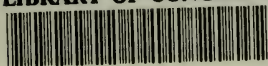


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Toleration is possible only to men of large information.—SCHILLER.

What was the Religion of Shakespeare?

A Lecture Delivered Before the Independent Religious Society, Orchestra Hall, Michigan Avenue and Adams St., Chicago, Illinois, Sunday, at 11 A. M.



By
M. M. MANGASARIAN

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Who am I?—A mortal seek-
ing knowledge!

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What was the Religion of Shakespeare?

It is by observing the frequency and emphasis with which certain views and expressions occur and reoccur in an author, and the consistency with which they are given the preference, that we may be able to generalize as to his philosophy or religion. As Shakespeare's works are neither a treatise on theology nor a manual of philosophy, our only means of discovering his attitude toward the problems of life and destiny is by reading, as it were, between the lines.

A great mind can neither sophisticate nor suppress its earnest convictions. This does not mean that anyone with earnest convictions must necessarily be a propagandist. To think and to let think, represents a state of mind which is entirely consistent, both with enthusiasm and toleration, if not with proselytism. We believe that Shakespeare has unmistakably expressed himself on the subject of religion, as he has on that of patriotism, for instance, but without any missionary zeal, which fact has led not a few students of his works to the conclusion that of all the great poets Shakespeare is the only one without a religion.

Green, in his *Short History of England*, writes, that "It is difficult to say whether Shakespeare had any religious faith or no." But this is not a fair way of stating the problem. If by "religious faith" Green means the Anglican, the Presbyterian, or the Unitarian faith, then it is true that we do not know to which of these he nominally belonged, and it does not much matter. But if he means that we have no means of knowing whether or not he accepted the Christian or any other

supernatural interpretation of the Universe, the allegation is not true, so far as we are able to judge. It is difficult to read any one of Shakespeare's tragedies without perceiving that its author is an anti-supernaturalist. In Shakespeare this world is all there is, and it is what men have made it. It is in terms of naturalism, pure and simple, that Shakespeare states the problem of human existence.

It is no objection to this to say that there are ghosts, witches, and apparitions on his stage, and that therefore he was a believer in the supernatural. We must not confound the machinery of the stage with the stage-master. Even Hamlet, when he exclaims that he sees his dead father and Horatio asks him "Where?" answers: "In my mind's eye;" which shows how little the appurtenances of the theatre of those times affected the atmosphere of the author's mind. This same Hamlet who in popular *parlance* has beheld his dead father "revisit the glimpses of the moon," declares in the language of his own sober thought, that the beyond is an "undiscovered country from whose bourne *no traveler returns*." And if Macbeth, unlike Hamlet, puts faith in the supernatural, he does so to his own hurt. But even Macbeth recovers his senses sufficiently to exclaim:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense;

and again:

Infected be the air whereon they ride;
And damned all those that trust them!

If it be objected that Shakespeare's hostility to the supernatural is confined to what might be called the *bogus* variety, and not to the kind that is true, we reply that there is no evidence in the plays that Shakespeare ever made such a distinction. Without anywhere intimating that he believed in one kind of the supernatural and not in another (the kind people believe in is generally their own, and the kind they deny, that

of somebody else), Shakespeare expresses his opinion of those who accept the supernatural in no uncertain way:—

Look how the world's poor people are amazed
At apparitions, signs, and prodigies,
Whereon with fearful eyes they long have gaz'd
Infusing them with dreadful prophecies.*

Having just told us that "It is difficult to say whether Shakespeare had any religious faith or no," Green intimates that Shakespeare was an agnostic, and probably a disciple of Montaigne. If he was an agnostic, it is not true that we do not know "whether he had any religious faith or no." We can be sure that he was without religious faith of any kind, using the word "religious" in the sense of the supernatural—if he preferred agnosticism to the creeds. He was an agnostic, it is to be supposed, because he could not conscientiously profess any of the "religious faiths" of his day.

But to be an agnostic does not mean to be without a religion; it only means to be without a revealed religion. This very agnosticism, as the expression of a courageous, honest and rational protest against revealed religions, is a religion—more manly, certainly, than the popular religions, because while the latter are imitative to a large extent, the former is unconstrained and personal.

Those who say unqualifiedly that Shakespeare had no religion, as Prof. Santayana of Harvard University, does, must mean by religion a recognition of the supernatural, which we submit is to make a partisan use *only* of the word religion. Wishing to prove the absence of religion in Shakespeare, Prof. Santayana writes: "If we were asked to select one monument of human civilization that should survive to some future age, or be transported to another planet to bear witness to the inhabitants thereof what we have been upon earth, we should probably choose the works of Shakespeare. In them we recognize the truest portrait and best memorial of man." After this magnificent tribute to the universality of Shakespeare,

*Venus and Adonis.

Prof. Santayana proceeds to qualify his statement by deploring what he calls "the absence of religion in Shakespeare." He fears that if Shakespeare were our sole interpreter, "the archæologists of that future age, or the cosmographers of that other part of the heavens, after conscientious study of our Shakespearian autobiography, would misconceive our life in one important respect. They would hardly understand that man had had a religion." This fear is unfounded. It may surely be learned from Shakespeare that "man had had" many superstitions, and also that there was in our world the worship of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Such a report would not leave the inhabitants of a strange planet in the dark as to whether or not "man had had a religion." Let us make this point a little clearer: In Shakespeare we find both the religion of superstition—addicted to the belief in ghosts, spirits, miracles, visions, and revelations past and present—and the religion of sense, namely, the elimination of the supernatural from human affairs, and the exalting of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth, with Truth as the greatest of the three, as the highest possible ideals of man. But, evidently, Prof. Santayana does not believe that it is possible to leave out the supernatural from religion and still have a religion. "But for Shakespeare, in the matter of religion," writes Santayana, "the choice lay between Christianity and nothing. He chose nothing." In our opinion Shakespeare chose something which was more in accord with the concensus of the competent, though opposed to the prejudices of the populace, namely: the rationalist attitude in the presence of life and death. And why is not this attitude as much entitled to be called a philosophy and a religion as the theological?

Would it not be unfair to say, for instance, that Tennyson's *The Coming Church of Humanity* is no church at all, because it is not after the fashion of orthodoxy:

I dreamed that stone by stone I reared a sacred fane,
A temple, neither pagod, mosque, nor church,
But loftier, simpler, always open-doored

To every breath from heaven; and truth and peace
And love and justice came and dwelt therein:

—or to contend that Goethe was profane and irreligious because the verse in which he sums up his philosophy omits all reference to the essentials of revealed religion?

In the Entire, the Good, the Beautiful resolve to live—
Wouldst fashion for thyself a seemly life.
Then fret not over what is past and gone;
And spite of all thou may'st have lost behind,
Yet act as if thy life were just begun.

The religion of not a few of the best minds has been of the above type; and surely, to a reasonable man the Catholic who denies that the Protestant is a Christian, or the Trinitarian who excommunicates the Unitarian is not more sectarian than the philosopher who denies that Goethe, Tennyson, Voltaire, or Shakespeare, had any religion at all because they did not have *his* religion.

The German critic, Gervinius, on the other hand, expresses the opinion that Shakespeare was silent on religion "because his platform was not a pulpit." But it was a very narrow view to take of religion, to intimate that outside the pulpit religion is an intruder. If religion is one's philosophy of life, it is at home everywhere, but if it is only one's beliefs concerning dogmas and rites, then the pulpit is its exclusive sphere. Shakespeare was silent on religion of the kind Gervinius has in mind, not because "his platform was not a pulpit," but because he had no such religion to express. A man's religion is his philosophy of life, in accordance with which he shapes his conduct and interprets human destiny, and surely Shakespeare was not without such a working-religion.

The position of W. J. Birch, the English parliamentarian who writes from the Christian standpoint, appears to us more consistent. He believes that Shakespeare was not at all silent on religion, in the Christian or supernatural sense of the word, but demonstrably antagonistic to it. He then produces passage after passage to show Shakespeare's positive dislike for

such fundamental tenets of revealed religion, as the doctrines of providence, the Fall of Man, the Holy Sacrament, the Word of God, Salvation, the Church, the Priesthood, etc. Birch denounces Shakespeare because he was not a Christian; because "not only the details, but the essentials, also, of Christianity are the themes of his flippancy." He infers further, from the companions of Shakespeare—Marlowe, Green, Raleigh, Beaumont and Fletcher; and from the books he read—Lucretius, Plutarch, Lucian, Montaigne and Bruno—that he could not have been a Christian, as no follower of Jesus Christ could take any interest in such profane writers.

Replying to those who quote the Will of Shakespeare to prove his piety, Birch says that the Will is not in the poet's handwriting; that the signature, alone, was his, the rest being the customary form of legal documents drawn by lawyers for such occasions. The real sympathies of Shakespeare, Mr. Birch thinks, may be inferred from such lines as the following:—

An idiot holds his bauble for a God. *

and again :

By that same God, *what God soe'er it be,* *

—which seems to imply, according to this Christian critic of Shakespeare, that there are as many Gods as there are fancies.

The reason which Mr. Birch assigns for the indifference of Shakespeare's contemporaries to his works and fame was his non-Christian teachings, which made him rather an object of distrust and fear than of admiration. The world of his day was religious, says Mr. Birch, and, therefore, it was glad enough to forget Shakespeare and remember the men who had left monuments of piety behind. The opposition of the religious element is thus given as one of the reasons for the absence of any recognition of his genius and the oblivion to which he seems to have been condemned before a less pious

* Titus Andronicus.

or puritanic age discovered with ecstasy the wealth and glory of his thousand souls. Milton's joyous exclamation echoes the gratitude of the intellectual world:

Thou, in our love and astonishment
Hast found a life-long monument.

But the majority of the apologists of supernaturalism, appreciating the value of Shakespeare as an ally, have stoutly claimed him as a Christian believer. Bishop Wordsworth has written a voluminous work to show how much of the Bible there is in Shakespeare. Mr. George Brandies, with much justice, calls this pious bishop's book "unreadable." Another Christian interpreter of Shakespeare offers the following apology for the poet's seeming indifference to the tenets of orthodox religion: "Doubts have been entertained as to Shakespeare's religious belief, because *few* or *no* notices of it occur in his works. This ought to be attributed to a *tender* and *delicate reserve* about holy things, rather than to inattention or neglect."

The above shows how indispensable to the interests of Christian doctrine Shakespeare's approval of them had come to be regarded by the later Christians. His was too great and shining a name not to have it listed on their side, and so was invented "a tender and delicate reserve" on the part of the poet, to explain his open protests against their creeds, which they mildly call his failure to take "notice" of them.

Others, again, have written lengthy arguments to prove that the immortal poet was a devout Catholic, an orthodox Calvinist, a loyal Anglican, and so forth. The man who in his lifetime was associated with Marlowe and his school, and who was vehemently denounced by the exponents of religion in that day—the Puritans—is today hailed by the descendants of these same Puritans as the honor and glory of their faith. But this change of heart is a purely sentimental one. It is, as already intimated, the increasing *eclat* of Shakespeare's name and fame which has made him desirable as a coreligionist. Already, even Thomas Paine is being claimed as a fellow-

believer. Mr. Brooke Hereford writes that if he, the author of the *Age of Reason*, were living now, he would join the Unitarian Church. It is not, however, by consulting our own necessities that we find out the religion of another. We may all wish that Shakespeare believed just as we do, and that he was upon our side of the question, but could our wish be any evidence in a matter of this kind?

The real attitude of Shakespeare toward revealed religion will be learned by observing, as we stated above, the frequency and consistency with which certain expressions appear and reappear in his works. An author's intimate beliefs may be ascertained by observing the prevailing mood of his mind, the atmosphere his characters breathe in, and the more or less permanent moulds into which his thoughts flow.

"That is alone to be called a man's opinion," writes Shaftesbury, "which is, of any other, the most habitual to him, and occurs upon most occasions." To the same effect are the words of Sir Bulwer Lytton, quoted by W. J. Birch in his *Philosophy of Shakespeare*: "In the mind of man there is always a resemblance to his works. His heroes may not be like himself, but they are like certain qualities which belong to him. The sentiments he utters are his at the moment; if you find them *predominate* in all his works, they predominate in his mind."

We may illustrate the truth of the above remark by an example from Moliere, the "Shakespeare of France," as he has often been called. In a conversation between a beggar and a citizen, the beggar is asked what he considers the object of life.

"To pray God for the good people who give me alms," he answers.

"Ah, you pass your time in praying to God! In that case you ought to be very much at your ease," says the philosopher citizen.

"Alas! sir," replies the beggar, "I often have not what to eat."

"That can not be," protests the citizen, "God would not leave those to die of hunger who pray to him morning and

night. Come, here's a pound; but I give it you for the love of *humanity*."

It is not possible for anyone who believed in orthodox catholicism to express with such emphasis and lucidity a sentiment like the above. Moliere could never have placed the praying mendicant in the light he does, nor invoked the name of *humanity* to a man who did all his begging in the name of the deity, had he been a consistent Catholic. Equally conclusive are the following Shakespearian lines in one of the historical plays, on the denominational sympathies of the great poet: King John instructs the Cardinal to bear this message to the Pope of Rome:—

Tell him this tale; and from the mouth of England
Add this much more,—that no Italian priest
Shall tithe or toll in our dominions;
So tell the Pope, all reverence set apart
To him and his usurped authority.

And when the believing King Philip protests against what he calls "blasphemy," King John returns in words which leave not a shadow of doubt as to Shakespeare's positive distrust of Catholicism:—

Though you and all the Kings of Christendom
Are led so grossly by this meddling priest,
Dreading the curse that money may buy out;
And, by the merit of vile gold, dross, dust,
Purchase corrupted pardon of a man,
Who in that sale sells pardon from himself;
Though you and all the rest, so grossly led,
This juggling witchcraft with revenue cherish;
Yet I, alone, alone do me oppose
Against the Pope, and count its friends my foes.

In the same way Shakespeare's attitude toward the Puritans of his day is decisively shown in his frequent references to them, of which the following is a fair specimen: "Though honesty be no Puritan, yet it will do no hurt."

Even more final than the above is Shakespeare's rejection

of the idea of providence, which is the nerve of supernaturalism. When Miranda, a young, innocent girl, observes from the shore a ship, with its freight of human lives, sinking, lashed mercilessly by the blind and unfeeling elements, she exclaims:—

Had I been any God of power, I would
Have sunk the sea within the earth, or e'er
It should the good ship so have swallowed, and
The freighting souls within her.

Only a little less decisive is Shakespeare's repudiation of all "other-help," and his recommendation of self-help, which makes ninety-nine per cent of the belongings of the popular religions superfluous:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
Which we ascribe to Heaven.

Again Shakespeare writes:—

In religion,
What damned error, but some sober brow
Will bless it and approve it with a text.

We can imagine how a man who, kept apart from the great theological interest of the day, could make the above comment; but for a partisan of any one of the sects, such a characterization of the folly and wickedness of making a number of Bible texts the occasion for endless wrangles and bloodshed would have been impossible, for the very cogent reason that in condemning the practice of resorting to Scripture as the court of last appeal in all matters of religion, he would have undermined his own position. Such a passage as the above illustrates with what scant sympathy the leading mind of that age contemplated the warfare of rival faiths. And when it is remembered that what heated the religious sects, the one against the other, were subjects concerning which no one possessed any knowledge, we will appreciate Hamlet's amazement that we should make such fools of ourselves:—

So horribly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls.

A further condemnation of the claims of religious organizations that they possess a Revelation which answers definitely and finally man's questions concerning the here and the hereafter, and a recommendation of the scientific attitude of modesty and openness of mind to fresh knowledge, is found in the lines, so frequently quoted, but with little understanding of its import:—

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Revelation may be closed, the Bibles and creeds may have no further use for study and investigation, but for a man of the rationality of Shakespeare, no revelation, no Bible, no creed, approached anywhere near covering the ever widening realm of truth. The books of the gods are sealed. Shakespeare believed in the open book.

Shakespeare's belief in the religion of Humanity is also shown by his sympathy with goodness irrespective of the race, creed, or country which produces it. He could admire a pagan for his virtues despite the teaching of the catechism which condemns the non-Christian world to the tortures of hell. Only a man of the sanity and chastened sympathies of Shakespeare could speak of a Roman skeptic in the following exalted tone:

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him, that nature might stand up,
And say to all the world, "This was a man!"

His approval also of the philosopher's behavior in the presence of death, as distinguished from the believer's dogmatism, is shown in the parting scene between Cassius and his great friend, Brutus:

For whether we shall meet again I know not.
Therefore our everlasting farewell take.
Forever and forever farewell, Cassius!
If we do meet again, why, we shall smile;
If not, why, then this parting was well made.

It has been suggested that the above does not show Shakespeare's own intellectual attitude toward the beyond, for he is only reporting the sentiments which such a character as Brutus entertained. In other words, it is one of Shakespeare's characters, not Shakespeare himself, who is philosophising. But it is curious that in Plutarch's history, from which our poet borrowed freely for this play, Brutus acknowledged a future state, and is positive of his future reward. "I gave up my life for my country in the Ides of March, for the which I shall live in another more glorious world," Plutarch reports Brutus to have said. Shakespeare's changing this dogmatic assurance concerning a future life to the philosophic attitude of unconcern shows conclusively which way his own sympathies inclined.

To further clinch the point, that Shakespeare is here speaking his own thought and not merely inventing thoughts suitable to his pagan characters, let us quote a stanza from his Sonnets which, it is admitted, embody the poet's own philosophy. It will be seen that he is thoroughly imbued with the Lucretian, or the scientific thought, of man and nature:

When I consider every thing that grows
Holds in perfection but a little moment;
That this huge state presenteth nought but show
Whereon the stars in secret influence comment.

And what is true of nature is true also of man, notwithstanding his self-exaltation:

When I perceive that men as plants, increase,
Cheered and checked even by selfsame sky,
Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
And wear their brave state out of memory.

Yet this transitoriness of man, instead of diminishing, enhances his value, and makes love, friendship and truth all the more precious. Life would not have been so great a gift, if it were unending. Love, the greatest of all blessings, shines upon the dark brow of death "like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's

ear." It is the thought of death, of separation, which creates attachments and friendships inexpressibly sweet.

Then the conceit of this *inconstant* stay
Set you most rich in youth before my sight.

Of course there are also many expressions in Shakespeare which a Catholic may cite to prove that Shakespeare was a faithful child of the church, or a Protestant to show that the greatest mind of England was on his side, but the context of Shakespeare, it must be admitted, is unreservedly on the side of the non-supernatural and the rationalistic interpretation of life.

When we come to examine the construction of Shakespeare's plays, we shall find that it is as decisively along rationalistic lines as the atmosphere which permeates them. Gods and ghosts fleet across his stage, but they have no perceptible influence upon the order or drift of events in Shakespeare's world. The center round which Shakespeare makes the universe revolve is—man! This represents a radical departure from theology. The change from the contemplation of God to the study of man is the Renaissance in a nut-shell.

Shakespeare, as the great Renaissance poet, lifted this world into the importance which the next world had usurped, and urged men to reclaim the prerogatives which they had, in fear and servility, deeded away to their gods.

Study, for instance, *Romeo and Juliet*, and it will be seen that the entire story, beginning with the rosy dawn in which love and youth met, to the noon-day storm which swept the unhappy lovers to their graves, is conceived, created and presented without the remotest reference to a divine providence as a factor in human affairs. Everything happens in a natural way, and from natural causes. Romeo's rashness and Juliet's impatience leave room for no mysteries as to their fate. There may be, or there may not be, a God, but to explain this tragedy it is not necessary either to postulate or to deny his existence. Shakespeare steers clear of the occult powers that are supposed to preside over human destiny, and never once does he

cross their paths or enter the circle of their influence. Consider, for example, the conduct of his Romeo and Juliet in the presence of death. Much is made of the death bed scene in religious literature. People are supposed to turn their thoughts heavenward in that hour, and to show anxiety about their souls. It is then, we are told, that a sense of the world to come takes irresistible possession of the mind. The last words of the dying are recalled to show how, upon the brink of the grave, as the earthly sun is sinking, the heavenly lights begin to appear. But Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet confront death without any thought of a future reunion, which is very remarkable considering their youth and their fondness for one another. It almost betrays a deliberate effort on the part of Shakespeare to prevent these ardent lovers, dying ere the budding rose of love had opened, to even dream of a life beyond where they may forever live and love. Nothing could be a clearer indication of Shakespeare's intellectual freedom from both the phraseology and method of theology. Romeo knows of no other paradise than his Juliet, while to the latter, where Romeo is, there is heaven. This is frank, honest, free, but it is not how the Mohammedan, the Christian or the Jewish religions expect the dying to express themselves. Romeo's address to death ignores all revealed religions:

Come, unsavory guide!
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
The dashing rocks, thy seasick weary bark!
Here's to my love! * * * Thus with a kiss I die.

Surely this is not the language of the believer. Nor has Romeo any illusions about death:

Oh here
Will I set up my everlasting rest;
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh.

And to think that Romeo had a Catholic priest for a friend! But it shows how clean Shakespeare's mind was from "such

fantasies * * * more than cool reason ever comprehends.”*

And when Romeo takes his farewell of Juliet, his thought is equally free from fancies :

Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace! and lips, O you,
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss,
A dateless bargain to engrossing death.

Nothing could be more un-Catholic and un-Protestant than this parting of Shakespeare's best lovers. Juliet, who has often knelt before the priest, dies without one appeal to religion for comfort or support. She has no faith, now, in the hour of her greatest need, in prayer, crucifix, Bible or church. "Go, get thee hence," she cries to the friar when he approaches to minister to her in her crushing sorrow. She follows Romeo without uttering one word about God, or the future. In the same spirit, "The rest is silence," murmurs Hamlet as he sinks to the ground, and we may announce with considerable assurance that the words are Shakespeare's as much as they are Hamlet's. †

But the naturalism of the poet as opposed to the supernaturalism of the religion of his day is further brought out by the free and uninterrupted operation in his plays of the law of action and reaction, of cause and consequence. It is no angel of heaven, as we read of in Scripture, that exalts or strikes down the people in Shakespeare's world; but by their own acts they rise or fall. Intemperance brings Timon of Athens to the dust; folly ruins Othello; insolence cuts Coriolanus' career short; ambition and superstition strangle Macbeth; hypocrisy subjects Angelo to the contempt of his fellows; hatred and revenge blight the life of Shylock. Heaven plays no part on Shakespeare's stage. Man reaps as he sows, and no gods are necessary to enforce cause and effect. If Nature's laws defy the power of man, do they bend or break when gods command? Pride, shame, intemperance, greed, hate—these can never lead to happiness, all the gods to the

* *Midsummer's Night's Dream.*

† We are neither recommending nor condemning Shakespeare's attitude toward the question of another life, but simply endeavoring to represent it.

contrary. Nor can all the powers of heaven and hell turn self-restraint, moderation, justice, contentment, courage, love and peace, into demons of hell. Nature is sound; Nature is all-sufficient, and in Shakespeare Nature occupies the stage so completely as to leave neither room nor necessity for any other power.

Nothing is so certain and so effective in Shakespeare as his criticism of the ways of Providence. When Othello, for instance, awakens to a sense of his irreparable loss—when the pity of Desdemona's death, like the incoming tide of the sea, sweeps over him and takes his breath away, he gasps out these significant words with his eyes searching the abysses of space over his head: "Methinks there should now be a huge eclipse of sun and moon, and the affrighted earth should yawn at altercation." He can not understand how "any God" could look down with unmoistened eyes upon such a tragedy. What does God do with his powers if he will not interfere to save men such as Othello from committing ignorantly so heinous a crime? Again he stammers out, "Are there no stones in heaven but what serve for the thunder?" Is God only a spectacular being? Is all he can do to thunder in the clouds and dazzle with his lightning? Where is the God of help? Is he real? Does he exist?

To make effective this indifference or helplessness of the gods, Shakespeare contrasts their stolid unconcern with human sympathy. Emilia, the wife of the man who poisoned Othello's mind, breaks into a heart-rending lamentation when she learns of the death of her innocent mistress, which shames the silent and tearless gods:

I'll kill myself for grief,

she sobs as she sees stretched at her feet the victim of human folly and crime. How eloquent, and how melting are these words! She does not care to live if she can not protect innocence and virtue, beauty and goodness against hate and envy. And this from a woman whose character was not above reproach! How admirable is the seething passion in her

human soul compared with the dumbness of the almighty gods!

By the mouth of another frail woman Shakespeare passes the same criticism upon the current conceptions of divine providence. When young Juliet learns that Romeo has killed her cousin, for which rash act he has been banished for life, thus blighting her dearest hopes, she cries :

Can Heaven be so envious?

Later on, when her own parents persecute her and drive her to a desperate experiment with death, and all for the purpose of wresting a little happiness out of life, she exclaims :

Is there no pity sitting in the clouds?

Finally, when all her hopes are turned to ashes, and she realizes the bitterness of her fate, she sobs :

“Alack, alack that Heaven should practice such stratagems upon so soft a subject as myself.”

This is a strong criticism of the popular fancy of a “Father in Heaven” who broods over his children as a hen over her young. Unlike the preachers of the conventional faiths, Shakespeare sought to divest people’s minds of dreams and fairy stories, that they may learn to cope with reality. This is the answer to the charge that the critic takes away people’s comfort when he takes away their “religion.” On the contrary, he helps them to replace the shadow with the substance. Men will do more for themselves and their world if they realize that if they do not, no other power will. Man becomes a god when the place is vacated by the idols.

But if there is still any uncertainty about Shakespeare’s religious philosophy, we recommend the careful perusal of the scene in *Macbeth* between Macduff, Malcolm and Rosse. The latter has just informed Macduff that the tyrant has put his entire household to death :

Macduff.—My children, too?

Rosse.—Wife, children, servants, all that could be found.

Macduff.—My wife killed too?

Rosse.—I have said.

Macduff.—All my pretty ones? Did you say all? * * *
All? What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam, at one
fell swoop?

Then follow these significant words of the bereaved and
wronged husband:

Did Heaven look on,
And would not take their part?

No wonder the sentiment expressed in the above was considered blasphemous by early Christian critics of Shakespeare. To a believer in God's right to do as He pleases, and in man's duty to bow humbly and uncomplainingly to the hand that smites him, the question which Macduff asks is both impious and wicked, for he openly upbraids Providence for its non-interference, if he does not categorically deny its existence. It is not probable that an honest adherent or even respecter of the current religious teaching of his day could have penned so bold a protest against the popular faith. "Where," Shakespeare seems to ask, "is the Heavenly Father whose tender mercies are over all his children?" What does God do for man? In what sense would a mother and her children, foully murdered, have been worse off, if there had been no Providence? And in what way were they benefited by the existence of a Heavenly Father?

In this same play, the poet has once more described his ideal man, and there is more of the pagan about him than of the Christian. Living in a community which regarded faith as the greatest of virtues, without which no amount of moral excellence could avail anything, Shakespeare draws a picture of his saint which is the very antithesis of Christian ideals. Malcolm asks for the respect of his fellows for his character, not for his religion.

Never was forsworn;
Scarcely have coveted what was mine own;
At no time broke my faith; would not betray
The devil to his fellow; and delight
No less in truth, than life.

The concluding line—*and delight no less in truth than life*—we have no hesitation in pronouncing as the most beautiful sentiment in Shakespeare. Malcolm says not a word about his Christian beliefs, without which “no one can be saved.”

Once more we call attention to the fact that there are in Shakespeare, as there are in Voltaire, nearly all the terms of church and creed, but the underlying philosophy of the poet is, if we may depend upon the above extracts and examples, unequivocally rationalistic. Shakespeare was a free-thinker, in that he interrogates the popular faith about God, and the hereafter, and suggests an order of the universe which is the very negation of the supernatural. His indifference to the fundamentals of the Christian faith, then, is not due to the fact that he is not a preacher, as Gervinius suggests, nor because he preferred “nothing” to Christianity, as Santayana concludes, or because of his “tender and delicate reserve about holy things,” as Charles Knight, one of the most enthusiastic admirers of Shakespeare suggests, but to his utter want of intellectual sympathy with the religious thought of his day, and to the fact that he had worked out a religion of his own, based on the natural virtues—an ethical religion of Humanity, with its commandments written, not on parchments, but in the blood of the race.

There is undoubtedly a religious atmosphere in Shakespeare, but it is the religion of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful; without dogma and without miracle, and as comprehensive, as true to nature, and as closely in harmony with the rationalistic interpretation of the universe as his own drama. Has not Goethe, in defining his own religion, defined also that of Shakespeare? “Man is born,” writes Goethe, “not to solve the problem of the universe, but to find out where the problem begins, and then to restrain himself *within the limits of the comprehensible*.” This is precisely what the great Englishman, whom Goethe so sincerely admired, did. He “restrained himself within the limits of the comprehensible,” which is a beautiful way of saying that he was practical and not speculative, scientific in spirit and method, and not the-

ological. He abstained from the unprofitable pursuit of the gods, whom the Bible says in one place, "no man can find out by searching," and devoted himself to the study of man and his world. This is the religion of sense. There is everything in Shakespeare about man, and every bit of it is serious; but there is nothing of any consequence in Shakespeare about God or gods. It is a matter of regret to the theologian that the great poet should have permitted the secular interests of life to engage his exclusive thought, but we rejoice in the fact that Shakespeare could not be tempted into the dusty and winding paths of theology which lead nowhere.

As truthfully as the great Voltaire, the glorious Shakespeare, poet, philosopher, historian, could say of the founders of isms, and the inventor and maker of gods, "they have troubled the earth, and I have consoled it."

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