PART II

APPENDIX

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SHAKESPEARE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THE WORKING CLASSES

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"Shakespeare was of us," cries Browning, in his "Lost Leader," while lamenting the defection of Wordsworth from the ranks of progress and liberalism--"Milton was for us, Burns, Shelley were with us--they watch from their graves!" There can, indeed, be no question of the fidelity to democracy of Milton, the republican pamphleteer, nor of Burns, the proud plowman, who proclaimed the fact that "a man's a man for a' that," nor of Shelley, the awakened aristocrat, who sang to such as Burns

> "Men of England, wherefore plow
> For the lords who lay ye low?"

But Shakespeare?--Shakespeare?--where is there a line in Shakespeare to entitle him to a place in this brotherhood? Is there anything in his plays that is in the least inconsistent with all that is reactionary?

A glance at Shakespeare's lists of dramatis personæ is sufficient to show that he was unable to conceive of any situation rising to the dignity of tragedy in other than royal and ducal circles. It may be said in explanation of this partiality for high rank that he was only following the custom of the dramatists of his time, but this is a poor plea for a man of great genius, whose business it is precisely to lead

and not to follow. Nor is the explanation altogether accurate. In his play, the "Pinner of Wakefield," first printed in 1599, Robert Greene makes a hero, and a very stalwart one, of a mere pound-keeper, who proudly refuses knighthood at the hands of the king. There were other and earlier plays in vogue in Shakespeare's day treating of the triumphs of men of the people, one, for instance, which commemorated the rise of Sir Thomas Gresham, the merchant's son, and another, entitled "The History of Richard Whittington, of his Low Birth, his Great Fortune"; but he carefully avoided such material in seeking plots for his dramas. Cardinal Wolsey, the butcher's son, is indeed the hero of "Henry VIII.," but his humble origin is only mentioned incidentally as something to be ashamed of. What greater opportunity for idealizing the common people ever presented itself to a dramatist than to Shakespeare when he undertook to draw the character of Joan of Arc in the second part of "Henry VI."? He knew how to create noble women--that is one of his special glories--but he not only refuses to see anything noble in the peasant girl who led France to victory, but he deliberately insults her memory with the coarsest and most cruel calumnies. Surely the lapse of more than a century and a half might have enabled a man of honor, if not of genius, to do justice to an enemy of the weaker sex, and if Joan had been a member of the French royal family we may be sure that she would have received better treatment.

The question of the aristocratic tendency of the drama was an active one in Shakespeare's time. There was a good deal of democratic feeling in the burghers of London-town, and they resented the courtly prejudices of

their playwrights and their habit of holding up plain citizens to ridicule upon the stage, whenever they deigned to present them at all. The Prolog in Beaumont and Fletcher's "Knight of the Burning Pestle" gives sufficient evidence of this. The authors adopted the device of having a Citizen leap upon the stage and interrupt the Speaker of the Prolog by shouting

"Hold your peace, goodman boy!"

Speaker of Prolog: "What do you mean, sir?"

Citizen: "That you have no good meaning; this seven year there hath been plays at this house. I have observed it, you have still girds at citizens."

The Citizen goes on to inform the Speaker of the Prolog that he is a grocer, and to demand that he "present something notably in honor of the commons of the city." For a hero he will have "a grocer, and he shall do admirable things." But this proved to be a joke over too serious a matter, for at the first representation of the play in 1611 it was cried down by the citizens and apprentices, who did not appreciate its satire upon them, and it was not revived for many years thereafter. It will not answer, therefore, to say that the idea of celebrating the middle and lower classes never occurred to Shakespeare, for it was a subject of discussion among his contemporaries.

It is hardly possible to construct a play with no characters but monarchs and their suites, and at the same time preserve the verisimilitudes of life. Shakespeare was obliged to make some use of servants, citizens, and populace. How has he portrayed them? In one play alone has he given up the whole stage to them, and it is said that the "Merry Wives of Windsor" was only written at the request of Queen Elizabeth, who wished to see Sir John Falstaff in love. It is from beginning to end one prolonged "gird at citizens," and we can hardly wonder that they felt a grievance against the dramatic profession. In the other plays of Shakespeare the humbler classes appear for the main part only occasionally and incidentally. His opinion of them is indicated more or less picturesquely by the names which he selects for them. There are, for example, Bottom, the weaver; Flute, the bellows-maker; Snout and Sly, tinkers; Quince, the carpenter; Snug, the joiner; Starveling, the tailor; Smooth, the silkman; Shallow and Silence, country justices; Elbow and Hull, constables; Dogberry and Verges, Fang and Snare, sheriffs' officers; Mouldy, Shadow, Wart, and Bull-calf, recruits; Feebee, at once a recruit and a woman's tailor, Pilch and Patch-Breech, fishermen (though these last two appellations may be mere nicknames); Potpan, Peter Thump, Simple, Gobbo, and Susan Grindstone, servants; Speed, "a clownish servant"; Slender, Pistol, Nym, Sneak, Doll Tear-sheet, Jane Smile, Costard, Oatcake, Seacoal, and various anonymous "clowns" and "fools." Shakespeare rarely gives names of this character to any but the lowly in life, altho perhaps we should cite as exceptions Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Ague-Cheek in "Twelfth Night"; the vicar, Sir Oliver Mar-Text, in "As You Like It"; Moth, the

page, in "Love's Labor Lost," and Froth, "a foolish gentleman," in "Measure for Measure," but none of these personages quite deserves to rank as an aristocrat. Such a system of nomenclature as we have exposed is enough of itself to fasten the stigma of absurdity upon the characters subjected to it, and their occupations. Most of the trades are held up for ridicule in "Midsummer Night's Dream"; Holofernes, the schoolmaster, is made ridiculous in "Love's Labor Lost," and we are told of the middle-class Nym, Pistol, and Bardolph that "three such antics do not amount to a man" (Henry V., Act 3, Sc. 2). But it is not necessary to rehearse the various familiar scenes in which these fantastically named individuals raise a laugh at their own expense.

The language employed by nobility and royalty in addressing those of inferior station in Shakespeare's plays may be taken, perhaps, rather as an indication of the manners of the times than as an expression of his own feeling, but even so it must have been a little galling to the poorer of his auditors. "Whoreson dog," "whoreson peasant," "slave," "you cur," "rogue," "rascal," "dunghill," "crack-hemp," and "notorious villain"--these are a few of the epithets with which the plays abound. The Duke of York accosts Thomas Horner, an armorer, as "base dunghill villain and mechanical" (Henry VI., Part 2, Act 2, Sc. 3); Gloster speaks of the warders of the Tower as "dunghill grooms" (Ib., Part 1, Act 1, Sc. 3), and Hamlet of the grave-digger as an "ass" and "rude knave." Valentine tells his servant, Speed, that he is born to be hanged (Two Gentlemen of Verona, Act 1, Sc. 1), and Gonzalo pays a like compliment to the boatswain who is doing his best to save the ship in

the "Tempest" (Act 1, Sc. 1). This boatswain is not sufficiently impressed by the grandeur of his noble cargo, and for his pains is called a "brawling, blasphemous, uncharitable dog," a "cur," a "whoreson, insolent noise-maker," and a "wide-chapped rascal." Richard III.'s Queen says to a gardener, who is guilty of nothing but giving a true report of her lord's deposition and who shows himself a kind-hearted fellow, "Thou little better thing than earth," "thou wretch"! Henry VIII. talks of a "lousy footboy," and the Duke of Suffolk, when he is about to be killed by his pirate captor at Dover, calls him "obscure and lowly swain," "jaded groom," and "base slave," dubs his crew "paltry, servile, abject drudges," and declares that his own head would

"sooner dance upon bloody pole
Than stand uncovered to a vulgar groom."
(Henry VI., Part 2, Act 4, Sc. 1.)

Petruchio "wrings Grumio by the ear," and Katherine beats the same unlucky servant. His master indulges in such terms as "foolish knave," "peasant swain," and "whoreson malthorse drudge" in addressing him; cries out to his servants, "off with my boots, you rogues, you villains!" and strikes them. He pays his compliments to a tailor in the following lines:

"O monstrous arrogance! Thou liest, thou thread, thou thimble,
Thou yard, three-quarters, half-yard, quarter, nail,

Thou flea, thou nit, thou winter cricket thou;
Braved in my own house by a skein of thread!
Away, thou rag, thou quantity, thou remnant!"

(Taming of the Shrew, Act 4, Sc. 3.)

Joan of Arc speaks of her "contemptible estate" as a shepherd's daughter, and afterward, denying her father, calls him "Decrepit miser! base, ignoble wretch!" (Henry VI., Part 1, Act 1, Sc. 2, and Act 5, Sc. 4.) It is hard to believe that Shakespeare would have so frequently allowed his characters to express their contempt for members of the lower orders of society if he had not had some sympathy with their opinions.

Shakespeare usually employs the common people whom he brings upon the stage merely to raise a laugh (as, for instance, the flea-bitten carriers in the inn-yard at Rochester, in Henry IV., Part 1, Act 2, Sc. 1), but occasionally they are scamps as well as fools. They amuse us when they become hopelessly entangled in their sentences (vide Romeo and Juliet, Act 1, Sc. 2), or when Juliet's nurse blunderingly makes her think that Romeo is slain instead of Tybalt; but when this same lady, after taking Romeo's money, espouses the cause of the County Paris--or when on the eve of Agincourt we are introduced to a group of cowardly English soldiers--or when Coriolanus points out the poltroonery of the Roman troops, and says that all would have been lost "but for our gentlemen," we must feel detestation for them. Juliet's nurse is not the only disloyal servant. Shylock's servant, Launcelot Gobbo, helps Jessica

to deceive her father, and Margaret, the Lady Hero's gentlewoman, brings about the disgrace of her mistress by fraud. Olivia's waiting-woman in "Twelfth Night" is honest enough, but she is none too modest in her language, but in this respect Dame Quickly in "Henry IV." can easily rival her. Peter Thump, when forced to a judicial combat with his master, displays his cowardice, altho in the end he is successful (Henry VI., Act 2, Part 2, Sc. 3), and Stephano, a drunken butler, adorns the stage in the "Tempest." We can not blame Shakespeare for making use of cutthroats and villains in developing his plots, but we might have been spared the jokes which the jailors of Posthumus perpetrate when they come to lead him to the scaffold, and the ludicrous English of the clown who supplies Cleopatra with an asp. The apothecary who is in such wretched plight that he sells poison to Romeo in spite of a Draconian law, gives us another unflattering picture of a tradesman; and when Falstaff declares, "I would I were a weaver; I could sing psalms or anything," we have a premature reflection on the Puritan, middle-class conscience and religion. In "As You Like It," Shakespeare came near drawing a pastoral sketch of shepherds and shepherdesses on conventional lines. If he failed to do so, it was as much from lack of respect for the keeping of sheep as for the unrealities of pastoral poetry. Rosalind does not scruple to call the fair Phebe "foul," and, as for her hands, she says:

"I saw her hand; she has a leathern hand,
A freestone colored hand; I verily did think
That her old gloves were on, but 'twas her hands;

She has a housewife's hand."

No one with a high respect for housewifery could have written that line. When in the same play Jaques sees the pair of rural lovers, Touchstone and Audrey, approaching, he cries: "There is, sure, another flood, and these couples are coming to the ark! Here come a pair of very strange beasts, which in all tongues are called fools" (Act 5, Sc. 4). The clown, Touchstone, speaks of kissing the cow's dugs which his former sweetheart had milked, and then marries Audrey in a tempest of buffoonery. Howbeit, Touchstone remains one of the few rustic characters of Shakespeare who win our affections, and at the same time he is witty enough to deserve the title which Jaques bestows upon him of a "rare fellow."

Occasionally Shakespeare makes fun of persons who are somewhat above the lower classes in rank. I have mentioned those on whom he bestows comical names. He indulges in humor also at the expense of the two Scottish captains, Jamy and Macmorris, and the honest Welsh captain, Fluellen (Henry V., Act 3, Sc. 2 et passim), and shall we forget the inimitable Falstaff? But, while making every allowance for these diversions into somewhat nobler quarters (the former of which are explained by national prejudices), do they form serious exceptions to the rule, and can Falstaff be taken, for instance, as a representative of the real aristocracy? As Queen and courtiers watched his antics on the stage, we may be sure that it never entered their heads that the "girds" were directed at them or their kind.

The appearance on Shakespeare's stage of a man of humble birth who is virtuous without being ridiculous is so rare an event that it is worth while to enumerate the instances. Now and then a servant or other obscure character is made use of as a mere lay figure of which nothing good or evil can be predicated, but usually they are made more or less absurd. Only at long intervals do we see persons of this class at once serious and upright. As might have been expected, it is more often the servant than any other member of the lower classes to whom Shakespeare attributes good qualities, for the servant is a sort of attachment to the gentleman and shines with the reflection of his virtues. The noblest quality which Shakespeare can conceive of in a servant is loyalty, and in "Richard II." (Act 5, Sc. 3) he gives us a good example in the character of a groom who remains faithful to the king even when the latter is cast into prison. In "Cymbeline" we are treated to loyalty ad nauseam. The king orders Pisanio, a trusty servant, to be tortured without cause, and his reply is,

"Sir, my life is yours.
I humbly set it at your will."
(Act 4, Sc. 3.)

In "King Lear" a good servant protests against the cruelty of Regan and Cornwall toward Gloucester, and is killed for his courage. "Give me my sword," cries Regan. "A peasant stand up thus!" (Act 3, Sc. 7). And other servants also show sympathy for the unfortunate earl. We all

remember the fool who, almost alone, was true to Lear, but, then, of course, he was a fool. In "Timon of Athens" we have an unusual array of good servants, but it is doubtful if Shakespeare wrote the play, and these characters make his authorship more doubtful. Flaminius, Timon's servant, rejects a bribe with scorn (Act 3, Sc. 1). Another of his servants expresses his contempt for his master's false friends (Act 3, Sc. 3), and when Timon finally loses his fortune and his friends forsake him, his servants stand by him. "Yet do our hearts wear Timon's livery" (Act 4, Sc. 2). Adam, the good old servant in "As You Like It," who follows his young master Orlando into exile, is, like Lear's fool, a noteworthy example of the loyal servitor.

"Master, go on, and I will follow thee
To the last gasp with truth and loyalty."
(Act 2, Sc. 3.)

But Shakespeare takes care to point out that such fidelity in servants is most uncommon and a relic of the good old times--

"O good old man, bow well in thee appears
The constant service of the antique world,
When service sweat for duty, nor for meed!
Thou art not for the fashion of these times,
When none will sweat but for promotion."

Outside the ranks of domestic servants we find a few cases of honorable

poverty in Shakespeare. In the play just quoted, Corin, the old shepherd, says:

"Sir, I am a true laborer; I earn that I eat, get that I wear; owe no man hate, envy no man's happiness; glad of other men's good, content with my harm; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck."

(As You Like It, Act 3, Sc. 2.)

in short, an ideal proletarian from the point of view of the aristocrat.

The "Winter's Tale" can boast of another good shepherd (Act 3, Sc. 3), but he savors a little of burlesque. "Macbeth" has several humble worthies. There is a good old man in the second act (Sc. 2), and a good messenger in the fourth (Sc. 2). King Duncan praises highly the sergeant who brings the news of Macbeth's victory, and uses language to him such as Shakespeare's yeomen are not accustomed to hear (Act 1, Sc. 2). And in "Antony and Cleopatra" we make the acquaintance of several exemplary common soldiers. Shakespeare puts flattering words into the mouth of Henry V. when he addresses the troops before Agincourt:

"For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile
This day shall gentle his condition."

(Act 4, Sc. 4.)

And at Harfleur he is even more complaisant:

"And you, good yeomen,
Whose limbs were made in England, shew us here
The metal of your pasture; let us swear
That you are worth your breeding; which I doubt not,
For there is none of you so mean and base
That hath not noble luster in your eyes." (Act 3, Sc. 1.)

The rank and file always fare well before a battle.

"Oh, it's 'Tommy this' and 'Tommy that' an' 'Tommy, go away';
But it's 'Thank you, Mr. Atkins,' when the band begins to play."

I should like to add some instances from Shakespeare's works of serious and estimable behavior on the part of individuals representing the lower classes, or of considerate treatment of them on the part of their "betters," but I have been unable to find any, and the meager list must end here.

But to return to Tommy Atkins. He is no longer Mr. Atkins after the battle. Montjoy, the French herald, comes to the English king under a flag of truce and asks that they be permitted to bury their dead and

"Sort our nobles from our common men;
For many of our princes (wo the while!)

Lie drowned and soaked in mercenary blood;
So do our vulgar drench their peasant limbs
In blood of princes." (Henry V., Act 4, Sc. 7.)

With equal courtesy Richard III., on Bosworth field, speaks of his opponents to the gentlemen around him:

"Remember what you are to cope withal--
A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways,
A scum of Bretagne and base lackey peasants."
(Act 5, Sc. 3.)

But Shakespeare does not limit such epithets to armies. Having, as we have seen, a poor opinion of the lower classes, taken man by man, he thinks, if anything, still worse of them taken en masse, and at his hands a crowd of plain workingmen fares worst of all. "Hempen home-spuns," Puck calls them, and again

"A crew of patches, rude mechanicals,
That work for bread upon Athenian stalls."

Bottom, their leader, is, according to Oberon, a "hateful fool," and according to Puck, the "shallowest thick-skin of that barren sort" (Midsummer Night's Dream, Act 3, Scs. 1 and 2, Act 4, Sc. 1). Bottom's advice to his players contains a small galaxy of compliments:

"In any case let Thisby have clean linen, and let not him
that plays the lion pare his nails, for they shall hang out
for the lion's claws. And, most dear actors, eat no onion or
garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath, and I do not doubt
to hear them say, it is a sweet comedy."

(Ib., Act 4, Sc. 2.)

The matter of the breath of the poor weighs upon Shakespeare and his characters. Cleopatra shudders at the thought that

"mechanic slaves,
With greasy aprons, rules and hammers, shall
Uplift us to the view; in their thick breaths
Rank of gross diet, shall we be enclouded,
And forced to drink their vapor."

(Antony and Cleopatra, Act 5, Sc. 2.)

Coriolanus has his sense of smell especially developed. He talks of the "stinking breaths" of the people (Act 2, Sc. 1), and in another place says:

"You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate
As reek of rotten fens, whose love I prize
As the dead carcasses of unburied men
That do corrupt the air, I banish you,"

and he goes on to taunt them with cowardice (Act 3, Sc. 3). They are the "mutable, rank-scented many" (Act 3, Sc. 1). His friend Menenius is equally complimentary to his fellow citizens. "You are they," says he,

"That make the air unwholesome, when you cast
Your stinking, greasy caps, in hooting at
Coriolanus's exile."
(Act 4, Sc. 7.)

And he laughs at the "apron-men" of Cominius and their "breath of garlic-eaters" (Act 4, Sc. 7). When Coriolanus is asked to address the people, he replies by saying: "Bid them wash their faces, and keep their teeth clean" (Act 2, Sc. 3). According to Shakespeare, the Roman populace had made no advance in cleanliness in the centuries between Coriolanus and Cæsar. Casca gives a vivid picture of the offer of the crown to Julius, and his rejection of it: "And still as he refused it the rabblement shouted, and clapped their chapped hands, and threw up their sweaty night-caps, and uttered such a deal of stinking breath, because Cæsar refused the crown, that it had almost choked Cæsar, for he swooned and fell down at it. And for mine own part I durst not laugh, for fear of opening my lips and receiving the bad air." And he calls them the "tag-rag people" (Julius Cæsar, Act 1, Sc. 2). The play of "Coriolanus" is a mine of insults to the people and it becomes tiresome to quote them. The hero calls them the "beast with many heads" (Act 4, Sc. 3), and again he says to the crowd:

"What's the matter, you dissentious rogues,
That rubbing the poor itch of your opinion
Make yourself scabs?

First Citizen. We have ever your good word.

Coriolanus. He that will give good words to ye will flatter
Beneath abhorring. What would you have, you curs,
That like not peace nor war? The one affrights you,
The other makes you proud. He that trusts to you,
Where he would find you lions, finds you hares;
Where foxes, geese; you are no surer, no,
Than is the coal of fire upon the ice,
Or hailstone in the sun. Your virtue is
To make him worthy whose offense subdues him,
And curse that justice did it. Who deserves greatness
Deserves your hate; and your affections are
A sick man's appetite, who desires most that
Which would increase his evil. He that depends
Upon your favors, swims with fins of lead,
And hews down oaks with rushes. Hang ye! Trust ye?
With every minute you do change a mind,
And call him noble that was now your hate,
Him vile that was your garland."

(Act 1, Sc. 1.)

His mother, Volumnia, is of like mind. She calls the people "our general louts" (Act 3, Sc. 2). She says to Junius Brutus, the tribune of the people:

"'Twas you incensed the rabble,
Cats, that can judge as fitly of his worth
As I can of those mysteries which Heaven
Will not leave Earth to know."
(Act 4, Sc. 2).

In the same play Cominius talks of the "dull tribunes" and "fusty plebeians" (Act 1, Sc. 9). Menenius calls them "beastly plebeians" (Act 2, Sc. 1), refers to their "multiplying spawn" (Act 2, Sc. 2), and says to the crowd:

"Rome and her rats are at the point of battle."
(Act 1, Sc. 2).

The dramatist makes the mob cringe before Coriolanus. When he appears, the stage directions show that the "citizens steal away." (Act 1, Sc. 1.)

As the Roman crowd of the time of Coriolanus is fickle, so is that of Cæsar's. Brutus and Antony sway them for and against his assassins with ease:

"First Citizen. This Cæsar was a tyrant.

Second Citizen. Nay, that's certain.
We are blessed that Rome is rid of him....

First Citizen. (After hearing a description of the murder.)
O piteous spectacle!

2 Cit. O noble Cæsar!

3 Cit. O woful day!

4 Cit. O traitors, villains!

1 Cit. O most bloody sight!

2 Cit. We will be revenged; revenge! about--seek--burn,
fire--kill--slay--let not a traitor live!" (Act 3, Sc. 2.)

The Tribune Marullus reproaches them with having forgotten Pompey, and calls them

"You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things."

He persuades them not to favor Cæsar, and when they leave him he asks his fellow tribune, Flavius,

"See, whe'r their basest metal be not moved?"

(Act 1, Sc. 1.)

Flavius also treats them with scant courtesy:

"Hence, home, you idle creatures, get you home.
Is this a holiday? What! you know not,
Being mechanical, you ought not walk
Upon a laboring day without the sign
Of your profession?"

(Ib.)

The populace of England is as changeable as that of Rome, if Shakespeare is to be believed. The Archbishop of York, who had espoused the cause of Richard II. against Henry IV., thus soliloquizes:

"The commonwealth is sick of their own choice;
Their over greedy love hath surfeited;
An habitation giddy and unsure
Hath he that buildeth on the vulgar heart.
O thou fond many! With what loud applause
Didst thou beat Heaven with blessing Bolingbroke,
Before he was what thou would'st have him be!
And now being trimmed in thine own desires,
Thou, beastly feeder, art so full of him,

That thou provokest thyself to cast him up.
So, so, thou common dog, didst thou disgorge
Thy glutton bosom of the royal Richard,
And now thou wouldst eat thy dead vomit up,
And howlst to find it."

(Henry IV., Part 2, Act 1, Sc. 3.)

Gloucester in "Henry VI." (Part 2, Act 2, Sc. 4) notes the fickleness of the masses. He says, addressing his absent wife:

"Sweet Nell, ill can thy noble mind abrook
The abject people, gazing on thy face
With envious looks, laughing at thy shame,
That erst did follow thy proud chariot wheels
When thou didst ride in triumph through the streets."

When she arrives upon the scene in disgrace, she says to him:

"Look how they gaze;
See how the giddy multitude do point
And nod their heads and throw their eyes on thee.
Ah, Gloster, hide thee from their hateful looks."

And she calls the crowd a "rabble" (Ib.), a term also used in "Hamlet" (Act 4, Sc. 5). Again, in part III. of "Henry VI.," Clifford, dying on the battlefield while fighting for King Henry, cries:

"The common people swarm like summer flies,
And whither fly the gnats but to the sun?
And who shines now but Henry's enemies?"

(Act 2, Sc. 6.)

And Henry himself, conversing with the keepers who have imprisoned him in the name of Edward IV., says:

"Ah, simple men! you know not what you swear.
Look, as I blow this feather from my face,
And as the air blows it to me again,
Obeying with my wind when I do blow,
And yielding to another when it blows,
Commanded always by the greater gust,
Such is the lightness of you common men."

(Ib., Act 3, Sc. 1.)

Suffolk, in the First Part of the same trilogy (Act 5, Sc. 5), talks of "worthless peasants," meaning, perhaps, "property-less peasants," and when Salisbury comes to present the demands of the people, he calls him

"the Lord Ambassador
Sent from a sort of tinkers to the king,"

(Part 2, Act 3, Sc. 2.)

and says:

"'Tis like the Commons, rude unpolished hinds
Could send such message to their sovereign."

Cardinal Beaufort mentions the "uncivil kernes of Ireland" (Ib., Part 2, Act 3, Sc. 1), and in the same play the crowd makes itself ridiculous by shouting, "A miracle," when the fraudulent beggar Simpcox, who had pretended to be lame and blind, jumps over a stool to escape a whipping (Act 2, Sc. 1). Queen Margaret receives petitioners with the words "Away, base cullions" (Ib., Act 1, Sc. 3), and among other flattering remarks applied here and there to the lower classes we may cite the epithets "ye rascals, ye rude slaves," addressed to a crowd by a porter in Henry VIII., and that of "lazy knaves" given by the Lord Chamberlain to the porters for having let in a "trim rabble" (Act 5, Sc. 3). Hubert, in King John, presents us with an unvarnished picture of the common people receiving the news of Prince Arthur's death:

"I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,
The whilst his iron did on his 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, unwashed artificer,
Cuts off his tale, and talks of Arthur's death."

(Act 4, Sc. 2.)

Macbeth, while sounding the murderers whom he intends to employ, and who say to him, "We are men, my liege," answers:

"Ay, in the catalogue, ye go for men
As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
Shoughs, water-sugs, and demi-wolves, are cleped
All by the name of dogs."

(Act 3, Sc. 1.)

As Coriolanus is held up to our view as a pattern of noble bearing toward the people, so Richard II. condemns the courteous behavior of the future Henry IV. on his way into banishment. He says:

"Ourselves, and Bushy, Bagot here and Green
Observed his courtship to the common people;
How he did seem to dive into their hearts
With humble and familiar courtesy;
What reverence he did throw away on slaves;
Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles
And patient overbearing of his fortune,
As 'twere to banish their effects with him.
Off goes his bonnet to an oyster-wench;

A brace of draymen did God speed him well
And had the tribute of his supple knee,
With 'Thanks, my countrymen, my loving friends.'"
(Richard II., Act 1, Sc. 4.)

The King of France, in "All's Well that Ends Well," commends to Bertram the example of his late father in his relations with his inferiors:

"Who were below him
He used as creatures of another place,
And bowed his eminent top to their low ranks,
Making them proud of his humility
In their poor praise he humbled. Such a man
Might be a copy to these younger times."
(Act 1, Sc. 2.)

Shakespeare had no fondness for these "younger times," with their increasing suggestion of democracy. Despising the masses, he had no sympathy with the idea of improving their condition or increasing their power. He saw the signs of the times with foreboding, as did his hero, Hamlet:

"By the Lord, Horatio, these three years I have taken note of it; the age has grown so picked, that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heel of the courtier, he galls his kibe." There can easily be too much liberty, according to Shakespeare--"too much liberty, my Lucio,

liberty" (Measure for Measure, Act 1, Sc. 3), but the idea of too much authority is foreign to him. Claudio, himself under arrest, sings its praises:

"Thus can the demi-god, Authority,
Make us pay down for our offense by weight,--
The words of Heaven;--on whom it will, it will;
On whom it will not, so; yet still 'tis just."

(Ib.)

Ulysses, in "Troilus and Cressida" (Act 1, Sc. 3), delivers a long panegyric upon authority, rank, and degree, which may be taken as Shakespeare's confession of faith:

"Degree being vizarded,
Th' unworthiest shews as fairly in the mask.
The heavens themselves, the planets, and this center,
Observe degree, priority, and place,
Insisture, course, proportion, season, form,
Office and custom, in all line of order;
And therefore is the glorious planet, Sol,
In noble eminence enthroned and sphered
Amidst the other; whose med'cinable eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandments of a king,
Sans check, to good and bad. But when the planets,

In evil mixture, to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents! what mutiny!
What raging of the sea, shaking of the earth,
Commotion of the winds, frights, changes, horrors,
Divert and crack, rend and deracinate
The unity and married calm of states
Quite from their fixture! Oh, when degree is shaked,
Which is the ladder of all high designs,
The enterprise is sick. How could communities,
Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities,
Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,
The primogenity and due of birth,
Prerogative of age, crowns, scepters, laurels,
But by degree stand in authentic place?
Take but degree away, untune the string,
And hark, what discord follows! each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy; the bounded waters
Should lift their bosoms higher than the shores,
And make a sop of all this solid globe;
Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead;
Force should be right; or, rather, right and wrong,
(Between whose endless jar justice resides)
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power.
Power into will, will into appetite;

And appetite, a universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself. Great Agamemnon,
This chaos, when degree is suffocate,
Follows the choking;
And this neglection of degree it is,
That by a pace goes backward, in a purpose
It hath to climb. The General's disdained
By him one step below; he by the next;
That next by him beneath; so every step,
Exampled by the first pace that is sick
Of his superiors, grows to an envious fever
Of pale and bloodless emulation;
And 'tis this fever that keeps Troy on foot,
Not her own sinews. To end a tale of length,
Troy in our weakness stands, not in her strength."

There is no hint in this eloquent apostrophe of the difficulty of determining among men who shall be the sun and who the satellite, nor of the fact that the actual arrangements, in Shakespeare's time, at any rate, depended altogether upon that very force which Ulysses deprecates. In another scene in the same play the wily Ithacan again gives way to his passion for authority and eulogizes somewhat extravagantly the paternal, prying, omnipresent State:

"The providence that's in a watchful state
Knows almost every grain of Plutus' gold,
Finds bottom in th' incomprehensive deeps,
Keeps place with thought, and almost, like the gods,
Does thoughts unveil in their dumb cradles.
There is a mystery (with which relation
Durst never meddle) in the soul of state,
Which hath an operation more divine
Than breath or pen can give expressure to."

(Act 3, Sc. 3.)

The State to which Ulysses refers is of course a monarchical State, and the idea of democracy is abhorrent to Shakespeare. Coriolanus expresses his opinion of it when he says to the people:

"What's the matter,
That in these several places of the city
You cry against the noble Senate, who,
Under the gods, keep you in awe, which else
Would feed on one another?"

(Act 2, Sc. 1.)

The people should have no voice in the government--

"This double worship,--
Where one part does disdain with cause, the other

Insult without all reason, where gentry, title, wisdom,
Can not conclude, but by the yea and no
Of general ignorance,--it must omit
Real necessities, and give away the while
To unstable slightness. Purpose so barred, it follows,
Nothing is done to purpose; therefore, beseech you,
You that will be less fearful than discreet,
That love the fundamental part of state
More than you doubt the change on't, that prefer
A noble life before a long, and wish
To jump a body with a dangerous physic
That's sure of death without it, at once pluck out
The multitudinous tongue; let them not lick
The sweet which is their poison."

(Ib. Act 3, Sc. 1.)

It is the nobility who should rule--

"It is a purposed thing and grows by plot
To curb the will of the nobility;
Suffer't and live with such as can not rule,
Nor ever will be ruled."

(Ib.)

Junius Brutus tries in vain to argue with him, but Coriolanus has no patience with him, a "triton of the minnows"; and the very fact that

there should be tribunes appointed for the people disgusts him--

"Five tribunes to defend their vulgar wisdoms,
Of their own choice; one's Junius Brutus,
Sicinus Velutus, and I know not--'Sdeath!
The rabble should have first unroofed the city,
Ere so prevailed with me; it will in time
Win upon power, and throw forth greater themes."

And again:

"The common file, a plague!--Tribunes for them!"
(Act 1, Sc. 6.)

Shakespeare took his material for the drama of "Coriolanus" from Plutarch's "Lives," and it is significant that he selected from that list of worthies the most conspicuous adversary of the commonalty that Rome produced. He presents him to us as a hero, and, so far as he can, enlists our sympathy for him from beginning to end. When Menenius says of him:

"His nature is too noble for the world,"
(Act 3, Sc. 1.)

he is evidently but registering the verdict of the author. Plutarch's treatment of Coriolanus is far different. He exhibits his fine

qualities, but he does not hesitate to speak of his "imperious temper and that savage manner which was too haughty for a republic." "Indeed," he adds, "there is no other advantage to be had from a liberal education equal to that of polishing and softening our nature by reason and discipline." He also tells us that Coriolanus indulged his "irascible passions on a supposition that they have something great and exalted in them," and that he wanted "a due mixture of gravity and mildness, which are the chief political virtues and the fruits of reason and education." "He never dreamed that such obstinacy is rather the effect of the weakness and effeminacy of a distempered mind, which breaks out in violent passions like so many tumors." Nor apparently did Shakespeare ever dream of it either, altho he had Plutarch's sage observations before him. It is a pity that the great dramatist did not select from Plutarch's works some hero who took the side of the people, some Agis or Cleomenes, or, better yet, one of the Gracchi. What a tragedy he might have based on the life of Tiberius, the friend of the people and the martyr in their cause! But the spirit which guided Schiller in the choice of William Tell for a hero was a stranger to Shakespeare's heart, and its promptings would have met with no response there.

Even more striking is the treatment which the author of "Coriolanus" metes out to English history. All but two of his English historical dramas are devoted to the War of the Roses and the incidental struggle over the French crown. The motive of this prolonged strife--so attractive to Shakespeare--had much the same dignity which distinguishes the family intrigues of the Sublime Porte, and Shakespeare presents the

history of his country as a mere pageant of warring royalties and their trains. When the people are permitted to appear, as they do in Cade's rebellion, to which Shakespeare has assigned the character of the rising under Wat Tyler, they are made the subject of burlesque. Two of the popular party speak as follows:

"John Holland. Well, I say, it was never merry world in England since gentlemen came up.

George Bevis. O miserable age! Virtue is not regarded in handicraftsmen.

John. The nobility think scorn to go in leather aprons."

When Jack Cade, alias Wat Tyler, comes on the scene, he shows himself to be a braggart and a fool. He says:

"Be brave then, for your captain is brave and vows reformation. There shall be in England seven half-penny loaves sold for a penny; the three-hooped pot shall have ten hoops, and I will make it a felony to drink small beer. All the realm shall be in common, and in Cheapside shall my palfrey go to grass. And when I am king asking I will be--

All. God save your majesty!

Cade. I thank you, good people--there shall be no money; all shall eat and drink on my score, and I will apparel them all in one livery, that they may agree like brothers and worship me their lord."

(Henry VI., Part 2, Act 4, Sc. 2.)

The crowd wishes to kill the clerk of Chatham because he can read, write, and cast accounts. (Cade. "O monstrous!") Sir Humphrey Stafford calls them

"Rebellious hinds, the filth and scum of Kent,
Marked for the gallows."

(Ib.)

Clifford succeeds without much difficulty in turning the enmity of the mob against France, and Cade ejaculates disconsolately, "Was ever a feather so lightly blown to and fro as this multitude?" (Ib., Act 4, Sc. 8.) In the stage directions of this scene, Shakespeare shows his own opinion of the mob by writing, "Enter Cade and his rabblement." One looks in vain here as in the Roman plays for a suggestion that poor people sometimes suffer wrongfully from hunger and want, that they occasionally have just grievances, and that their efforts to present them, so far from being ludicrous, are the most serious parts of history, beside which the struttings of kings and courtiers sink into insignificance.

One of the popular songs in Tyler's rebellion was the familiar couplet:

"When Adam delved and Eve span,
Who was then the gentleman?"

Shakespeare refers to it in "Hamlet," where the grave-diggers speak as follows:

"First Clown. Come, my spade. There is no ancient gentleman but gardners, ditchers and grave-makers; they hold up Adam's profession.

Second Clown. Was he a gentleman?

First Clown. He was the first that ever bore arms.

Second Clown. Why, he had none.

First Clown. What, art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says, Adam digged; could he dig without arms?"

(Act 5, Sc. 1.)

That Shakespeare's caricature of Tyler's rebellion is a fair indication of his view of all popular risings appears from the remarks addressed by Westmoreland to the Archbishop of York in the Second Part of "Henry IV."

(Act 4, Sc. 1). Says he:

"If that rebellion
Came like itself, in base and abject routs,
Led on by bloody youth, guarded with rags,
And countenanced by boys and beggary;
I say if damned commotion so appeared,
In his true, native, and most proper shape,
You, Reverend Father, and these noble lords
Had not been here to dress the ugly form
Of base and bloody insurrection
With your fair honors."

The first and last of Shakespeare's English historical plays, "King John" and "Henry VIII.," lie beyond the limits of the civil wars, and each of them treats of a period momentous in the annals of English liberty, a fact which Shakespeare absolutely ignores. John as king had two great misfortunes--he suffered disgrace at the hands of his barons and of the pope. The first event, the wringing of Magna Charta from the king, Shakespeare passes over. A sense of national pride might have excused the omission of the latter humiliation, but no, it was a triumph of authority, and as such Shakespeare must record it for the edification of his hearers, and consequently we have the king presented on the stage as meekly receiving the crown from the papal legate (Act 5, Sc. 1). England was freed from the Roman yoke in the reign of Henry VIII., and in the drama of that name Shakespeare might have balanced the indignity

forced upon King John, but now he is silent. Nothing must be said against authority, even against that of the pope, and the play culminates in the pomp and parade of the christening of the infant Elizabeth! Such is Shakespeare's conception of history! Who could guess from reading these English historical plays that throughout the period which they cover English freedom was growing, that justice and the rights of man were asserting themselves, while despotism was gradually curbed and limited? This is the one great glory of English history, exhibiting itself at Runnymede, reflected in Wyclif and John Ball and Wat Tyler, and shining dimly in the birth of a national church under the eighth Henry. As Shakespeare wrote, it was preparing for a new and conspicuous outburst. When he died, Oliver Cromwell was already seventeen years of age and John Hampden twenty-two. The spirit of Hampden was preeminently the English spirit--the spirit which has given distinction to the Anglo-Saxon race--and he and Shakespeare were contemporaries, and yet of this spirit not a vestige is to be found in the English historical plays and no opportunities lost to obliterate or distort its manifestations. Only in Brutus and his fellow-conspirators--of all Shakespearian characters--do we find the least consideration for liberty, and even then he makes the common, and perhaps in his time the unavoidable, mistake of overlooking the genuinely democratic leanings of Julius Cæsar and the anti-popular character of the successful plot against him.

It has in all ages been a pastime of noble minds to try to depict a perfect state of society. Forty years before Shakespeare's birth, Sir

Thomas More published his "Utopia" to the world. Bacon intended to do the same thing in the "New Atlantis," but never completed the work, while Sir Philip Sidney gives us his dream in his "Arcadia." Montaigne makes a similar essay, and we quote from Florio's translation, published in 1603, the following passage (Montaigne's "Essays," Book I, Chapter 30):

"It is a nation, would I answer Plato, that hath no kind of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no intelligence of numbers, no name of magistrate nor of political superiority; no use of service, of riches, or of poverty; no contracts, no succession, no dividences; no occupation, but idle; no respect of kindred, but common; no apparel, but natural; no manuring of lands; no use of wine, corn, or metal. The very words that import lying, falsehood, treason, dissimulation, covetousness, envy, detraction, and pardon were never heard among them."

We may readily infer that Shakespeare found little to sympathize with in this somewhat extravagant outline of a happy nation, but he goes out of his way to travesty it. In "The Tempest" he makes Gonzalo, the noblest character in the play, hold the following language to the inevitable king (Shakespeare can not imagine even a desert island without a king!):

"Had I plantation of this isle, my lord,
I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;

Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn or wine or oil;
No occupation; all men idle,--all,
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty, ...

Sebastian. Yet he would be king on't.

Antonia. The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning.

Gonzalo. All things in common. Nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavor; treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
Would I not have; but Nature should bring forth
Of its own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.

Seb. No marrying 'mong his subjects?

Ant. None, man; all idle, whores, and knaves.

Gon. I would with such perfection govern, sir,
To 'xcel the golden age.

Seb. 'Save his Majesty!

Ant. Long live Gonzalo!

Gon. And do you mark me, sir?

King. Pr'ythee, no more; thou dost talk nothing to me.

Gon. I do well believe your Highness; and did it to minister occasion to these gentlemen, who are of such sensible and nimble lungs that they always use to laugh at nothing.

Ant. 'Twas you we laughed at.

Gon. Who, in this kind of merry fooling, am nothing to you; so you may continue and laugh at nothing still."

(Tempest, Act 2, Sc. 1.)

That all things are not for the best in the best of all possible worlds would seem to result from the wise remarks made by the fishermen who enliven the scene in "Pericles, Prince of Tyre." They compare landlords to whales who swallow up everything, and suggest that the land be purged of "these drones that rob the bee of her honey"; and Pericles, so far from being shocked at such revolutionary and vulgar sentiments, is

impressed by their weight, and speaks kindly of the humble philosophers, who in their turn are hospitable to the shipwrecked prince--all of which un-Shakespearian matter adds doubt to the authenticity of this drama (Act 2, Sc. 1).

However keen the insight of Shakespeare may have been into the hearts of his high-born characters, he had no conception of the unity of the human race. For him the prince and the peasant were not of the same blood.

"For princes are
A model, which heaven makes like to itself,"

says King Simonides in "Pericles," and here at least we seem to see the hand of Shakespeare (Act 2, Sc. 2). The two princes, Guiderius and Arviragus, brought up secretly in a cave, show their royal origin (Cymbeline, Act 3, Sc. 3), and the servants who see Coriolanus in disguise are struck by his noble figure (Coriolanus, Act 4, Sc. 5). Bastards are villains as a matter of course, witness Edmund in "Lear" and John in "Much Ado about Nothing," and no degree of contempt is too high for a

"hedge-born swain
That doth presume to boast of gentle blood."
(Henry VI., Part 1, Act 4, Sc. 1.)

Courage is only to be expected in the noble-born. The Duke of York says:

"Let pale-faced fear keep with the mean-born man,
And find no harbor in a royal heart."

(Henry VI., Part 2, Act 3, Sc. 1.)

In so far as the lower classes had any relation to the upper classes, it was one, thought Shakespeare, of dependence and obligation. It was not the tiller of the soil who fed the lord of the manor, but rather the lord who supported the peasant. Does not the king have to lie awake and take thought for his subjects? Thus Henry V. complains that he can not sleep

"so soundly as the wretched slave,
Who with a body filled and vacant mind,
Gets him to rest, crammed with distressful bread,
Never sees horrid night, the child of Hell,
But like a lackey, from the rise to set,
Sweats in the eye of Phoebus, and all night
Sleeps in Elysium....
The slave, a member of the country's peace,
Enjoys it, but in gross brain little wots
What watch the king keeps to maintain the peace,
Whose hours the peasant best advantages."

(Henry V., Act 4, Sc. 1.)

And these lines occur at the end of a passage in which the king laments

the "ceremony" that oppresses him and confesses that but for it he would be "but a man." He makes this admission, however, in a moment of danger and depression. Henry IV. also invokes sleep (Part 2, Act 2, Sc. 1):

"O thou dull god! why liest thou with the vile
In loathsome beds?"

But plain people have to watch at times, and the French sentinel finds occasion to speak in the same strain:

"Thus are poor servitors
(When others sleep upon their quiet beds)
Constrained to watch in darkness, rain, and cold."
(Henry VI., Part 1, Act 2, Sc. 1.)

Henry VI. is also attracted by the peasant's lot:

"O God, methinks it were a happy life,
To be no better than a homely swain....
... The shepherd's homely curds,
His cold thin drink out of his leather bottle,
His wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade,
All which secure and sweetly he enjoys,
As far beyond a prince's delicates."
(Henry VI., Part 3, Act 2, Sc. 5.)

All of which is natural enough, but savors of cant in the mouths of men who fought long and hard to maintain themselves upon their thrones.

We have already shown by references to the contemporary drama that the plea of custom is not sufficient to explain Shakespeare's attitude to the lower classes, but if we widen our survey to the entire field of English letters in his day, we shall see that he was running counter to all the best traditions of our literature. From the time of Piers Plowman down, the peasant had stood high with the great writers of poetry and prose alike. Chaucer's famous circle of story-tellers at the Tabard Inn in Southwark was eminently democratic. With the knight and the friar were gathered together

"An haberdasher and a carpenter,
A webbe, a deyer and tapiser,"

and the tales of the cook and the miller take rank with those of the squire and lawyer. The English Bible, too, was in Shakespeare's hands, and he must have been familiar with shepherd kings and fishermen-apostles. In the very year in which "Hamlet" first appeared, a work was published in Spain which was at once translated into English, a work as well known to-day as Shakespeare's own writings. If the peasantry was anywhere to be neglected and despised, where should it be rather than in proud, aristocratic Spain, and yet, to place beside Shakespeare's Bottoms and Slys, Cervantes has given us the admirable Sancho Panza, and has spread his loving humor in equal measure over

servant and master. Are we to believe that the yeomen of England, who beat back the Armada, were inferior to the Spanish peasantry whom they overcame, or is it not rather true that the Spanish author had a deeper insight into his country's heart than was allotted to the English dramatist? Cervantes, the soldier and adventurer, rose above the prejudices of his class, while Shakespeare never lifted his eyes beyond the narrow horizon of the Court to which he catered. It was love that opened Cervantes's eye, and it is in all-embracing love that Shakespeare was deficient. As far as the common people were concerned, he never held the mirror up to nature.

But the book of all others which might have suggested to Shakespeare that there was more in the claims of the lower classes than was dreamt of in his philosophy was More's "Utopia," which in its English form was already a classic. More, the richest and most powerful man in England after the king, not only believed in the workingman, but knew that he suffered from unjust social conditions. He could never have represented the down-trodden followers of Cade-Tyler nor the hungry mob in "Coriolanus" with the utter lack of sympathy which Shakespeare manifests. "What justice is there in this," asks the great Lord Chancellor, whose character stood the test of death--"what justice is there in this, that a nobleman, a goldsmith, a banker, or any other man, that either does nothing at all or at best is employed in things that are of no use to the public, should live in great luxury and splendor upon what is so ill acquired; and a mean man, a carter, a smith, a plowman, that works harder even than the beasts themselves, and is

employed on labors so necessary that no commonwealth could hold out a year without them, can only earn so poor a livelihood, and must lead so miserable a life, that the condition of the beasts is much better than theirs?"

How different from this is Shakespeare's conception of the place of the workingman in society! After a full and candid survey of his plays, Bottom, the weaver with the ass's head, remains his type of the artizan and the "mutable, rank-scented many," his type of the masses. Is it unfair to take the misshapen "servant-monster" Caliban as his last word on the subject?

"Prospero. We'll visit Caliban my slave who never
Yields us kind answer.

Miranda. 'Tis a villain, sir,
I do not love to look on.

Prospero. But as 'tis,
We can not miss him! he does make our fire,
Fetch in our wood, and serve in offices
That profit us." (Tempest, Act 1, Sc. 2.)

To which I would fain reply in the words of Edward Carpenter:

"Who art thou ...

With thy faint sneer for him who wins thee bread

And him who clothes thee, and for him who toils

Day-long and night-long dark in the earth for thee?"

LETTER FROM MR. G. BERNARD SHAW

(Extracts)

As you know, I have striven hard to open English eyes to the emptiness of Shakespeare's philosophy, to the superficiality and second-handedness of his morality, to his weakness and incoherence as a thinker, to his snobbery, his vulgar prejudices, his ignorance, his disqualifications of all sorts for the philosophic eminence claimed for him.... The preface to my "Three Plays for Puritans" contains a section headed "Better than Shakespeare?" which is, I think, the only utterance of mine on the subject to be found in a book.... There is at present in the press a new preface to an old novel of mine called "The Irrational Knot." In that preface I define the first order in Literature as consisting of those works in which the author, instead of accepting the current morality and religion ready-made without any question as to their validity, writes from an original moral standpoint of his own, thereby making his book an original contribution to morals, religion, and sociology, as well as to belles letters. I place Shakespeare with Dickens, Scott, Dumas père, etc., in the second order, because, tho they are enormously entertaining, their morality is ready-made; and I point out that the one play, "Hamlet," in which Shakespeare made an attempt to give as a hero one who was dissatisfied with the ready-made morality, is the one which has given the highest impression of his genius, altho Hamlet's revolt is unskillfully and inconclusively suggested and not worked out with any

philosophic competence.[4]

May I suggest that you should be careful not to imply that Tolstoy's great Shakespearian heresy has no other support than mine. The preface of Nicholas Rowe to his edition of Shakespeare, and the various prefaces of Dr. Johnson contain, on Rowe's part, an apology for him as a writer with obvious and admitted shortcomings (very ridiculously ascribed by Rowe to his working by "a mere light of nature"), and, on Johnson's, a good deal of downright hard-hitting criticism. You should also look up the history of the Ireland forgeries, unless, as is very probable, Tolstoy has anticipated you in this. Among nineteenth-century poets Byron and William Morris saw clearly that Shakespeare was enormously overrated intellectually. A French book, which has been translated into English, has appeared within the last ten years, giving Napoleon's opinions of the drama. His insistence on the superiority of Corneille to Shakespeare on the ground of Corneille's power of grasping a political situation, and of seeing men in their relation to the state, is interesting.

Of course you know about Voltaire's criticisms, which are the more noteworthy because Voltaire began with an extravagant admiration for Shakespeare, and got more and more bitter against him as he grew older and less disposed to accept artistic merit as a cover for philosophic deficiencies.

Finally, I, for one, shall value Tolstoy's criticism all the more

because it is criticism of a foreigner who can not possibly be enchanted by the mere word-music which makes Shakespeare so irresistible in England.[5] In Tolstoy's estimation, Shakespeare must fall or stand as a thinker, in which capacity I do not think he will stand a moment's examination from so tremendously keen a critic and religious realist. Unfortunately, the English worship their great artists quite indiscriminately and abjectly; so that is quite impossible to make them understand that Shakespeare's extraordinary literary power, his fun, his mimicry, and the endearing qualities that earned him the title of "the gentle Shakespeare"--all of which, whatever Tolstoy may say, are quite unquestionable facts--do not stand or fall with his absurd reputation as a thinker. Tolstoy will certainly treat that side of his reputation with the severity it deserves; and you will find that the English press will instantly announce that Tolstoy considers his own works greater than Shakespeare's (which in some respects they most certainly are, by the way), and that he has attempted to stigmatize our greatest poet as a liar, a thief, a forger, a murderer, an incendiary, a drunkard, a libertine, a fool, a madman, a coward, a vagabond, and even a man of questionable gentility. You must not be surprised or indignant at this: it is what is called "dramatic criticism" in England and America. Only a few of the best of our journalist-critics will say anything worth reading on the subject.

Yours faithfully,

G. BERNARD SHAW.

FOOTNOTES:

[4] Besides the prefaces here referred to, Mr. G. Bernard Shaw has at various times written other articles on the subject.--(V. T.)

[5] It should be borne in mind that this letter was written before Mr. G. B. Shaw had seen the essay in question, by Tolstoy, now published in this volume.--(V. T.)