

Shakespeare and Philosophy

The meaning behind the plays

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To many people Shakespeare is not human but divine. Perhaps the one contemporary critic that has expressed this most articulately is Harold Bloom, who in his book on 100 exemplary minds singles out that of Shakespeare, so while the other minds might be thought of as brilliant stars, his is the overarching one that provides the celestial firmament on which they all are positioned. He alone possess such grandness and breadth, and to be compared to him (and found wanting) is the highest accolade that can be given to any writer. Such hyperbole must make you suspicious, provoke in you an opposition and a scorching skepticism. How much of that is truth and how much is cant? And if you take such praise to heart, you may even wander whether such a spirit can be pinned down to a particular man. Did Shakespeare write his plays (or just somebody calling himself Shakespeare?) or were they collective efforts, involving not only co-authors but also the active contributions of actors and thus evolving through the process of trial and error; the plays themselves never being fixed but fluid, changing from performance to performance, constantly being revised, and consequently those texts that have survived to this day are but random snapshots ¹. Thus much effort has been devoted to try and decipher who was the 'true' Shakespeare, and even to wonder whether such a man existed at all, or whether we are simply chasing a phantom (and by implication that the plays themselves are phantoms liable to dissolve into thin air if scrutinized closely enough?). Such efforts are wasted, at least if misguidedly motivated, and have no effect on the plays. The phenomenon of their existence remains, authorship or not, and it can even be claimed that the more 'invisible' Shakespeare is, the more interesting the plays. In fact by denying them any authorship at all they are enhanced into the status of collective myth, not unlike that of the Bible, with which his works are often compared, be it mostly in a context of linguistic influence. In short, by dissolving him of his human individuality he becomes indeed divine.

Nevertheless, despite such flight of fancies much documentary evidence exists of the man Shakespeare commonly regarded to be the author of those plays. We know when he was baptized, who his parents were, where he went to school, whom he married (the nuptial bed is supposedly on display in the so called Ann Hathaway's cottage), the names of his children and their occupations. Many of his business dealings and other mundane facts of his life are carefully documented, and most intriguingly some books in his personal library

¹ In fact many plays survive in different editions, and the task of deciding which is the true one is as intractable as it is ultimately meaningless. King Lear is a case in point, which in the Oxford edition of his collected plays, appears in two different versions (albeit with a large intersection) one labeled 'The History of King Lear' the other 'The Tragedy of King Lear', two versions which according to the editors are usually conflated into one.

can be identified, and thus possible sources for his imagination suggested². In short we know surprisingly a lot of Shakespeare considering the fact that he was a commoner, yet what we know of him personally and are most liable to ever find out, with a few scattered if tantalizing exceptions, will have no bearing whatsoever on our appreciation of his plays or throw any illumination on their creation³. In particular no vivid and reliable eye-witness accounts by contemporaries exist. Still what we have is enough to make an icon of him including that of a possibly reliable likeness, an icon to be paid homage to, maybe even by prayer, as to the exhumed relics of a saint. And there is, not to be forgotten, a site to which you may make your pilgrimage, as if to a Mecca. No matter your opinion of Shakespeare, you have to admit that he is surrounded by a lot of hype, accumulated hype which apparently started to build up at the end of the 18th century, when he was being rescued from a temporary oblivion (although it is hard to believe that he was ever really forgotten). This hype forms as if an many-layered crust enclosing a small kernel, that for all we know, may be nonexistent, a mere mirage. And thus it acts as a barrier to many of us because it seems to prevent the establishment of a personal relationship between the reader and the author which is so necessary for a real communion. To read Shakespeare may appear less than an act of reading than the partaking of a communal ritual, not unlike that of adhering to a prevalent fashion. To this sense of depersonalization contributes first the seemingly anonymity of the author, the personal voice of which we seem not to detect, secondly the medium itself. A play should be seen enacted, not merely read; what may be dead on the printed page, may very well be filled with life, when breathed by an actor of flesh and blood. A play should be performed, and the very act of performance makes the whole into a spectacle of sorts, which would have little sense outside the social setting in which it is reconstructed, not unlike the performance of a piece of music, whose nature may be glimpsed from the notes, but only comes truly alive when sight is replaced by sound. To this we will return.

I first heard about Shakespeare when I was about ten. I was told that he was the greatest author ever, and this kind of information naturally intrigued me, first because I entertained such ambitions myself (namely that of writing) and secondly, and maybe even more crucially, at that age such ultimately meaningless rankings excite the immature imagination, which finds fascination in such facts as what is the biggest, fastest, most ferocious animal, man, or vehicle. By osmosis I acquired the knowledge of quite a few of the titles of his play, but differed hereby little, I guess, from my contemporaries. At sixteen I made my pilgrimage to Stratford-on-Avon with my parents, and my mother, anxious to cultivate my taste, took me to a performance of 'Twelfth Night'. Then during the years I have seen a few of his plays performed, both in English and in Swedish translation⁴. But never, never have I been truly touched? Why? Is it because of some kind of autism?

² McGinn even claims to find direct paraphrases of the writings of Montaigne in his plays.

³ One may argue that the same holds for the lives of most authors, even modern and well-documented ones; and thus our hunger for biographical detail, is less motivated by the desire for instruction than for our appetite for gossip.

⁴ This is an intriguing question, how much is lost in translation? Of course something is always lost, but I suspect that in fact most of the poetic magic of his lines is actually preserved in other Germanic tongues, and that he can sound as good in Swedish and German as he does in the original. But I suspect

Maybe I am as that *idiot savant*, who after being taken to a performance could recite the number of words each actor had uttered, but had no inkling at all what it was all about? Or on a less extreme note, maybe I am on the other side of the cultural divide popularized, (and subsequently quoted to the point of nausea), by C.P.Snow. One type of intelligence pursuing the mysteries of nature, dominated by the left hemisphere (or is it the right?), thinking in terms of numbers and abstract relationships, transcending the accidental and merely human; the other type inspired by the opposite hemisphere, who revels in the distinctively human and its cultural constructions (which is, cynically put, but another word for 'hype'). There is, in spite of, or maybe rather because of the very vulgarization of such hackneyed opinion, a kernel of truth to such speculation. After all my intellectual development of my teens was of turning away from stories and poems, seeking more eternal truths; finding more excitement (and poetry?) in the solution of a mathematical problem than in the pedestrian parsing of a poem or the trivial of 'smithing' mere rhymes. And when I went to England that time in 1966, my real pilgrimage was not to Stratford but to that little house where Newton was born and bred⁵. Still I resent the basic simplification such a view indicates.

Few things excite us more as children (or at least some of us) than stories. As a child I devoured everything that came my way, regardless of intrinsic quality. I did of course encounter the classical fairy-tales as put down by Grimm and Perrault⁶ as slightly bowdlerized in editions made for children. I also discovered as soon as I had taught myself to read the Biblical stories, not in the Bible itself, but as retold to children, and was very fascinated by them. Those stories certainly gripped me in a way none of Shakespeare's plays have ever done. They scared me, they made me weep be it of fright or sorrow, and I read them over and over again. They certainly instilled in me a deep desire to write (a most natural consequence of excessive reading) and to which I occasionally gave free rein, giving me a reputation of being too caught up in imagination which was bad and indicated a somewhat loosened grip on reality⁷. The plays by Shakespeare are also stories, at least ostensibly based on such (and to which we will likewise return), and maybe if I had encountered them as an impressible child, I would have been as moved by them as by the biblical ones and the fairy-tales. Othello strangling his beautiful bride would have upset me, even if I had not fathomed the full import of it, or I might have been moved by the spectacle of a mad King Lear abandoned by his evil daughters. Of Greek mythology and Icelandic sagas I was treated at least to fragments of, but with the possible

that this is no longer true when transported into French, and less and less so when carried to even more distant linguistic domains.

⁵ At the time there was a modest entrance fee and a lady that alerted the intermittent visitor to the scribbled drawings the child Isaac had cut on the walls. Nowadays I suspect the fees are stiff and the bareness of the original settings filled out with potted informations, exhibits and a gift-shop through whose gauntlet you are required to pass.

⁶ The fairy-tales are basically the same, but the execution differ fascinatingly

⁷ In Swedish there is no clear distinction between 'phantasy' and 'imagination'. The word used is 'fantasi' and it took me several years to realize that it actually had a good connotation. When the word was applied to me as a child I felt it was entirely negative, suggesting a kind of disease of the mind, liable to just imagine things.

exception of *Romeo and Juliet* I was throughout childhood (and adolescence?) ignorant of any Shakespearean plot.

But childhood is one thing, adolescence something quite different, the latter involving not only an intellectual development but maybe more to the point an emotional intensification making possible an imaginative compassion, rendering your childhood self in retrospect a somewhat monstrous character⁸ The stories that grip you in your teens are different and more personally focused, as the very act of willful imagination is not sufficient, they have to speak to you directly and your concerns⁹. I certainly was rather affected by a performance of a play by Ibsen (*The Wild Duck*) I saw on TV in my early teens, and some plays by Strindberg (especially 'the Father') made a deep impression on me in my middle-teens. Other examples can of course be adduced, but it would be tedious to do so¹⁰.

Shakespeare presents some formidable hurdles to the casual encounter. His plots are rather contrived, his characters not always well-rounded, there is a certain stiff stylization to the dramaturgy (although many swears by his skill as a dramatist), and a lot of artifice. Who speaks in daily life in blank verse? And of course the language itself, slightly archaic, presents, both a but temporary distraction due to its unfamiliarity¹¹ and a more permanent such, due to his fondness for punning and obscure word-play. The latter, one somewhat uncharitably suspects, providing the main delight for many a Shakespeare buff, crossword puzzles being a degenerate form of intellectual thinking known as ingenuity¹². The real fascination in Shakespeare is to be found in the poetry of his lines. Maybe not all of them, too much of a good thing relentlessly displayed rather numbs the mind than electrifies it, and hence may put you if not to sleep at least to distraction; but some of it sticks and you marvel. The main thesis of McGinn is that, taking a cue from the early Shakespeare scholar - Hazlet, the philosophical astuteness of the bard is at least as interesting as the poetry itself. That Shakespeare was deep down a philosopher who

⁸ The Polish travel-writer Kapuscinsky notes that children soldiers are the most ferocious, as they lack fear and compassion due to a lack of emotional imagination.

⁹ This is not true to the same extent for small children, despite much didactic nonsense being voiced, as a child you are more likely than ever after being omnivorous, discovering the world without so much structuring as when you mature. The ease with which a non-pathological child picks up its native tongue as opposed to the pain involved in later years to imperfectly assimilate a foreign one, is only one of many illustrations of this fact.

¹⁰ Let me anyway mention the novels of Dickens which were favorites of mine at a certain age, as well as the intriguing aspects to be gleaned from an early encounter with Proust, only to be pursued thirty-five years later. My early infatuation with Dickens turned into embarrassment when I started to read the *Great Russians* in my early twenties

¹¹ Objectively speaking, the language of Shakespeare is surprisingly modern, a Swedish play from the same time would be linguistically weird indeed but for those attuned to the old-fashioned language by specialized study, while a student of Shakespeare needs no such, but will automatically assimilate the few archaisms that prevail.

¹² An even more uncharitable suspicion of the allure of Shakespeare's plays is to be found in their nature as period-pieces, not unlike that of the costumes their actors are required to wear, or the old furniture of past epochs, that make many people drawl.

expressed himself poetically¹³. To this McGinn adds the suggestion, already alluded to in a previous footnote, that Shakespeare was deeply influenced by Montaigne. In fact the sub-title of the book 'Discovering the meaning behind the plays', no doubt foisted on him by agents and publishers, would indicate that McGinn is suggesting a radical realignment of Shakespeare criticism (or at least when it comes to popular exposition). But nothing could be further from the truth (as the saying goes). McGinn takes a very modest approach, with no intention to trespass onto traditional Shakespeare scholarship (which will, I sadly suspect, take no notice of him), but just to view the plays of Shakespeare from a specific angle, namely the one from which he professionally is most qualified to take. The author claims that he has always been appreciative of Shakespeare, finding, as with a piece of music, more and more to enjoy, at each re-acquaintance. Still it was only when he was alerted to a possible connection between some basic philosophical concerns and the writings of Shakespeare, he did out of curiosity embark on a more systematic study during the comparative leisure provided by a Sabbatical. The whole book is thus literally a labor of love employing the tools provided by his labor of bread.

The plan of the book is at first to consider six particular plays by Shakespeare and discuss the various philosophical issues those can be said to illustrate. The plays McGinn has chosen are 'A Midsummer nights dream, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, King Lear and the Tempest', all of them, with the possible exception of the last, well-known and often performed. Then the author chooses to discuss more general aspects of Shakespeare, such as his attitude to gender (of course found to be strikingly contemporary), the psychology of Shakespeare, the nature of his tragedies and finally the characteristics of his genius. The first six chapters allow the author to present in a popular way some basic philosophical quandaries, and sweeten the pills by illustrations.

The basic philosophical questions are, as Jaspers and others have noted, not only accessible to children, but often instigated by them spontaneously. The relationship between dream and reality is an obvious example of such a query. How do we not know that we are not dreaming when we think that we are awake? There is an important asymmetry here. Would we never be 'awake' we would not have a notion of 'dreaming'. When we are awake on the other hand, we are convinced that this is the more authentic state, and that dreaming is an aberration. However, when we are dreaming, we do not necessarily realize that we are, often not even caring even¹⁴. It is not as if we are aware of our waking selves as dreams, while we are dreaming. The natural speculation by analogy is that what we are calling being awake, is just another kind of dream in another more real reality, to which we someday will wake up. In fact one can imagine that reality comes in many layers, and that we are going to wake up into more real and real realities (This is the idea behind the delightful little story 'The dream of infinity' by the Swedish turn of the century writer Hjalmar Sderberg.) In fact nothing prevents us from imagining an infinite number of levels

¹³ The relationship between philosophy and poetry is an intriguing one. I often claim, only half in jest and not at all meant to be disparaging, that philosophy should be considered the poetry of science, a suggestion deeply resented by many philosophers, including McGinn himself

¹⁴ Although I recall once as a child realizing that I was dreaming while dreaming, telling that to the supporting actors of my dream, who received it with blank faces. I was at the time quite intrigued by it, as I had been wondering whether it was possible.

(as in Sderbergs story), in which case at each stage of our existence we are dreaming, and that the reality that underlies it all, somehow lies abstractedly in the very ladder by itself, which is beyond all the dreams¹⁵. To such technical profundities Shakespeare does not descend (ascend?), to him the question is rather to what extent our impressions come from something outside ourselves or are just illusions produced by our brains¹⁶. The first stand is referred to as realism, and is a typical case of a metaphysical attitude that allows no formal proof but is more in the nature of an intuition or a defiant decision. The play that obviously most directly concerns dreaming and the nature of reality is 'the Midsummer Nights Dream', in which dreaming is likened to both madness, poetry and love, it being hard to ascertain where the one ends and the other starts. The play, not surprisingly set in a Classical time and on Greek latitudes, is nevertheless something that makes much more sense on more northerly latitudes, where the magic of a vanishing night does away with the standard demarcation between the realm of the day (wakefulness) and that of night (dreaming), leading to a charmed and unsettling confusion. It is fair to suspect that the festival of mayday poles is a peculiar northern concern and not a Mediterranean tradition and really ought to be set in an English wood rather than in a Greek. In the play there is a mixture of the real and the fantastic, and, as so often in Shakespeare's plays, a play within the play (suggesting that of a dream within a dream casting suspicion on the status of the whole). It is about love and infatuation, and the message is that love is not rationally based, in particular its object is not always one of merit. Instead love is a confusion, caused by a charm (or a pill), and its object lies wholly within the eye of the beholder, who can fasten it on anything that happens to move, be it a beast half man half ass, as the 'lovable' Bottom. Of course you can see it as philosophy touching on the skepticism of a Descartes or a Montaigne, on the other hand, the subject of dreaming is one natural to all fiction and from a meta-fictional point of view, the subject of much of it. As noted above, the charm of the play is found more in its form than the systematic illumination it throws on the subject of dreaming. Here Shakespeare shows himself much more of a poet than a philosopher, although ultimately both inquiries have a common ground, which you might call philosophical if you want (or are a professional philosopher).

The philosophical problem of Hamlet is more focused, even if those proverbial line of 'Be or not to be' may seem to address the perennial ontological question of existence, and to what extent we are free to choose it or not. The play of Hamlet is, according to McGinn, a question about the fluidity of the self, whether the self is something given, or whether it is something invented, not unlike that of a role in a play, which we choose to act. This is of course a natural question for a playwright to pose, reminiscent of the contradistinction between dreaming and wakefulness. Is the world but a stage on which we chose to play our roles, and just as there may be no ultimate reality, only degrees of dreaming, there is no real self, only a succession of roles? Each play is a play within a bigger play? The idea that the world is fiction and hence under our control is an exciting and disturbing one. I often

¹⁵ Platos abstract heaven of forms is clearly in this tradition, relegating our sensual impressions to a lower and confused reality of a dreamer.

¹⁶ The very reference to brains, contradicts the anti-realist stand of the radical assumption; a dilemma familiar to all philosopher with post-modernist leanings. From a historical point of view the remarkable thing is that Shakespeare so unequivocally locates the mind in the brain, not in some other organ.

used to dream about when I was young that the world would be a play in which you were free to act spontaneously and irresponsibly, how much more exciting would not life be, how many more things would not happen to you? If the world is fiction, the sense of free-will becomes enhanced as well as the restraints of morality are being loosened. In ordinary life we are bound by conventions that restrict our latitude of action considerably, our lives are guided much more by habit than by impulse in order to maximize predictability. I remember once being struck by the fact that nothing is really impossible to do, including even murder, once you decide that your life is set on a stage, and with fascination and horror I started to draw the consequences of such a course of action when uninhibited by social strictures. I started to suspect that such a life would really mean one of meaning and freedom, guided much more by daring and will, than timid conservatism, which I then slowly began to understand that my own youthful life was too hemmed in by, the reaction against which was really the source for such unbridled and morbid fantasies. But to return to Hamlet. If you are free to choose your roles, what will guide your choices, and what will you do with such freedom? In the case of Hamlet there is a paralysis, because any decision to act needs to be based on a firm sense of self to translate intention into implementation. If your self is constantly changing, it means that so are the consequences, and an act only makes sense within a given fixed context. Thus Hamlet is reduced to a virtual reality, in which thought and speech make up the whole, because only language contains within itself its own commentary. But the real meaning of being in a play is not the freedom of action from moral censure, nor the freedom of choice per se, because in a real play actors are unlike real people, bound by a given script. The real meaning of a play is being seen and observed, of doing something to attain attention, often one of admiration or, what comes to the same thing ultimately, shock and disapproval¹⁷. Can this not explain to some degree the propensity of posturing so obvious in Hamlet, his long and solemn soloquays directed to no one in particular in the play, but surely to an audience both imagined, and as it ironically turns out to be, more real than the dreamer himself.

Once again one may view the drama of Hamlet as a philosophical one, or as a literary. Both interpretations are as natural, yet nevertheless one suspects it is the poet in Shakespeare who is holding the reins, and philosophy goes on a free ride. This is even more pronounced in the third choice of play - Othello.

Stepping down from the ultimate ontological questions, we are as social beings, reduced to one of immediate import, namely that of other minds. How do we know what other people are thinking, or that they are thinking at all? Maybe they are but automata, designed to mimic inner life without possessing one. The latter alternative is known as solipsism, and if not usually defined in that way, constitute the essentials of it. But even if rejecting solipsism, and in fact especially if we do, we are confronted with a most pressing problem that lies at the heart of social intercourse. As McGinn points out we all have an advantage towards the rest of humanity, we know our thoughts but they do not. Unfortunately it works the other way around as well. One may take advantage of this by

¹⁷ I am aware of another phantasy of mine, prevalent during my twenties, of having my life minutely observed in real time by outsiders, say friends or friends of my parents. Clearly it was an expression of ambition, because is not the ultimate role of ambition to be set on a stage and admired if not by all and sundry at least by some you want to impress?

practicing deception, as unscrupulous individuals are apt to do (provided they have some ulterior motives to serve); but it is not only crucial to downright deception, games such as chess and various games of cards, would be impossible without this asymmetry of knowledge. (But of course such games are nothing but legalized deception constrained to some overarching rules.)

Now you may see this as a philosophical problem at heart, as McGinn is committed to do, on the other hand it is the basic fulcrum around which all dramatization revolves. Thus in addressing the problem, Shakespeare is simply following in the long tradition of all dramatists, and it seems unlikely that he saw it as mainly a philosophical problem, rather than a quintessentially dramatic¹⁸. Of course, as noted so repeatedly the demarcation of philosophy is not so firm and all fundamental though contains within itself issues that can be articulated philosophically. If done so consistently Othello is confronted by an epistemological dilemma. Whom to believe? The protestations of his fair Desdemona or the insinuations of Iago? Total skepticism is impossible, belief is more like a see-saw, the more you doubt one thing, the more you are forced to believe something else. Thus extreme skepticism goes hand in hand with extreme gullibility, what, among others, Hume sarcastically pointed out. The more Othello doubts his wife, the more trusting he has to be of Iago. Would he just submit the suggestions of Iago to the same exacting standards as he did those of Desdemona, the tragic situation would not ensue. But why is Othello incapable of this rather simple step? Someone like Hamlet, McGinn speculates, would not have allowed himself to be so bamboozled. What is it in Othello's character that makes him susceptible to such a ruse? What is the essence of jealousy? The fact that you cannot achieve absolute knowledge? The fact that once you are caught on this horn, the desire for knowledge transcends the kind of knowledge you want. Fidelity cannot be proved, it is in the terminology of Popper only falsifiable. One incident of fidelity means nothing, but one incident of infidelity is enough. Thus the jealous lover eager for certainty above all, can only hope to achieve it by having his worst fears confirmed, and thus all his actions are geared towards this self-destructive ambition¹⁹.

The problem of jealousy has been treated by many authors throughout the history of

¹⁸ I must admit though that from my only reading of the play at least a quarter of a century ago, I most vividly remember a philosophical pun, not mentioned by McGinn. Emilia asks Desdemona whether she would not be willing to be unfaithful to win the whole word. Desdemona denies that she would, but Emilia retorts to the effect that if she did, she would in particular win the eradication of the deed as well

¹⁹ It is very interesting though that McGinn offers a solution to the quandary of Othello, a solution which incidentally reveals that he thinks less as an abstract philosopher, who would have nothing to offer Othello, but as a human being. His suggestion is simply that had Othello had normal sexual relations with his wife, the unfortunate situation would not have ensued. Is sex such a simple solution, do people who enjoy sex with each other never suffer from jealousy, because the sex ensures normal trust? Most interesting though of the suggestion is that nowhere in the play is there any suggestion of chastity, or at least none very explicit. Clearly McGinn has been caught sufficiently in the yarns of the story, to imagine the fictional creation of Othello to be larger than what is revealed by the author. A fictional character is characterized by only being defined by the author who has the ultimate authority in answering questions about it. It is the great mystery of good fiction to create the illusion of this constraint not being present, something that is usually expressed as a character being well-rounded and not just a two-dimensional

literature, and while I think that many of those are superior to that of Shakespeare's when it comes to realism and actual evocation (I am thinking of Strindberg and Proust) Othello remains the stylized icon of that particular conflict between heart and mind, and that is of course an illustration of the position of Shakespeare in Western culture, a position in many ways comparable to that of the Bible, in providing commonly agreed references.

When it comes to Macbeth the philosophical issue becomes far less pronounced. Macbeth is an evil person, but of an evil radically different from that of Iago. The latter is a caricature, on the very periphery of what is humanly conceivable and thus unlikely to engage our identifications and hence sympathies, while that of Macbeth is presented as something within us, that can be called forth by say ambition. According to McGinn, the character of a Macbeth is an illustration that our acts do not issue inevitably out of our character, but our character is as much, if not more, the result of our acts. It is clear that Macbeth acts against his better instincts, taunted and prompted by his wife, once he has taken that fatal step he has changed into a monster, finding no longer any compunction in committing atrocity, in fact so mired is he in his callousness, that he prevails over his wife, who is undone for by remorse. There is in Macbeth throughout a sense of dignity and bravery, come what may come, that makes you an uneasy admirer. Having put himself beyond the ken, he seems to fully embrace the consequences. You think of a Saddam Hussein, apparently a cultured and intelligent being²⁰, who during the course of his life took some very pivotal decision that eventually turned him into a monster. Thus when we saw him being led to his death, many of us found it tragic, no matter how particularly well-deserved his death might have been²¹ Of Saddams inner life we know little, after all there is the problem of the other minds, but of Macbeth the author let us have some glimpse. What is the undoing of Macbeth? His imagination? He is a man of action, not one to dither in face of decision, and here he presents a striking contrast to Hamlet. But such single-mindedness does not preclude the presence of a vivid imagination. McGinn suggests that just as fear is fed by our imagining it, so is remorse. Remorse hunts both lady Macbeth and her husband leading eventually to their demise.

With King Lear the fundamental philosophical issues are even less pronounced, on the other hand the moral ones emerge the clearer. Morality is also a question of self-knowledge, and here King Lear fails, leading him to commit acts that will undercut him totally and lead to his pathetic downfall, from a powerful arrogant master, to one stripped to the very baseness of human existence, not only divested of power and riches but also of the light of his intelligence, being reduced to a desolate confused individual a prey to the forces of nature roaming around on the windy heaths pelted by nature's caprice, his clothes and mind in tatters. It is in fact a moral parable, which suitably modified could have fitted into the New Testament, as an illustration of the vagaries of pride and arrogance, and the realization of our inherent weakness.

cardboard cut out, having no presence outside the printed page. Clearly McGinn has reacted to Othello as fiction not as philosophy.

²⁰ The qualifying 'cultured' may strike many readers as puzzling, not to say offensive, when applied to such a brute. But I have been told that he spoke a beautiful Arabic.

²¹ This is an instinctive feeling many of us have when we see someone faced with execution and have no personal quarrel with him. Facing death we are all somehow put on the same level.

It is in the discussion of 'the Tempest' in which McGinn is most original, and which his philosophical approach is probably most relevant and illuminating. What is the Tempest about? The power and magic of Language. And perhaps one of the few plays by Shakespeare in which we may detect an alter ego of the author, namely in the figure of Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan. In the play he has been banished to a deserted island with his fair daughter, and somehow mysteriously been turned into a magician. He arranges for a shipwreck, through the machinations of his obedient spirits. But for all the sound and fury, the storm is but fictional, having all the trappings of the real thing, yet causing no physical harm. Words have power, although they are but meaningless breaths of air, that resonate but for a brief moment, being hardly perceptible to the ear, before they expire for ever. Yet this formal succession, lately encoded in stone or ink to stay the obliteration of time, carries meaning, that clearly transcend its form and seem to have no connection to it. It is tempting, as many modern philosophers have suggested, to ascribe to its meaning a hidden Platonic reality that can be made manifest in many different ways²². The play is in many way reminiscent of a Midsummer Nights Dream, with its appeal to the supernatural and its eschewing of realism. It is clearly meant to be allegorical, it being ultimately about language and representation, thus fittingly a late work of the master, whose subsequent retirement can with some imagination be seen as heralded by the voluntary divestment of his magic power that Prospero effects at the end.

Shakespeare and gender is a very topical matter, and McGinn (somewhat disappointingly?) flirts with the idea that gender identity is simply a choice. This is made particularly piquant by the practice in the days of Shakespeare to have all roles enacted by males. This presented a challenge to convincingly portray a female by a male. Even more interesting when it is carried one way forward, when the male acts a female impersonating a male. How to convey this faithfully, it is not enough just to be your own sexually gendered self, it is acting of the second order, acting acting, not only any acting, but acting convincing acting. The female character should act and confuse others that she is a male, but in such a way that the audience of the play, not just the audience of the play within the play, should sense that there is a woman acting.

Now Shakespeare as a psychologist is most of all a faithful observer. He does not have a scientific not even systematic approach, but his ambition is not to explain by some simple principles, such as those Freud proposed, only as a naturalist to produce as wide a sample as possible. The psychological intuition of Shakespeare is remarkable, although of course not all of his characters are drawn by his psychologists ink, and it prompts the question of whether there is such a thing as scientific psychology? That psychology is basically a matter of observation and intuition, an attempt to address the problem of other minds, and thus ultimately about social manipulation. Just as languages are supposed to be all equally expressive, so is our innate intelligence of which the former is an expression, has

²² How meaning can emerge from the meaningless is a mystery reminiscent of how order can emerge from disorder. The latter case confronts the naturalists, the beautiful situation of which is the explanation by natural selection, as opposed to the assumption of an intelligent design. Clearly something similar is at play with language. Still it seems true that in language acquisition meaning precedes, we learn the meaning of words through a sensed sharing of meaning with other speakers, not that we first learn words (by pointing?) and then construct meaning out of them.

not improved (probably on the contrary) since the emergence of modern man, in spite of exponential growth in scientific knowledge. Thus a bard of the early 17th century is just as wise as any man today. Similarly an excellent portrait painter of 15th century is excelled by none of today in spite of all technological advancement. This fact can either be seen negatively as the impossibility of improvement, or be a celebration of basic humanity invariant throughout our ages, thus united in a common quest and understanding. Without this preservation there would be no Humanism as we see it. Change might be exciting, but also disturbing and scary. Discovering what is invariant is mostly reassuring, because it indicates that what is may remain (potentially for ever).

Earlier in the essay I have hinted at the problem of the theatre, that those plays are plays after all, written not so much to be read as to be performed. A more thorough technical understanding of the theatre in general and the Elizabethan in particular is necessary for a full appreciation of Shakespeare, along with actual attendance of his productions. Much of Shakespearean scholarship is in effect devoted to those questions, and the book does of course not make any contributions to this, as it was never meant to. I cannot offer anything myself, except some concluding observations.

First there seems to be an ironic rift in the fact that those plays written for the unsophisticated rabble now is considered the pinnacle of sophistication. How is that? One standard explanation is that Shakespeare is a genius, and thus he appeal is universal, as appreciated among high-brows as well as low-brows. Just as we are all equal in the face of God. Still this should not make oneself blind to the fact that there are obvious shortcomings in his plays, shortcomings we would hardly tolerate when present in a less divine master. His comedies especially abound in burlesque, and clever as they may be, not to say entertaining, how much would really have been lost, had those less momentous plays not survived into posterity. If given a choice between say Goethes Faust and say 'Much ado about Nothing' is it so obvious that we should always opt for the bard? (Then on the other hand one may argue that his true genius lay in his comedies, that those are the ones that will survive, while future generations will find his tragedies turgid and pretentious, fashions change after all.) In what sense is a minor play of Shakespeare superior to say one of his contemporaries, say Ben Jonson. Would in fact not a play by Jonson gives as much pleasure of study as a period piece as something by Shakespeare? Many of the delights present in the latter are surely also to be discovered in the former? Of course not having read anything by Jonson, I can only state questions, not insinuate answers.

Secondly it is quite interesting to note that the stories that seem to provide the plots of his plays never seem picked out of the Bible, although that ought to have been the most read or at least familiar to the great majority of people? One explanation is that educated people like Shakespeare wer predominantly treated to a fare consisting of the classical authors of the antiquities, be they Roman or Greek, and that this pagan age seemed to have fired the imagination of at least the educated much more than the Biblical stories. (In painting we see less of an imbalance, even if here I believe, with the possible exception of crucifications and the Madonna with the child, classical motives still outnumber the biblical.) In the writings of a Montaigne, classical erudition shines through, and he makes far more references to the Latin and the Greek than to the Bible. This tradition survived

until the early 20th century, for better or for worse²³. Also, the classical fairy-tales, which we tend to think of as timeless, were not collected until as recently as two centuries ago, and thus probably mostly unknown at the time of Shakespeare. What would he have done with a tale such as 'Cinderella' or 'Sleeping Beauty'?

Did Shakespeare believe in God? Was he a secret Catholic among a majority of Protestants? A negative answer to the first question does not make the second moot. Belief and religious affiliation being two rather different things. The verdict seems to be no. He was a naturalist with no metaphysical commitment to a higher deity. As McGinn points out he was basically ethically tolerant, but more in the sense of treasuring the great variety of morality he could identify. Moral, but not a moralist. The ultimate evil is dishonesty, and dishonesty is a denial of truth. Of course if you identify the abstract notion of truth with God, Shakespeare, as so many others of metaphysical ambition, was a believer.

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²³ It is quite likely that a school-boy of the past was more well-versed in classical literature and proficient in Latin, than the average Oxford Classic major of today