

GOOD IN EVERY THING

Meditations on Shakespeare

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For Bethany

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*And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.*

—As You Like It
Act II, Scene I

INTRODUCTION

*The learner must want to be changed by his studies.
He must read Shakespeare as a Christian reads his Bible.*

David V. Hicks, *Norms & Nobility*

This little book offers a handful of reflections touching on some of Shakespeare's plays that have brought me a precious supply of refreshment and joy over the years. The term "meditations" in the title may conjure up a host of strange and eclectic associations: anything from stoicism to jazz music to lavender-scented yoga pillows. But I think the practice I have in mind is something fairly familiar and intuitive for readers (though, sadly, it is too little exercised). In the following pages, we will pursue the simple pleasure of thinking with Shakespeare—by which we mean a different thing than the ordinary academic enterprise of thinking about Shakespeare. Today our shelves teem with criticisms, commentaries, histories, and variorums, many of which are vitally helpful, even needful, to understanding and appreci-

ating the Bard’s classic body of work. But in these nine short reflections, I want to try out a different way of appreciating literature that has its roots in a rich history of Christian and classical thought: something the old grammarians used to call *meditatio*—our natural, imaginative desire to look at important life questions through the eyes of a beloved author.

The historicist impulse of modern education tends to treat literature as an artifact. Many critics and teachers think of books primarily as literary relics that tell us something about the time and place of the author, but very little about our own condition, much less about those higher-order questions that loom over our personal lives. The Great Tradition thought otherwise. St. Basil of Caesarea believed that even pagan literature was a source of divine truth,¹ and John Calvin called the classics “admirable light” that illumines our souls.² David Hicks speaks for the broad classical consensus when he insists that we “must read Shakespeare as a Christian reads his Bible.”³ Not that Shakespeare could ever become a kind of dramatic Scripture or poetic Bible-substitute. But Bible-reading and Shakespeare-reading ought to share a common hope which the modern critic often lacks: the sincere expectation that one can learn something important about life through the printed page.

The practice of literary meditation has been around for a long time. In his *Didascalicon*, the twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor explains the crucial qualitative difference between reading for “understanding” and reading for “counsel.” Whereas *studio* typically happens along systematic

lines (the analysis of a plot, the scrutiny of an argument), *meditatio* transpires through any of the numerous and sometimes haphazard ways that a book can spark a flame in our souls. The art of meditation, Victor says,

*delights to range along open ground, where it fixes its free gaze upon the contemplation of truth, drawing together now these, now those causes of things, or now penetrating into profundities, leaving nothing doubtful, nothing obscure. The start of learning, thus, lies in reading, but its consummation lies in meditation.*⁴

Clearly, there isn't a single method to be followed in this description, but an overarching commitment to wisdom in contemplation. The spirit of meditation, not the system, proves to be the vital thing. All literary learning begins in study, but at some point we must attend to those scenes and speeches in Shakespeare that jump out at us. In Francis Bacon's phrase, we must "weigh and consider" what the text is telling us.⁵ This kind of imaginative reception isn't something separate from serious reading. It is the "consummation" of all our efforts.

There is no single, continuous argument to this book. The reflections that follow are episodic, and that means there is a degree of arbitrariness both in the choice of plays and in the topics they inspire. Still, these chapters generally cohere around the subjects of education, imagination, and virtue: the *paideia* of the soul, the expansive vision of the heart,

and the ideals of human excellence. My intended audience is someone who knows a little Shakespeare, cares about classical stuff, and doesn't mind hearing some thoughts on the latter suggested by the former.

The practice of meditating on Shakespeare turns out to have a long and (mostly) venerable history. Abraham Lincoln made a habit of always keeping a thumb in a volume of Shakespeare. As did John Keats. And the illustrious P. G. Wodehouse. But no one I think surpasses the fervor of Coleridge, who was perhaps the most enthusiastic supporter of a regular Shakespeare reading-plan:

O! When I think of the inexhaustible mine of virgin treasure in our Shakespeare, that I have been almost daily reading him since I was ten years old . . . that at every new accession of information, after every successful exercise of meditation, and every fresh presentation of experience, I have unfailingly discovered a proportionate increase of wisdom and intuition in Shakespeare.⁶

Maybe I should end there and issue this outrageous invitation as my own. Don't just read Shakespeare—read him with the expectation that you will be changed by him. These plays are a quarry for the conscience and a storehouse for high ideas. Read him as though he has something illuminating and personal to say to you. Because he does.

CHAPTER ONE

HAMLET & WHAT MOVES US

*By our efforts to bring together and to understand
the conflicts from within that are engendered by
images of conflicts from without, somehow,
miraculously, we learn.*

Louise Cowan, “The Literary Mode of Knowing”

If Polonius were a professor, he would almost certainly wear tweed—a medium gray weave, knit elbow patches, and a smart opal pocket square (folded to a single peak, of course). If Polonius were a don, he would likely own Gregory Peck frames: the classic tortoiseshell type with a lightweight build. A collegiate Polonius would probably devise ripping PowerPoints, replete with fully documented images and animating spiral text. He’d probably subscribe to all the trending journals, mill about at conferences, and drop buzzwords like “high-impact practices” and “diagnostic teaching” with a smidge of impish glee. In short, if Polonius were a professor, he would be very professorial. But I am not sure that he would be a very good professor.

From the start, Hamlet's relationship with this tiresome court counselor is a vexed one. First, Polonius serves Claudius, the devious uncle who murdered Hamlet's father to gain the crown. Second, he is the father of Ophelia, Hamlet's love interest in a "complicated relationship" to end all complicated relationships. Additionally, though, the situation is vexed by a contrast of personalities. Really, there could hardly be two men less similar than Hamlet and Polonius.

When it comes to public polish, Polonius boasts an undeniable degree of *savoir faire*, but when it comes to public influence, Shakespeare's "tedious old fool" is a bit of a bore (2.2.219). Wordy, ostentatious, dull—Polonius possesses a capacity for circumlocution which far exceeds his circumspection. Recall, for example, this memorable string of proverbs (delivered with all the delicacy and grace of a T-shirt cannon) just before his son, Laertes, skips off to France:

*Give every man thy ear but few thy voice;
Take each man's censure but reserve thy judgment.
Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy
But not expressed in fancy—rich, not gaudy . . .
Neither a borrower nor a lender, be,
For loan oft loses both itself and friend
And borrowing dulls th' edge of husbandry.
This above all, to thine own self be true
And it must follow as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false
to any man. (1.3.67–70, 74–79)*

Put a pin in that last piece of suspicious advice for a moment. Has this kind of moral teaching worked on Laertes? Polonius' suspicion is telling. Anticipating those "wanton, wild, and usual slips / As are companions noted and most known / To youth and liberty," a very dubious dad sends his servant Reynaldo on a reconnaissance mission to Paris to check up on his son's activities (2.1.22–24). Ophelia too begs her brother not to act like the "puff'd and reckless libertine" who sallies down "the primrose path of dalliance" (1.3.49–50). In manners, Laertes possesses *sprezzatura*—spontaneous grace. The courtier Osric describes him as "an absolute gentleman, full of most excellent differences, of very soft society, and great showing" (5.2.106–8). Yet when it comes to character, Laertes' education seems partial at best.

I do not think Shakespeare means to cast doubt on moral exhortation itself. Nor do I think he has a problem with proverbial wisdom. If you nix the proverb genre, then you have to throw out, well, Proverbs—not to mention a whole stash of other gems, like *The Golden Sayings of Epictetus* (something an Elizabethan literary-type would certainly never do). The real issue seems instead to be a life in which style is shorn of wisdom. Polonius is the kind of person who memorizes sayings not because he is wise (or hopes to become wise), but because he aims at "soft society." No wonder Laertes follows suit. Like father, like son (proverbially speaking).

Here is another counterfactual: If Prince Hamlet turned teacher, what would he be like? Would he pair a black turtle-neck with a black blazer? Would he lecture like Jacques

Lacan, pacing the room in saturnine steps, waving his Lucky Strike cigarette with great panache? I am more reluctant to speak on this point because Hamlet is a much deeper character than Polonius, and for that reason, who can say what Hamlet would or wouldn't do? Still, I suspect the prince understands something vitally important that Polonius totally misses: the art of what really moves people.

Remember act 2, scene 2—the scene where Hamlet greets the players at Elsinore? Hamlet requests an impromptu performance of Virgil, specifically the scene of Priam's death at the fall of Troy. During the vivid spectacle that follows, Polonius shows only mild interest (“This is too long,” he mutters baldly at one point), but by contrast, Hamlet is visibly moved (2.2.498). The prince has “turn'd his color and / has tears in's eyes” (2.2.519–520). Only in a lengthy soliloquy that closes the act does Hamlet personally divulge the matter of his discomposure:

*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
That from her working all his visage wann'd,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, an' his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing,
For Hecuba!
What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba,*

*That he should weep for her? What would he do
Had he the motive and the cue for passion
That I have? (2.2.550–62)*

In a flash, Shakespeare's audience grasps something about the power of imagination as a conduit of moral feeling. Priam's wife Hecuba may mean nothing to this professional thespian, but she certainly means something to Hamlet, who glimpses in her character a devastating reminder of his mother's infidelity. In a sudden moment of poetic apprehension, Queen Hecuba stands for the kind of queen Gertrude ought to be, and even Hamlet feels some chastisement from this classic image of loyalty (2.2.502). So something strange and powerful transpires. Engaging the story of Priam as his own story, Hamlet discovers a living relationship with the contemplated object. He is moved.

Anyone who has deeply loved stories recognizes what is happening here. If you have read *The Divine Comedy* or *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Barchester Towers*, you know how poetic images help us see the beauty of beauty and the evil of evil and the silliness of silliness. In Hamlet's own words to the players, these imaginative pictures raise "the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image" (3.2.22–23). Hamlet clearly apprehends the inner pedagogical principle at play, because he immediately plans to wield its power against Claudius:

*I'll have these players
 Play something like the murder of my father
 Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks;
 I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,
 I know my course. (3.3.590–94)*

With this “Mousetrap,” the prince creates the conditions for the stage to do the same work on Claudius (3.2.237). He stages a play containing a murder scene eerily similar to the deed suspected of his uncle, and he hopes by this device to call out the pangs of hidden guilt: “The play’s the thing” to “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.604–5). What is more, the plan works. Seeing his own evil on display, Claudius is cut to the quick, just as Hamlet was by Hecuba. Gonzago’s audience does not know why Claudius loses his composure, but Hamlet’s audience does: Dramatic confirmation arrives in act three, scene three when we find a guilt stricken sovereign soliloquizing a confession: “My offense is rank, it smells to heaven.” The king is moved.

So why does Hamlet’s pedagogy move the soul while Polonius’ doesn’t? To put not too fine a point on it, the fundamental contrast between Hamlet’s “education” and Polonius’ is that the former is poetic in nature: Hamlet discovers a moral feeling by seeing that moral feeling enacted. In the case of Laertes, we have a young man who is told what the good life looks like. In the case of the prince, by contrast, we have a soul who is shown it. The difference, again, is not with the medium, not between plays and proverbs (for proverbs have

always been used to express vital truths). The difference is rather between truth encountered didactically and truth encountered experientially. Polonius may know all the watchwords of courtly life, but only Hamlet watches.

The great poets teach us that to truly learn something, to apprehend a reality with the whole of our being, we must not merely be told about it; we must, like Hamlet, see reality for ourselves. Here “seeing” means the whole sensorium and not just the ocular sense. With the help of the whole body, the soul directly beholds the reality at hand, contemplates it, and takes it in, and we call this event *poetica scientia*—that luminescent moment in which, John Senior explains, “we intuitively know that something is due to our experience of being.”¹

Of course, *poetica scientia*, also known as poetic knowledge, is not limited to the study of poetry. A little boy wrestles with his dog and recognizes the goodness of dog-ness. A botany student encounters the wild outline of a white oak and perceives the beauty of nature’s forms. A Danish prince watches an actor and weeps over his life. So on and so on. This is an idea for teachers to take to the bank. Deep education, learning by looking, drops its taproot into the soil of the soul and turns the mind to the essences of things—trees, songs, heroes, chemicals, theorems—so we can see their nature firsthand. Perhaps this is what the great Charlotte Mason meant when she insisted that all genuine education must be “literary”—not that all learning should take place in the form of verse, but that all learning must possess the poetic

soul which causes a student to see.²

Polonius may not have worn tweed, and he may not have shopped at Oliver Peoples. Still, it is too bad that he cared more about the stylish catchphrases of courtiers than the precious, unmediated glimpse of wisdom. For as Josef Pieper so brilliantly observes, “In seeing for ourselves, we are achieving more contact with reality and are in greater possession of reality than when we espouse knowledge based on hearing.”³ At the end of the day, our deepest moral affections belong to the world of the spiritual sight.