Shakespeare and The Tempest*

By Francis Neilson

There are many biographical and critical works about our poet and his plays. They have come from authors of nearly every country in Europe as well as America, and each year a new one is added to the long list. For over fifty years I have read many of their volumes. One of the first to fascinate me was William Shakespeare, A Critical Study, by George Brandes. The translation was first published in 1898, but my copy bore the date of 1901. It was left behind in England when I departed for America in 1915. The loss was incalculable to me, for upon nearly every page I had set down marginal notes.

My present copy bears the date of 1914. It was the eighth edition of the work. To say that it took the English scholars by storm is putting it mildly. The Athenaeum said: "No other single work on Shakespeare includes so much, and so much that is valuable." The Spectator called it "a great book."

It is all that, even though we know much more about Shakespeare now than scholars did two generations ago. Brandes startled many of our sleepy critics of dramatic literature when he said:

Shakespeare stands co-equal with Michael Angelo in pathos and with Cervantes in humor. This of itself gives us a certain standard for measuring the height and range of his powers.¹

Since the publication of Brandes' famous study, brilliant schools of Elizabethan scholars have contributed invaluable treatises upon the plays as they are read; the sources from which Shakespeare took his plots, and, also, the hundred and one problems concerned with authorship, style, versification and characterization. But not one of any consequence treats the plays from the standpoint of the man who has to produce them. The commentaries I have read make their appeal directly to a reader. Hence, the many errors that arise, such as those that I have pointed out in my humble contributions: Hamlet and Shakespeare and A Study of Macbeth for the Stage.²

² These books were privately printed and distributed in 1950 and 1952 respectively. Many copies were given to public and university libraries throughout the United States.

In dealing with *The Tempest*, I intend to consider it as a piece to be performed in a theater, where the educated congregate together with Tom, Dick and Harry. It is there the folk of the pit and the gallery (groundlings, if you prefer the term) see the piece with those who can afford a stall.

If the play under consideration is to be understood by the scholar in the library and the stage director in the theater it is necessary to go very deeply into the life of the author, the creator of Prospero. The reason for this is that critics have decided it is the only piece by Shakespeare which gives an insight into the mind of the poet. Some see in it an autobiographical trend, which, of course, would never be noticed by an auditor.

But this idea is important also because it leads us to wonder why, after the amazing achievement of writing the last tragedies, he turned his mind to a play of redemption. We might ask ourselves how much of Shakespeare is in Prospero, and in what way do their ideas resemble each other? We cannot possibly fathom this surprising change in thought unless we know more of the history of the author than our Shakespearian scholars have presented to us. To my mind, there is a world of observation and experience that lies behind the writing of this strange, eventful story, and which cannot be dissociated from the period in which he and his parents lived. The events—economic, political and religious—that took place in England from the time of the coming of the Tudors until the advent of the Stuarts, were so calamitous that no thoughtful person, whether or not he was able to read or write, could be impervious to it; for it affected every class in the kingdom and brought about horrors worse than war.

It is my purpose in this study to show the spiritual effect upon Shakespeare of the great changes in the law and custom of the land, which had taken place in the lives of his grandfather, his father and himself. I hope to illustrate how these were indelibly imprinted upon his mind when he was a pupil at the grammar school in Stratford.

The plan of this study has intentionally been a fluid one, in which the reader may find some repetitions and digressions. However, I feel I have something to say that may be of interest, and I shall present facts about the Tudor period that have been overlooked by many of the critics.

I

The Approaches of Critic and of Producer

The Arden Edition of *The Tempest*, with an introduction by Frank Kermode, is one of the most elaborate studies of the play I have read.

The ground he covers is so extensive, and the abundance of detail so vast, that it is not easy to absorb it all in one reading. Yet, the thought crosses one’s mind, if Shakespeare were with us today, would he not be mightily puzzled to know what to make of it all? For there were no library critics in his day. He wrote the plays to be acted before an audience, either at court or on the boards of the Globe or some other theater. They were presented with costume and properties, but with little attempt at scenery, such as that provided by modern productions.

It should be remembered that the audience saw the actors in action and heard them speak. Ninety-five per cent of them would not know anything about the technical construction of the lines, whether they were poetry or prose; for the spoken line is something quite different from that which is read in the study. The reader with the book in his hand sees at once the form, because his eye is cast over the page; but there is no page for a man sitting in the theater.

I have known actors who have so transmogrified Shakespeare’s verse that it has lost all poetic rhythm. Henry Irving, in *The Merchant of Venice* and in *Macbeth*, would break a sentence with a pause to cast a look or to make a gesture. Sometimes he would throw in a “Bah!” At other times, to add touches to the character, he would cough slightly or twist his head or limbs, to emphasize the peculiar nature of the part. Indeed, it may be said that all these acting tricks, not set down in the stage directions of the plays, were hallmarks of the actor’s technique of presenting his own version of the character.

What did he know or care about sources or about the different forms of verse, as the expert in poetry understands them? What did he know of iambic pentameter or even a verse of only five measures? I have known and worked with many of the leading actors of the past sixty years, but I do not recollect discussing with one the forms of verse used by Shakespeare in his plays. Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson and Walter Hampden were probably the only men I knew who were inclined to go more deeply into a play as a whole than those who studied only a part to be performed.

It is a pity we know so little about the methods of rehearsal of these plays when they were first presented. A prompt book made by Shakespeare has not yet been discovered, and this fact makes us wonder from what script the actors studied their parts. Was the play as a whole read to the company by the author, and afterwards, did each actor write out his own part, with cues, from the manuscript? That would be an arduous business and take a lot of time. It certainly could not have been done in the case
of *Twelfth Night*, if Dr. Leslie Hotson’s story4 of its production is to be accepted, for it was written and produced in great haste. Therefore, we can imagine what a busy time the prompter must have had at the first performance. We find it difficult to visualize what took place, then, during the rehearsals of a new play.

In Heminge and Condell’s First Folio, the meager stage directions do not answer the purpose of a prompt book. Such instructions as we find in the plays—entrances and exits, music cues, thunder and lightning—are only what a stage novice would mark. In the prompt book of a skilled producer the positions of the actors in the scene would call for precise instructions, and add perhaps ten or a dozen pages to the script.

When I began as an actor, stage managers were rough-and-ready gentlemen, and I never remember one reading a play to the company. Parts were distributed to each actor and actress, and sometimes they did not know the plot of the play, or the denouement, until they had rehearsed the whole of it once. Even then, they were by no means letter perfect, and weeks of repetition were necessary before some of them grasped the nature of the roles they had to play. Indeed, in many plays that I produced, actors learned the dialogue at rehearsal while acting the intricate business of the scene.

Only once have I attended a rehearsal at which each actor held the complete play in his hand. That was at the Schauspielhaus in Munich, when I was invited to see the first performance of Maeterlinck’s *Monna Vanna*. It was a novel experience for me, for I had never produced a play that had been published.

Nowadays any company desiring to perform a play of Shakespeare has no difficulty in providing each actor with a copy. In some cases it is possible, through French’s editions of the plays, to use prompt copies that have done service for the productions given by famous actors.

To think back to the days when Shakespeare introduced a new play to his company calls for the imagination of a highly qualified stage director. He stands in a different sphere of art from that of the literary expert, who gives us erudite essays on the source, the construction, and the literary technique of his plays.

The reader must not think for a moment that I do not value highly most of the critical analyses that have enriched the literature on Shakespeare. My wish is only to mark definitely the difference—the wide one—that lies between the work of the Shakespearian expert and that of the

stage director. The one belongs to the library and the study; the other to
the theater, for he is to rehearse the actors. The first appeals to a reader;
the other is conscious, first and last, that the appeal is to be made to an
auditor. Therefore, when I question the benefit of all this excellent work
of the essayists to the producer and the actor, I am merely trying to differ-
entiate clearly between the functions of the literary expert and the man
who has to produce the play.

I am prepared to admit that my intrusion into the realm of Shakespearian
scholarship may be regarded by the critics, who are purists, as arrogance on
the part of a critic who has no academic footing. It is a bold adventure
for one who, in this study, will clash with the opinion of some of the
writers who have given us invaluable information on sources, literary
 technique, and biographical information about the poet. But whether or
not a stage director, a man of the theater, is highly esteemed by the aca-
demicians, he may make an appeal to all those students who are interested
in the plays from the standpoint of the theatergoer. After all, they are the
judges of the worth of a production.

This study, then, falls into two parts: (1) a review of the social and
constitutional changes that were taking place under the Tudors and how
they molded the mind of the man who wrote The Tempest; and (2) an
analysis of the play itself, considering the technical problems of staging it
in the theater.

II
The House of Tudor

The defeat at Bosworth and death of the last king of the line of York,
in 1485, hastened the end of a period that had been in decline for nearly
a century. It was the final battle of the Wars of the Roses, the struggle
between the Houses of Lancaster and of York, and brought to the throne
of England a man of Welsh descent, who was dubbed a bastard, for no
record has been found of a marriage between his grandfather and the
widow of Henry V.

Already many changes had been wrought in the law and custom of the
land; there were more yet to come, which would be deeply and sorely felt
by the people. Much of this aspect has been neglected by the recorders,
but since the middle of the last century records have been unearthed which
were unknown to the historians of earlier periods, and from them we
gather facts that are new.

To what extent the knowledge of these changes affected the literary
and spiritual mind of Shakespeare has not been weighed as seriously as
the subject deserves. In many respects, the matter touches the question of his education. Concerning it we are now in a position to maintain that, in Stratford, there was no reason why he should have been a dull pupil. There was an excellent free grammar school open to boys, and the available literature, pagan and Christian—catalogued by some of the experts—would compare favorably with what can now be found in a small-town library.

One fact that has been overlooked by some recorders is that a Reformation was taking place in England when Martin Luther was a young boy. The revolt began within and without the Church, and it was fostered in the universities. The men who were responsible for starting this reform were the giants of learning of that day. Linacre was born some twenty years before Luther; Colet some sixteen years before; Thomas More was of the same period; and Grocyn was about thirty-seven years older than Luther. These were some of the men—all Englishmen—who were concerned in reforms within the Church, and who broke the almost sterile discipline of the schoolmen of a dying age. The reformers of the early years of Henry VII were responsible for the revival of learning, and threw the doors of knowledge open to the people themselves.

It is amazing to go through the list of works which these men brought to the notice of the English. The printing presses were busy in the principal countries of Europe. It is estimated that ten thousand editions of books and pamphlets were published in the last thirty years of the fifteenth century. This astonishing change rang the curtain down upon the last dark days of medieval restriction. Suddenly much of the literature of the past was available for any grammar school boy to study. All this was taking place about a century before William Shakespeare was born.

It is well for us to look into the history of England during the Tudor period, for in the plays there is much evidence that Shakespeare was aware of certain grave changes that have been touched upon only lightly by the historians of our time. He must have had the investigator's eye for, as we shall see, there was little of moment that took place in the towns or along the country roads that escaped his notice. His apprenticeship, during what have been called the "lost years," indicates clearly that he was born to be a historian of singular genius. One has only to read carefully Henry VI, Part I, to be convinced of this. How long he worked upon this play no one knows, but it bears the imprint of careful study. It is generally accepted by the scholars that the material was found in the Chronicles of Halle and Holinshed. And some are under the impression that he studied
these sources long before he went to London, to become known as an actor of importance.

The story told by Alan Keen and Roger Lubbock in *The Annotator* has yet to be given deep consideration by the Shakespearian experts. It tells of the discovery of a copy of Halle's *Chronicle*, thickly annotated in the margin by a hand of Shakespeare's time. I have spent much thought on the problem arising from this discovery, for I have long held the notion that Shakespeare was at heart a radical constitutionalist, and implicitly believed in all that is implied in the phrase "the law and custom of the land."

There are many passages in the plays that substantiate this idea. To him the coming of the Tudors meant much more than a mere change of reigning houses:

Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!
Comets, importing change of times and states,
Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,
And with them scourge the bad revolting stars . . . .

Another prophecy is:

Posterity, await for wretched years,
When at their mothers' moist eyes babes shall suck . . . .

These lines are in the earliest scenes he wrote, and there is, too, the first evidence of a theme that runs through several of his other plays:

. . . . Thou most usurping proditor,
And not protector, of the king or realm.

"Usurper!" To him usurpers were all bad men, no matter how great they were or how royal their blood. In another history, an early one, *King John* (1594), we find Constance, the mother of Arthur, denouncing the King:

. . . . But Fortune, O!
She is corrupted, chang'd, and won from thee:
She adulterates hourly with thine uncle John,
And with her golden hand pluck'd on France
To tread down fair respect of sovereignty,

2 *I Henry VI*, Act I, scene 3. (The quotations from all plays except *The Tempest* are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. by W. J. Craig [Oxford University Press, 1925].)
5 Because of the wide difference of opinion regarding the chronology of the plays, I have used the dates compiled by F. Madan for *The Oxford Shakespeare*, p. 1351.
And made his majesty the bawd to theirs.
France is a bawd to Fortune and King John,
That strumpet Fortune, that usurping John! 6

Who can doubt the close study Shakespeare must have given to the
history of his land, when we have in mind the dramas of her kings he
based upon the knowledge then extant? To bring convincing evidence of
this fact, I shall have to resort later to other plays which mark dynastic
changes, but the trilogy of the Plantagenets suffices for the purpose of
establishing this fact.

Can we assume, then, that Shakespeare, having read so deeply in the
chronicles of the period, was a student Prospero, searching for an Ariel who
would help him in some supernatural way to right the wrong of the time?
Supernatural it would have to be, for he had learned early the impotence
of the human being to restore order in the realm, and bring back the days
of abundant harvests for a happy people.

The memory of a period when there was peace in the land is shown
clearly in all the plays, and yet there is often a profound melancholy that
underlies the thought of what had been and the conditions of life of his
day. It is the same strain of melancholy that we find running through the
sonnets of Michelangelo, who died just about the time Shakespeare was
born. For both of them the spiritual and cultural period had passed and
could never be restored through human agency.

To my mind, Henry VI, Part I was a kind of manual, a primer-lexicon,
out of which he developed not only the history of the English dynasties,
as it was then known, but the ideas he wove into themes in many of his
plays.

Foul play, in all its detestable methods—bastardy, usurpation, sedition,
perjury and treachery—rings the changes in the scenes of these dramas of
royal dissension. The King cries out after one of the quarrels of Gloucester
and Winchester:

Believe me, lords, my tender years can tell
Civil dissension is a viperous worm. 7

And Mortimer tells Richard Plantagenet:
The first-begotten, and the lawful heir
of Edward king, the third of that descent:
During whose reign the Percies of the North,
Finding his usurpation most unjust,
Endeavour'd my advancement to the throne 8

6 King John, Act III, scene 1.
7 I Henry VI.
8 Ibid., Act II, scene 5.
Then after the patched-up quarrel which has raged between the Bishop of Winchester and the Duke of Gloucester, uncles of the King, Exeter fears the future. He knows it is only a feigned compact that has been made between them, which "will at last break out into a flame." And then he says:

And now I fear that fatal prophecy
Which in the time of Henry, nam'd the Fifth,
Was in the mouth of every sucking babe;
That Henry born at Monmouth should win all;
And Henry born at Windsor should lose all:
Which is so plain that Exeter doth wish
His days may finish ere that hapless time.9

We must remember that line: "Was in the mouth of every sucking babe." This is of vast importance, for it refers to the hearsay and legends that were passed from one hearth to another, generation after generation, by unschooled historians. These were the tales that lived in the minds of the folk. There are many examples of this in the plays, and later I shall give three or four instances of how Shakespeare used them to advantage.

The poet must have been at work upon Henry VI a few years before he wrote Love's Labour's Lost (1590), which might have been regarded at the time as a pot-boiler. Yet, what a contrast in theme and workmanship. The one, melodrama of the highest order; the other, high comedy of a quality seldom surpassed. (I use the term "melodrama" to express a type of play which was so popular in the old days of Drury Lane and the Adelphi, in which there were no songs but always incidental music.)

The division of the acts of Henry VI into many scenes has been one reason why it is seldom given. It is one of the most difficult for the producer to mount. Beerbohm Tree told me that he would have liked to make two separate plays of the first part of it.

Before we leave this play and pass on to the next stage of our thesis, I must quote one or two more passages that will help us to understand the attitude of Shakespeare's mind at that time. The King tells his uncle he always thought

It was both impious and unnatural
That such immanity and bloody strife
Should reign among professors of one faith.10

Then there is the prophecy of Henry V regarding Winchester:

\[9 \text{Ibid., Act III, scene 1.} \]
\[10 \text{Ibid., Act V, scene 1.} \]
If once he come to be a Cardinal,
He'll make his cap co-equal with the crown.\textsuperscript{11}

The aside of Winchester indicates his relations with Gloucester:

I'll either make thee stoop and bend thy knee,
Or sack this country with a mutiny.\textsuperscript{12}

The play brings to us in many scenes ghosts, spirits and witches. The first intimation we have of the use of evil spirits—fiends, as they are called in this play—occurs when Joan calls on her helpers:

Now, ye familiar spirits, that are cull'd
Out of the powerful regions under earth
Help me this once, that France may get the field.\textsuperscript{13}

This play is more than an introduction to the sort of knowledge gathered by Shakespeare in his apprenticeship days; it is a kind of handbook, which gives us an understanding of how his mind was shaped by the dynastic changes of the realm.

The difference between history and legend was not so precisely drawn then as it is today. And Shakespeare undoubtedly was familiar with the stories of the long ago as they were passed down from family to family. We are far too sophisticated now to appreciate the value of the verbal recordings of the folk. Still, myth and legend cling to superstitious minds as mussels to a rock. The people of Shakespeare's day practiced pagan rites and celebrated festivals that were as old as those of Cybele. The memories were in their blood. Dr. Margaret Murray, in her amazing chronicle of \textit{The Divine King of England},\textsuperscript{14} informs us that the Dianic cult was practiced in England down to the reign of the Stuarts. But who knows now the stories of early days, which were recounted at the hearthside—stories of times when "a woman and her babe could walk scatheless from sea to sea"; when England was under the rule of Eadwine? In many scenes of the plays Shakespeare makes us aware of what the common folk gathered concerning the doings of royalty and rebels.

Examples of how quickly the news of calamity filters down to the folk is found in several of the plays. There were no newspapers or broadcasters in the day of King John, but the rumors of the death of Arthur spread rapidly among the people at Pomfret:

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., scene 3.
\textsuperscript{14} London, Faber and Faber, 1954.
Young Arthur's death is common in their mouths;
And when they talk of him, they shake their heads
And whisper one another in the ear;
And he that speaks, doth grip the hearer's wrist—
Whilst he that hears makes fearful action,
With wrinkled brows, with nods, with rolling eyes.
I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,
The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool,
With open mouth swallowing a tailor's news;
Who, with his shears and measure in his hand,
Standing on slippers, which his nimble haste
Had falsely thrust upon contrary feet,—
Told of a many thousand warlike French,
That were embattailed and rank'd in Kent.
Another lean unwash'd artificer
Cuts off his tale and talks of Arthur's death.15

Earlier in the same scene the Bastard tells the King:

But as I travell'd hither through the land,
I find the people strangely fantasied,
Possess'd with rumours, full of idle dreams,
Not knowing what they fear, but full of fear.16

One has only to read the garden scene in Richard II to be convinced
that the common people were their own recorders. Consider this speech:

Go, bind thou up yon dangling apricocks,
Which, like unruly children, make their sire
Stoop with oppression of their prodigal weight:
Give some supportance to the bending twigs.
Go thou, and like an executioner,
Cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays,
That look too lofty in our commonwealth:
All must be even in our government.
You thus employ'd, I will go root away
The noisome weeds, that without profit suck
The soil's fertility from wholesome flowers.17

Could a more vivid description of the turmoil of the court be given by
a historian? So often it happens in the plays that the man of the workaday
world gathers information of moment, not known to his employers. Later,
in the same piece, Richard's Queen learns about the conspiracy of Boling-
broke from the gardener, who advises her:

15 King John, Act IV, scene 2.
16 Ibid.
17 Act III, scene 4.
Post you to London and you'll find it so;  
I speak no more than every one doth know.18

At this, the Queen cries out: "And am I last that knows it?"

I could quote similar instances from other scenes, but this one indicates clearly the avid mind of a gleaner who despised no source that could satisfy his hunger for what he considered to be facts.

Professor Kitson Clark, a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, in his essay, *The English Inheritance*,19 has given us examples of the persistence with which the sense of right endured in the public mind for generations. Law, in the sense of what was respected by their forefathers, was, to them, a sacred possession. Professor Clark's work is invaluable for one who is interested in studying closely the dramas I am dealing with here. He states:

Law penetrated all things, it entered into language, into thought, into Shakespeare's plays to such an extent that that has been part of the case that they were actually written by a great lawyer, and always into politics. Lawyers penetrated everywhere. They filled the government service, they advised the opponents of government, where such were bold enough to exist, they filled the House of Commons. . . . Small wonder that the Tudors were to accept the ancient law of England as a sturdy if barbarous ally. Small wonder that when the Stuarts stumbled against what most contemporary Englishmen imagined the law to be they were brought down into the dust.20

Clark recognizes, moreover, that the laws of King Edward the Confessor, in all probability, went "right back to a pre-Christian world in which for the free man there was an elaborate code of personal rights and personal obligations and a strong sense of justice."

The idea of the freedom of the individual being derived from a law of nature was the common heritage of the people in early medieval times, and our history is full of instances when the people rose in revolt against monarchs who violated their sense of what was right.

No question need be raised about Shakespeare's knowledge of the law, even in such prosaic matters as contracts, violations of municipal ordinances, or other legal business. We shall see that William, as a quick-witted boy, had many occasions to learn from his father's predicaments the jargon of lawyers and the methods of their practice.

*Port Washington, N. Y.*

20 *Pp. 26–7.*

(Continued)