Book Reviews


What makes the content of Shakespeare, A Life in Art (originally published in two separate volumes by Columbia University Press as Young Shakespeare and Shakespeare, The Later Years) particularly problematic is its immensely learned author’s insistence that Shakespeare is “like double-faced Janus” who “looks both ways at once,” with “two faces, one turned backwards to the age before his own” and one reflecting “the new spirit” of the times in which he wrote. Problematic because for Fraser, this makes the mature dramatist “a skeptical Englishman . . . devoid of moral point or purpose,” indeed, one who “grew more skeptical as he grew older.” What is more, this skepticism is seen as consistently directed against any moral interpretation of the plays. Thus, for example, we are told that “Shakespeare ante-dates moral judgment” in Romeo and Juliet or at least, “declining to point the moral” in the play, he has “his characters do this for him,” thereby distancing himself from them. So, too, Fraser describes Antony and Cleopatra as “stopping our ears against the strictures of morality,” and treating “our moral sense cavalierly,” as it were implying “a pattern beyond morality.”

In view of this skepticism—or what one might call agnosticism, which clearly mirrors the author’s own Weltanschauung—it may come as a surprise to find that he emphasizes the importance of the dramatist’s early formation on the Bible, which was “endlessly his primer,” albeit also somehow “older than morality and remote from poetic justice.” Thus, he says that the Bible both elucidates the plot and gives the dramatist “his point of departure” in As You Like It, and of the characters in Pericles that “the voice that serves for all of them suggests Holy Writ.” In particular, he sees King Lear as having been influenced by Shakespeare’s study of Saint Paul “from earliest days,” with special attention to that apostle’s “injunction to put off the old man, put on the new.” On the other hand, for all his encyclopedic learning, Fraser betrays a defective knowledge of this sacred source when
he states that “Shakespeare nowhere mentions original sin”—in spite of its recurrence as a theme in *Hamlet* and the explicit mention of “the imposition... hereditary ours” in *The Winter’s Tale*. Again, in spite of Claudius’s impressive admission in *Hamlet*, “O my offence is rank,” he still declares, “Best not to call it guilt”—though if that isn’t guilt, in the commonly accepted sense of the word, what is it? Then in his discussion of *The Winter’s Tale*, the author declares—notwithstanding all the explicit evidence to the contrary—both that “sins and their remission have little to do with the brightening world of Act V” and that the dramatic pattern “isn’t providential and doesn’t require that we awake our faith.” Well, we may ask, what is “the saint-like sorrow” that Leontes is said to have performed at the beginning of the Act, and what is the point of Paulina’s concluding exhortation that “you do awake your faith”?

With all this emphasis, even if at times somewhat off target, on the Bible, the author implies that regardless of his skepticism the dramatist was at heart a Christian—though when it comes to the particular form of Christianity, he again sees Shakespeare as looking Janus-like at once “to the past, Catholic and easy-going” and “forward to the modern world, Protestant and fierce.” Significantly, however, he was neither “an apologist for the Tudor establishment” nor a simple-minded adherent of the cause of the Virgin Queen. From the outset Shakespeare was well aware both that “her throne being at risk, Elizabeth turned inquisitor, as savage as any,” and that “the cruelty the Tudors practiced, subtler than the rack or gallows, menaced the spirit.” Fraser consequently dismisses his seeming praise of her in the conclusion of *Henry VIII* as “patriotic piffle written long after her death”; and though in general the plays are “sometimes patriotic,” he finds they also “make you feel that patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel”—not least when the praises of Britain are put into the mouths of the wicked queen and her worthless son in *Cymbeline*.

Such being the author’s view of the Tudor background to the plays, it is itself a surprise to find him also stating that “living when he did,” Shakespeare’s “skeptical bias comes as a surprise.” He is further surprised to find the dramatist “bereft of conviction” and “emancipated,” considering that “his formal schooling, stifling dissent, awoke in this young scholar disbelief in all shibboleths and creeds.” How, we may wonder, retorting his skepticism against him, does he know? What, after all, does anyone know of the young William’s schooling, or its effect on his future plays? Rather, in view of those times, with so many “thought police” in the offing (to whom he gives a twofold mention), wasn’t it only natural for Shakespeare