer's betrayal of the Almighty and our consequent apostasy.

If the man most scholars think is "Shakespeare"—that man from Stratford born in April of 1564, who died in April 52 years later—if that man who left his wife and children in Stratford to pursue the shadowy craft of acting and playwrighting down in London, while dallying with the Dark Lady of his sonnets (and with who knows whom else and of which sex), if that man did indeed write the works we now call "Shakespeare," then treachery he knew most intimately.

First, in his sonnets we see love betrayed: if not Shakespeare's of Anne Hathaway (for we can't be sure how autobiographical these poems are), then more certainly the love between the poet and the young man he adores and, worse, the duplicitous love of the Dark Lady (the poet's mistress), who seduces that compliant young man.

Next, betrayal underlies Shakespeare's two lavish narrative poems. In *Venus and Adonis* the beautiful boy Adonis betrays his carnal nature by spurning the Goddess of Love herself, while in *The Rape of Lucrece* libidinous Tarquin perfidiously defiles the wife of Collatine, his comrade in arms.

And then in the plays. Everywhere you gaze you see treachery, treason, infidelity, disloyalty, disaffection, defection, apostasy, recreancy, perfidy, sedition, deception, duping, and deluding. Imaginary gardens with real snakes in them.

Take once more the four great tragedies: their business is betrayal. Their plots consist of treacherous plotting. Claudius kills his brother Hamlet, usurps his throne, and wins his queen. Envious Iago seduces Othello into betraying his unswerving wife. King Lear blindly betrays his cordial daughter's love, to be betrayed in turn by her two sisters, serpent toothed. Macbeth, a kinsman and a host to his kind old king, kills Duncan in his innocent sleep, and sleeps no more.

Look further into Shakespeare's tragedies. Romeo and Juliet betray their family names while fate plays false with them. Brutus (*Et tu*) betrays Julius Caesar. Cressida

cheats on Troilus. Cleopatra ducks out on Antony, who ditches the Romans. And Coriolanus too turns against Rome, rather than betray his own arrogance, and ultimately proves traitor to two nations.

Look also at Shakespeare's English history plays, from the treasonous overthrow of Richard II by Henry Bolingbroke to the tyrannous reign, eight blood-drenched dramas later, of that murderous Machiavel, Richard III. England itself is Eden's garden defiled by disloyalty, dishonor, and disobedience, though redeemed at last by the Tudor progenitor of Gloriana, Shakespeare's sovereign, Good Queen Bess.

Even Shakespeare's comedies—especially Shakespeare's comedies—turn to treachery for their success. Duping and delusion, knavery and gulling are the warp and woof of all their motley foolery. “Lord, what fools these mortals be,” Puck proclaims us in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where he specializes in deceiving human sight. Deceit and disguise, misprision and confusion, trickery and treachery—these are the essence of (in order of appearance) *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labor's Lost*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *All's Well That Ends Well*; as well as the “problem plays”—*The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*—and the late romances—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

Pretty depressing, when you view it all. But then, that's life, and Shakespeare gives us life. He shows us what we are, yet also what we may be, at our best: honest and honorable, faithful and true, loyal and trustworthy, constant in love.

“Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments,” he prompts himself in Sonnet 116.

Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken . . . .

Such faithful, constant love as this he shows us in many of his women: Juliet, Hero, Desdemona, Cordelia, Hermione, Imogen, Rosalind, and Portia. More problematical are his men, yet Romeo, Valentine, Troilus, and even Orlando give us hope; more sagely still, Kent and Enobarbus.

But then, if Shakespeare wasn't even “Shakespeare,” his perfidy is complete and he has deceived us through and through, making fools of playgoers, students, and scholars for all time, his whole life but a ruse and jest. And that would fit.



## TREACHERY IN *JULIUS CAESAR* AND *1 HENRY IV*

Treachery as a theme in *Julius Caesar* is front and center. Caesar is the chief political and military figure in Rome, intending to aggrandize his power even more by becoming king. But Caesar's ambitions provoke envy and emulation in other ambitious men, though mostly patriotic fear in Brutus, worried by Caesar's overweening pride and his potential for oppression of the people.

Brutus' dilemma as a close friend and trusted ally of Caesar's is whether his personal loyalty to Caesar outweighs his loyalty to Rome. Both choices he's faced with entail betrayal: either of his friend, who as Rome's ruler may prove honorable and just; or of his countrymen, who may fall victim to a tyrant if Caesar overreaches. As "the noblest Roman of them all" (5.5.68), Brutus proves himself a tragic protagonist by struggling manfully with his excruciating decision, one that fate won't save him from, bound as he is to suffer either way. Either way, he'll prove a traitor.

The theme of treachery in *1 Henry IV* is less overt and muddier, though the picture grows clearer from a perspective that views the full tetralogy of English history plays: *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*, in which this drama is embedded. Treachery is clear in *The Tragedy of King Richard the Second* in a way comparable to *Julius Caesar*. Deposition and assassination of a seated monarch virtually define treachery, and Henry Bolingbroke, however he rationalizes his actions with reference to Richard's personal unfitness or questionable right to rule, is a usurper and a regicide. But for a brief time he wins the sympathies of the populace and revels in his ill-gained title.

But in the second play of this tetralogy, his revels are unraveling as rebels take up arms against him and civil wars ensue: the Scots, the Welsh, the Irish all are fractious and disgruntled, and treachery abounds. The very treason that Henry has unleashed comes home to haunt him as Caesar's ghost haunts Brutus. What hurts Henry most is the apparent apostasy of his own son and heir, Prince Hal, who seems to thumb his nose at his father while playing the truant with the likes of Peto, Bardolph, Nym, and fat Jack Falstaff, a knight of ample girth and little grace. But the irony is palpable: as Henry Bolingbroke has robbed the kingdom of its crown and sovereign, young Henry robs its subjects of their crowns and sovereigns in a highway heist: a treachery for a treachery. So who's the veriest traitor of them all? England itself has become a den of treacherous thieves.

What can redeem it? That is this play's operative question; it is Prince Hal's question principally: how to "redeem the time" (1.2.24). With yet more irony, fire must fight fire for redemption to occur; hence the true prince must first play false if he would win at last. Like Hamlet he must put an antic disposition on and dissemble his true motives to disguise them from his adversaries and gain advantage in the end:

So when this loose behavior I throw off  
And pay the debt I never promised,  
By how much better than my word I am,  
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes;

And like bright metal on the sullen ground,  
My reformation, glitt'ring o'er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
I'll so offend to make offense a skill,  
Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.2.208)

Knowing his own father's treachery and sin, Prince Hal must find a way to prove loyal and faithful to not only his errant father but to his desecrated kingdom, despoiled by Bolingbroke's ambitions. Whether Hal's Machiavellian tactics can restore legitimacy to this sullied kingdom remains an open question, even when Hal as King Henry V is acclaimed the "star of England" (H5, ep 6) for his famous victory over France, a campaign that knits Britain's factious elements together once again. But for a moment at least, at the close of this tetralogy, treachery is stilled and harmony prevails.

### **SHAKESPEARE'S MEDIUM AND MESSAGE**

While folly is the stuff of Shakespeare's plays—the human medium he worked overtly in—wisdom is the message implicit in his plays, discernible to those with ears to hear and eyes to see. In the spacious mirrors of his drama, we find ourselves reflected, if somewhat distorted by the crazed and darkened glass of artful representation. Errant and bewildered, arrogant and hardhearted, vain and vicious, these simulacra of ourselves strut and fret their hour upon the stage as we do in our stage-play world, to the merriment and anguish of the angels gazing on us from their galleries above.

Yet if what we view mostly is our folly made plain, we see it now at one remove, which sets us at some distance from ourselves and opens a small gap where wisdom may peek through: "No, I'll not be like Malvolio in his vanity, nor Iago in his envy, nor King Lear in his rashness, nor Lady Macbeth in her ambition." In such characters we can apprehend our own tendencies toward error and correct our course. Conversely, characters like Cordelia and Rosalind, Kent and Enobarbus walk the way of loyalty and love, toward which we may reorient ourselves, ennobled by their examples. And such nobility is wisdom.

I'll leave you with one final thought to ponder regarding treachery, and a poem to sum things up. My thought is this: that the gravest treachery of all is self-betrayal, being unfaithful to what one truly is and might become, were one's essential Self to be realized in full. "To thine own self be true," is one of Shakespeare's most famous sentences (ironically voiced by the treacherous Polonius in *Hamlet*). Arguably (though others argue otherwise), Prince Hal is such a personage, true to his highest calling of redeeming England's purloined crown.

I offer here a sonnet of sorts reflecting on both treachery and its cure.

## BETRAYAL

Betrayal is the broken bond of love,  
The primal eldest sin, the one above  
All others in the ranks of wretchedness,  
The hardest to confess and to redress,

For nothing's more essential than this bond  
Of kindly kinship to which we all respond  
By native impulse and by natural law:  
Betraying which is mankind's gravest flaw.

Once sundered, how may it be remedied,  
Remembered as the bond of all our breed,  
Reknit, renewed by love's redeeming soul,  
Restored to health, remade a seamless whole?

How else but by contrition, penance, prayer  
Can grief allow and love begin repair?

## PERENNIAL SHAKESPEARE

My perennial question about Shakespeare, as I have studied and taught his works for over thirty years, is to determine whether his four centuries of acclaim and eminence are due essentially to his *wisdom*, a wisdom proceeding from deep spiritual insight into human nature and consciousness comparable to that of the world's great sages and seers.

That is an audacious question to ask, since presumably I myself would have to be wise enough to recognize such wisdom in order to find it in his works or anywhere else. Even the fact that I am now 67 does not ensure that I am wise enough to pronounce upon Shakespeare's wisdom. But if not now, when? Why not at least weigh in on the issue, however uncertainly, to see—though no seer—what I can see?

For as long as I have been studying Shakespeare, I have been aware of "cosmic consciousness" as an extraordinary and ecstatic state of mind said to open one to deep insight into the Way Things Are via transcendental vision. Emerson first exposed me to the notion when I was in high school and then, when I was in my first year of college, I experienced a personal glimpse of visionary consciousness, a peak experience never since repeated with such rapturous intensity, yet increasingly assimilated, I feel, into my ordinary mentality so that I now regularly walk about with a calm assurance of wonder in the heart of things, even though I cannot taste it so poignantly as I once did. Later, I resonated to a kindred ecstasy in Wordsworth and Whitman.

Yet with Shakespeare, because he hides behind his dramatic characters, nor can his sonnets be trusted to reveal his heart, I did not appreciate such kinship of sensibility, or not so directly as with Emerson, Wordsworth or Whitman. Nonetheless, his plays often represent the cosmos metaphysically and depict divine and demonic presences impinging on the secular world. His imagination, at least, if not his intuition, reports on forces and entities residing in the visionary reaches beyond material mortality: spirits, specters, and deities.

More importantly, Shakespeare represents the struggle of human beings to be wise, to transcend their innate and nearly all-consuming proclivity to folly and to attain rare spiritual insight into the principles that make for ultimate human happiness, those principles revealed by our race's most enlightened luminaries. If Shakespeare's transcendental wisdom is to be truly assessed, it should not be by the acuity of his representations of metaphysical realities, but by his insight into the nature of the human heart and soul as it copes with the conditions of mortal life and either soars or sinks before it dies. Of sinking, he knew much and offered innumerable instances, but of soaring he could also report, as in his undying representations of exquisite love, of compassionate tenderness and sympathy, of joy, of courage, of fidelity, of honor, of forgiveness and redemption. He showed the best of our kind—our spiritual luminousness against the dark backdrop of our dismal follies and fallings from grace.

Though he dallied with deities and demons, Shakespeare was finally more interested in human truths rather than cosmic truths, in wisdom rather than gnosis. Whatever mythologies proved affecting for showing us our follies and pointing the way to wisdom served his turn as a dramatist whose ultimate intent was not to confirm or deny one cosmology or another, but merely to anatomize our human mortality as beings granted an opportunity that we typically fail through our foolishness to seize, wisdom being rare.

With regard to the ultimate cosmological questions we human beings ponder, questions extending beyond the bourne of natural science and into the realm of supernatural and metaphysical curiosity, what did Shakespeare believe? Specifically with respect to religious issues, what do we know or what can we infer about his credo, if he had one?

Shakespeare lived and wrote when England enforced the creed of Anglo-Catholicism upon its citizenry, though many crypto-Roman Catholics (possibly Shakespeare's own father) smoldered more or less silently in their apostasy. Even more secretly, atheists like Christopher Marlowe lived amongst the orthodox populace, while Jews, Mohammedans, wiccans, and other exotic pagans and heathens huddled beyond the pale of official credibility. Thus the credological spectrum available for Shakespeare to contemplate stretched wide and could even include the Greek and Roman pantheon; classical philosophies of stoicism, hedonism, pythagoreanism, and pyrrhonism; neoplatonic hermeticism; and the homegrown lore of fairy land.

So, what did Shakespeare believe? Though most observers are naturally inclined to project their own attitudes upon an enigmatic other they cannot decipher, spying out

familiar confirmations of what they already assume, Shakespeare eludes easy cosmological classification, chiefly because he never writes to us directly and expositively (as did, for instance, Sir Francis Bacon in his essays), but only through the mediation of fiction, through drama and poetry. Even his sonnets cannot be trusted to reveal his heart, nor do they clearly address the ultimate questions. In his plays, of course, Shakespeare never appears; only multitudes of characters appear, representing a plethora of attitudes and speculations about the secret workings of the universe.

No play demonstrates a variety of beliefs wider than Shakespeare's most searching and bewildered tragedy, *King Lear*. It is also his most credologically inclusive, finally leaving us in the midst of the cosmic mystery (as on a darkling plain or blasted heath) baffled in our quest for certain knowledge about ultimate issues. What Shakespeare does divulge, however, in this grim play and in other tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, are human truths, existential truths, not cosmic or essential truths. Principally, Shakespeare demonstrates the primacy of love, kindness, and generosity over the fallacy of egotistical machination and monstrous malice. He reveals absolutely the dignity of selfless compassion and the wretchedness of sin. Though sinners often defeat the virtuous and sometimes go unpunished, and while even the saintly can suffer horribly, Shakespeare leaves us clear about what evil is and how it works, and likewise about goodness. We can go to Shakespeare for moral, if not cosmological, values and convictions.

What we most would like to know about our status in the universe is whether we are in good hands. We want to believe we are and that all "evil" is either illusory or will pass at last into a greater goodness beyond our present comprehension. *King Lear* presents ambivalent responses to this query as different characters speculate variously about it. Edgar appeals to the "kind" gods and the "clear" gods, whereas the blinded Gloucester finds the gods malignant. Is Fortune random or predictable or controllable by will? Kent and Edmund differ in their suppositions about fate. Or is the universe simply capricious, as loony as Lear's fool appears to be, or, more aptly, as King Lear himself is in his senile imbecility?

I have a friend who is a free-thinker, a rationalist, a secular humanist, as I myself have been, though now I think of myself as a recovering secular humanist, one drawn to believe that there exist mystical insights and truths beyond the borders of my friend's skeptical scientism. Accordingly, by proper Freudian protocol, as I look about me, I tend to recognize confirmations of my own assumptions. In particular I am naturally inclined to find Shakespeare mirroring my very point of view, just as he seems to do for all his myriad-minded readers who come away from his works reinforced in their personal beliefs, however contradictory they are to those of others. Shakespeare presents a spacious mirror, perhaps a funhouse mirror, in which we see ourselves reflected, as in a Rorschach ink blot or, more generally, in the world at large, which each of us construes idiosyncratically. So I will tell you of the worldview I discover in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, one I naturally believe is Shakespeare's own worldview objectively represented in this, his most exalted and dreadful of tragedies.

It would be easy, I think, for my skeptical friend to claim that the playwright who made *King Lear* is every inch a skeptic. One can point to the sundry assumptions of several characters who posit deities of different kinds—kind gods and malicious ones, random and indifferent gods, fiends and angels. Chiefly, one can point to the uncertainty and confusion of these characters about their own assumptions, expressing their own skepticism to undermine their beliefs. And what kind of world is it the play presents to us at the last? Not one that seems to be held in good hands, providentially cared for and redeemed from evil, loss, and sorrow; rather, a world that Kent describes as “cheerless, dark and deadly” (5.3.291), a dreadful and despairing world of rampant injustice and malicious misery (the world, you might ruefully say, of our evening news).

Yet one could reasonably object that Shakespeare, a celebrated playwright in a theocratic state whose monarchs headed an Anglo-Catholic government under the ultimate authority of the Christian God—that Shakespeare merely portrayed in *King Lear* the desolate state of England’s pre-Christian era still benighted and unredeemed from graceless paganism. In fact, I have made elsewhere just this argument, even suggesting that the wantonly sacrificed Cordelia foreshadows Christ crucified and portends the advent of a reformed world purged of the waywardness and wickedness represented in Lear, Gloucester, Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and, most monstrosly, in the bastard Edmund. Cordelia is both wise as a serpent and gentle as a dove, as Jesus advised. While she has sharp eyes to spy out the treacherous hypocrisy of her sisters, and stoutly refuses to compromise her integrity for her own self-interest, she remains a paragon of patience, compassion, and forgiveness in her responses to her father’s senile egotism and extravagant folly. One could conclude then that though *King Lear* presents us with a corrupt and fallen world vacant of intervening deities (no ghosts, no spirits, no fairies, no actual gods or demons of any sort), that in Cordelia, Kent, Edgar and the Fool he at least suggests godlike virtues that some human beings can embody even in a god-forsaken, tragic world.

Humanists can applaud this perspective and affirm as fact that human decency, loyalty, and love can contend with and sometimes prevail against human monstrosity. At our best we are able to summon selfless kindness and solicitude in the service of the humane principles of decency and justice. Even without the backing of divine exhortation and encouragement, we can find it in our own human potentiality to grow loving and wise, to transcend the wayward foolishness of our pathology and immaturity. We have it in us to grow toward godhood, an ideal we have represented in our various myths as deities whom eventually we hope to manifest in our imperfect selves.

## **THE HEART OF SHAKESPEARE**

Someday I may compile a book of my essays on Shakespeare, attempting to reveal the core causes of his universal appeal and enduring esteem. I’d like to call my book *The Heart of Shakespeare*, audacious though that sounds, and remembering Hamlet’s warning to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that they can never “pluck out the heart of my

mystery” (3.2.366). But the more I read Shakespeare, the less mysterious seems the business he was about as a dramatist, which has to do with anatomizing the human heart.

I use the heart metaphor in my title because what Shakespeare meant by the heart was more than the pulsing blood pump we think it to be, but rather an organ of insight and compassion that houses the essential spark of divinity in human beings. Figuratively speaking, all of Shakespeare’s plays examine and diagnose varieties of cardiac problems in their principal characters: hearts that are given away, lost, assaulted, constricted, hardened, frozen, burned, and broken; hearts that need to open, soften, melt, love, and heal. “Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” (3.6.78) laments King Lear, who suffers from his own stony heart, self-hardened apparently. Whence come cruelty, evil, and vice into human hearts, corrupting and corroding them is the issue Shakespeare investigates and reveals in play after play, the heart of our miseries. Hard hearts and soft heads are his chief concerns, our vices and our follies, and what remedies may be found for them, but mostly for our sick hearts.

The worst of all diseases in our hearts comes from betrayal. The healthy heart is a loving, giving, generous, open heart, a heart seeking connections with kindred, kindly, compassionate hearts in others through bonds of love and friendship. Hearts yearn to join amiably with other hearts and cannot live alone, lest they grow desolate and dark. Yet when a love-bonded heart is scorned and rejected by a beloved companion, great grief ensues and often great corruption. So it is with Iago, who once doted on Othello only to be supplanted by Cassio and Desdemona. Likewise is the bond of fealty between Macbeth and King Duncan cracked when Duncan promotes his boyish prince instead of valorous Macbeth as his successor. As to the heart of Hamlet, it is shattered by his father’s death and by the obscene betrayal of his mother’s affections for both his father and himself in her coupling with Claudius. Sick at heart as well are other notable tragic figures in Shakespeare’s cosmos: Julius Caesar (“the unkindest cut of all”), Coriolanus (betrayed by his city), Antony (a traitor to his marriage and then betrayed, he believes, by his queenly concubine), Timon of Athens (spurned by the ungrateful Athenians and driven to despair). And then King Lear (“How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child”). *King Lear* is the tale of an old man, a king, seeking to be loved yet unable to recognize love, which is invisible and ineffable, when he cannot see it or hear it. Thus, allegorically, *King Lear* is a story of the spiritual blindness of someone who seeks God but will accept only material evidence for proof of God’s existence; whereas God cannot be known empirically or rationally, but only by the intuition of the heart and the insight of the soul. Just as, quite literally, Lear’s friend the Earl of Gloucester cannot see the difference between the true love of his son Edgar and the feigned love of his bastard Edmund until his eyes have been destroyed; likewise, Lear is duped by the hollow protestations of love reverberating from Goneril and Regan, and he fails to appreciate the rich resonance of Cordelia’s silence, which says (to those with ears to hear) that her love is immeasurable, unquantifiable, and hence unanswerable to Lear’s question of *how much*.

The God of Shakespeare’s Christian Bible was Love, Compassion, and Sacrifice personified, yet one who was reviled and slain by the ignorant and malignant powers of the world. In the pre-Christian world of *King Lear*, Cordelia prefigures such a deity in

her absolute devotion, understanding, and forgiveness. Although Shakespeare presents us in *King Lear* with a pagan and skeptical society, confused and desperate in its inability to know true love, his own perspective transcends the dreary darkness of storm-lashed Albion and hints, through the faithfulness of Cordelia and the loyalty of Kent, at something trustworthy and loving at the core of the universe, a loving and merciful heart enveloped in mystery.

## HEARTSIGHT: IT'S ALL ABOUT BELIEVING

... "Goodbye," said the fox. "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

It's all about believing. We are *Homo credens*, and we live by our beliefs, not by bread or by reason alone. Shakespeare knew this about us, for make-believe was his medium. His business was making people believe, by the magic spell of his art, in the truth of his dramatic illusions. He knew and said that "the truest poetry is the most feigning" (AYL 5.3.20). And though we may know few of Shakespeare's own beliefs, we may infer that he verily believed in the powerful effect of belief itself in people's lives.

He knew how credulous we are, so easily deluded and deceived, fools of our abused senses and aberrant fancies. Not surprisingly, many of his major characters reflect Shakespeare's mage-like nature in their inclination to manipulate the beliefs of others: Prince Hal, Rosalind, and Prospero for the good; Richard III, Lady Macbeth, and Edmund for wicked ends; Oberon and Puck merely for sport.

But no character is more virtuostic in practicing the arts of reshaping others' beliefs, of transmuting black to white and white to black than Iago, Othello's nemesis. There's not a character in the play who is not duped by Iago's duplicity: Roderigo, Brabantio, Cassio, Desdemona, even Emilia his wife, and all the others who call him "honest, honest Iago"—the cunningest, most self-conscious villain of them all, enviously diabolical to the core.

It's all about believing. Because we rarely know the truth of things, we act instead on suppositions, on what we take for real and right, assume as true. Though the skeptical take care to verify what they suppose is so, science is not so sure or usable as we could wish, and much uncertainty prevails. At which point we fall back on belief. We trust and hope it's true.

Yet one does not believe just to be a believer; one believes in order to know. Believing is a way of knowing, a way of coming to the truth; otherwise it is nothing but simply wishful fantasy and idle hope. One takes a leap of faith in the expectation of landing on firm ground (as does Indiana Jones, quite graphically, in his search for the Holy Grail). The presumed truth of God's beneficent and loving existence, of an almighty creative force for good at work in the universe is not the kind of truth that science can determine through observation, experiment, and methodological verification.



The truth of God's being, say believers, comes only by belief: believe then see; project love and trust, reverence and wonder if you wish to find all those virtues coming back to you, and that will be God, in truth—a universe corresponding to your belief in its goodness. God is a subjective truth, a personal truth, not an objective, public truth. God is a truth made manifest to insight, not to eyesight, seen not by the head but by the heart, by heartsight.

“What is essential is invisible to the eye,” the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

—Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

P.S.

Suppose Shakespeare had been knocked on the head some dark night in Sir Thomas Lucy's preserves, the world would have wagged on better or worse, the pitcher gone to the well, the scythe to the corn, and the student to the book; and no one been any wiser of the loss . . . . Alas and alas! You may take it how you will, but the services of no single individual are indispensable.

—Robert Louis Stevenson, “An Apology for Idlers”