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SHAKESPEARE--KING OF INFINITE SPACE.

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CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGISTS LOOK FOR SUBSTANTIAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN A WRITER'S LITERARY WORK AND THE EXTERNALS OF HIS LIFE, A PRACTICE THAT ENGLISH SCHOLARS ESCHEW. HOWEVER, A USEFUL KIND OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY MAY BE FOUND IN THE WORKINGS OF SHAKESPEARE'S IMAGINATION THROUGHOUT MOST OF HIS PLAYS. SHAKESPEARE, IN HAMLET'S WORDS, CAN BE CONCEIVED AS "A KING OF INFINITE SPACE, WERE IT NOT...(FOR) BAD DREAMS." RECURRENT BAD DREAMS REFLECTED IN HIS PLAYS ARE (1) A MALE BIAS, IN WHICH WOMEN ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTTALKED AND IN WHICH MEN ARE DEEPLY DISTURBED, LARGELY THROUGH THEIR OWN COMPOUNDING, (2) A PATTERN OF SEXUAL BETRAYAL, ILLUMINATING THE EVIL THAT BEFALLS THOSE GUILTY OF SELF-DECEPTION, (3) A MOTIF OF INFIDELITY, IN WHICH LOVE RARELY COMES INTO ITS OWN, AND (4) THE SPECTRE OF A WORLD "FULL OF SOUND AND FURY," LACKING A DIVINE HIERARCHY OF POWER. IN ADDITION, SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS INTIMATE SPECIFIC EVENTS IN HIS LIFE. FOR EXAMPLE, HE COMPOSED "HAMLET" AND "CORIOLANUS," TWO MOURNING PIECES WHICH EXPLORE FILIAL DUTY, AT THE TIMES OF HIS FATHER'S AND MOTHER'S DEATHS RESPECTIVELY. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "PSYCHOLOGY TODAY," VOL. 1 (APRIL 1968), 39-41, 66-68.) (JB)

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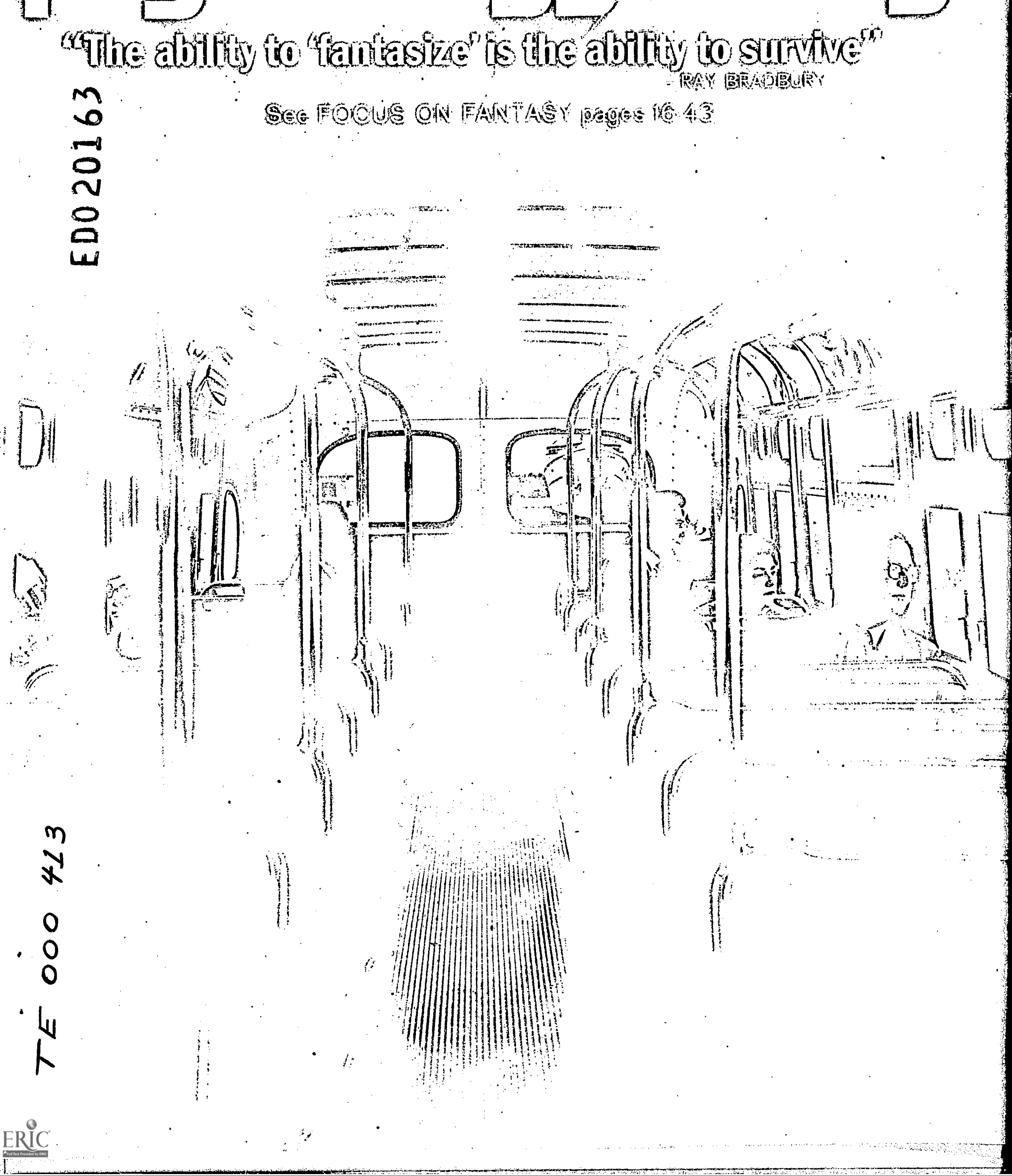
"The ability to 'fantasize' is the ability to survive"

- RAY BRADBURY

See FOCUS ON FANTASY pages 16-43



Shakespeare:

KING OF INFINITE SPACE

By Harold McCurdy

That Shakespeare lived in and by his imagination not even a hardened Shakespeare scholar would deny. And yet, inevitably, there are intrusions on the world which imagination creates. Hamlet sums it up with passionate precision: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams."

Do we dare to suppose that the playwright, in constructing plays for theater audiences in London, was making a confession about the man from Stratford? To claim that Shakespeare's imagination, working through the fabric of his plays, has produced a more truthful autobiography than we can weave from the verifiable facts of his life would generate controversy in every English Department from London to Berkeley.

Nevertheless, I believe we can examine the plays as adequately as we can examine anything and, within limits, do so in repeatable and confirmable ways. We can try to define the sort of world Shakespeare reigned over in his plays, and we can go on to ask what bad dreams troubled it. What connections did Shakespeare's imaginary world have with the theoretical "real world" that we, playing the history game with fragmentary documents, imagine to have existed?

Suppose we start with a simple, fairly manageable question. How many and what kinds of people populate the world of the Shakespearean plays? We run into problems of counting and defining, as in any census, but it is an approximation of the truth to state that there are over 800 of various shapes and sizes and moral conditions. In a sample limited to the 12 most prominent characters in each of 32 plays, I found that these 384 individuals (actually the number is a little indefinite because of duplications and agglomerations) could be divided with fair accuracy into 303 males and 81 females, a ratio of 3.74 to one. If we go at the business a bit differently and assign weights to the individuals by figuring the amount of their speech activity, we find that the males outtalk the females by a ratio of 4.1 to one. In short, Shakespeare's personal world has a distinctly male bias.

The bias is not peculiar to Shakespeare. Scraps of evidence suggest that similar biases may mark all personal worlds. For example, the male-female ratio for Marlowe is 5.66 to one, for Sophocles 2.45 to one. The bias for Charlotte Bronte (female, but not particularly feminine) is in the other direction, in the ratio of 1.27 women to one man.

I can cite a few other facts. When a class of college students once jotted down for me as rapidly as possible the names of people they knew, the male respondents averaged about 2.3 to one in favor of their own sex, the female respondents about 1.7 to one in favor of theirs. In a recent small sample of dreams collected from another college class the same bias occurs, though less strongly: the persons appearing in the dreams of the men were predominantly male in the ratio of 1.7 to one, in the dreams of the women predominantly female in the ratio of 1.2 to one. Various explanations come to mind, but I will here merely affirm that the bias in Shakespeare appears to be more pronounced than usual, though less than in Marlowe.

Masculine though Shakespeare's world is, a woman from time to time assumes a dominant role in it. When that happens, as it does in five of the 32 plays considered here, a quality of mercy tempers the action. Portia, Rosalind, Viola, Helena and Imogen, the heroines of *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Cymbeline*, are faithful, gentle, loving and wise, and exercise in their various ways a healing function—particularly Portia and Helena, the one by law, the other by medicine. In the 27 other plays the top-ranking character (the one who speaks the most) is a man, and the general impression made by these men is far different from the impression made by the five women just mentioned. They may be lovers or they may be warriors, but they are nearly always disturbed and disturbing, often cynical, sometimes outright paranoids; involved, at any rate, in a sea of troubles that they themselves have helped stir up. There's not a man among them as undivided in soul as Portia, Rosalind, Viola, Helena or Imogen. The nearest we get

to such integrity is in *The Tempest*, where Prospero from the beginning aims at forgiveness and reconciliation. Yet even Prospero is not above terrifying those he intends to benefit and often in his agitation has to take a turn through the garden to still his beating mind.

Shakespeare, king of infinite space except for bad dreams, reigns over a largely masculine and largely unhappy world, very witty and stirring, sweetened now and then by birdsong and the fragrance of country flowers, but charged with turmoil, disappointment, rage and defeat. At times the blackness is hellishly black, as in *Macbeth*, where the brief candles intensify the darkness, or in *Lear*, where the gleam that comes from Cordelia is snuffed out in the most pathetic scene in literature. Love's magic, reconciling and healing and resurrecting, comes into its own only occasionally, although toward the end, in *Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, it begins to prevail.

"The pangs of despised love"

On reading the plays in chronological order one finds that certain themes develop as they are repeated. Conspicuous among them is the theme of sexual betrayal. It spans nearly the whole 20 years of dramatic production through a series of eight plays from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* to *The Winter's Tale*. Especially worth our attention are the four plays in which it is most central —*Much Ado About Nothing, Othello, Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*.

In *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-1599) Claudio is fervently in love with Hero. The smooth course of their romance is interrupted by the cynical Don John, who contrives to make it appear that Hero, on the very eve of her wedding, is having a clandestine affair with the scoundrelly Borachio, one of Don John's companions in evil. Persuaded by the subtle Don John of Hero's infidelity and indeed debauchery, Claudio contemptuously renounces her at the altar before the assembled wedding guests and leaves her in a state of collapse on the floor of the chapel. Her cousin Beatrice with the assistance of a priest and other friends, arranges to keep Hero in hiding until the mystery of the incriminating evidence fabricated by Don John can be cleared up, while circulating the rumor in the meantime that Hero has died of grief. A confession is eventually extracted from Borachio that vindicates her completely. But Claudio's distrust of Hero is the real cause of her suffering. Not until he has paid humble tribute at her pretended tomb and been thoroughly chastened by a realization of his guilt and his loss does Hero at last reappear and become reunited with her astonished and penitent lover.

Six years later Shakespeare gives a darkly tragic rendering of the same plot in *Othello* (1604-1605). The pattern is similar, but Iago is more villainous than Don John, Othello more truly murderous in his distrust than Claudio. Not only in the grimly tragic mood, however, is *Othello* different from *Much Ado About Nothing;* the guilt of the man is also much greater. Othello builds distrust on slighter evidence. He has to suspect an old friend instead of a debauched stranger, he has to disbelieve a loyal wife instead of a relatively untried fiancee, in order to come to the damning (and false) conclusion that his beloved has betrayed his love. Claudio, a young man with limited experience of his woman's character, has apparent direct eyewitness evidence to justify him. In contrast, Othello, mature, with signal proofs of his wife's devotion, weaves his case against her out of trifles and his own jealous nature. Yet the blame is not Othello's alone, any more than it was Claudio's. The process that undermines his faith in his wife originates in the wicked mind of another. Othello is, in a sense, only the instrument of Iago.

Some five years later, in *Cymbeline* (1609-1610), a further step is taken toward implicating the lover in the machinery of infidelity. Posthumus, exiled from his wife Imogen because of the anger of her father Cymbeline, King of Britain, makes a wager with the villain Iachimo that amounts to an invitation to go to Britain and test his wife's virtue by attempting to seduce her—this in spite of the fact that, on parting from Imogen to go into exile, he had sworn to remain "the loyal'st husband that did e'er plight troth." The challenge, congenial to Iachimo since he believes in the universal badness of women, is all the more attractive from the glowing account that Posthumus has given of his wife's beauty and chastity. They strike a bargain, Posthumus setting the terms, saying, "if you make your voyage upon her and give me directly to understand that you have prevailed, I am no longer your enemy; she is not worth our debate," though he adds, to be sure, that if the enterprise fails "for your ill opinion and the assault you have made to her chastity you shall answer me with your sword."

Posthumus clearly goes much further than Claudio or Othello in setting the engine of betrayal in motion. Iachimo's attempt against Imogen's virtue is fruitless but, managing to conceal himself in her bedroom, he takes note of certain details of the room and of Imogen's body (a mole on her breast) and steals a bracelet from her arm as she sleeps. By these tokens he is able on his return to convince Posthumus that his wife has played him false.

Thereupon Posthumus bursts out in a tirade against all womankind. The language he uses makes an extraordinary commentary on the dynamics of Shakespeare's imagination. Recall that in the five plays where women are the dominant figures (Imogen being one of them), mercy and love and peace seem to be guaranteed by the healing influence of their integrity. Conceive of these women as constituting important feminine components of Shakespeare's own personality. Then reflect on these words emitted by Posthumus in a fit of puritanical rage:

Could I find out
The woman's part in me! For there's no motion
That tends to vice in man, but I affirm
It is the woman's part: be it lying, note it,
The woman's; flattering, hers; deceiving, hers; . . .
Ambitions, covetings, change of prides, disdain,
Nice longing, slanders, mutability,
All faults that may be named, nay, that hell knows,

(Continued on page 66)

(Continued from page 41)

Why, hers, in part or all; but rather, all;
For even to vice
They are not constant, but are changing still
One vice, but of a minute old, for one
Not half so old as that. I'll write against them,
Detest them, curse them. . . .

Vitriol! There follows an order from Posthumus to his old servant Pisanio, whom he has left in Britain as Imogen's protector, to kill her. Though Pisanio is loyal to his master, he will not carry out this mad commission, but helps Imogen hide and pretend death—a death that almost becomes real through the hostility of the queen and the lust of her brutal son Cloten. Eventually, Posthumus and Imogen are reunited, and Iachimo confesses and is forgiven. In sum, in this version of the old plot, the lover imagines himself to be betrayed because of evidence that he himself has done much to generate, being now no longer the victim and instrument of another but using another as the instrument of his own viciousness.

Finally, a year or two later in *The Winter's Tale* (1610-1611), the fusion of betrayer and betrayed is complete. It is Leontes, the husband, who initiates the thought of infidelity, implements it by the yeasty working of his imagination, and brings down the terrible consequences upon himself. On practically no grounds at all, simply by a suspicious interpretation of his wife Hermione's hospitality to his own lifelong friend Polixenes, Leontes attempts to poison his friend, imprisons his wife and condemns her to death (he is King of Sicily and regards her supposed adultery as treason against the throne), and sends his newborn daughter out with a servant to be exposed in the wilderness to die. The mistreatment of Hermione causes the death of his young son Mamillius, and this event, combined with a message from the Oracle at Delphi, at last reveals to him his folly. The penitent man, however, now receives the news that Hermione, who had fallen into a coma at the announcement of the death of her little son, is dead. The story in fact is a ruse by the faithful Paulina to protect her mistress, and Leontes, not aware that his vengeful schemes have been mercifully thwarted (Mamillius alone has died), must endure 16 years of penitence before Hermione is restored to him, his friend Polixenes returns, his daughter Perdita is found, and the joys of reunion are capped by the betrothal of his daughter to his friend's son Florizel.

In a series of four plays, then, over a period of 12 or so years, we find that the pattern of tensions centering in a man's distrust of a woman changes progressively toward the conclusion that the evil that befalls the man is largely of his own compounding. If we could squeeze the four principal male characters into one and have this one distill the wisdom of the four into a single subjective statement, it might well run this way: "I was not the victim of the falsehood and infidelity of others; I suffered instead from my own self-deception."

"Look here, upon this picture, and on this"

Can we take a formula like this as directly applicable to Shakespeare himself and postulate a relation between the characters in Shakespeare's imaginary world and his own feelings concerning womankind or some particular woman, perhaps his own wife? Should we suppose that Shakespeare, playing in one person many people, incorporating himself in Claudio, Othello, Posthumus and Leontes, by means of them lived through the hell of distrust, jealousy and rage of any unhappy husband to the conclusion that the fault was in himself rather than in the woman?

Practically all professional Shakespearean scholars disparage and resist such hypotheses, while simultaneously, clinical psychologists of various brands act toward the dreams and fantasies of their clients as if, in principle, it was sound procedure to look for substantial connections between imagination and biographical fact. No doubt Freud's influence is very considerable here, but it is not necessary to invoke his name in support of this psychological orientation. Indeed it is rather embarrassing to do so, not only because of the controversial character of Freudian symbolism, but also because his views on Shakespeare are so oddly mixed. On the one hand, he wrote a famous note in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* that connected *Hamlet* with the death of Shakespeare's father, and, on the other hand, he tended to favor the belief that the Shakespearean plays were written by Sir Francis Bacon!

More pertinent, in any case, is the work of Henry Murray with the Thematic Apperception Test, a set of pictures selected and used by Murray to elicit imaginative stories from many different people from a variety of backgrounds. At his Harvard Psychological Clinic over a period of years he and his associates studied the connection between these TAT stories and the autobiographies of their authors. He found that psychologically experienced judges could successfully match stories and autobiographies without knowing who had written them. He further concluded that even the most egocentric of the Harvard college students studied in his clinic, under more or less formal laboratory conditions, were not so egocentric, so prone to identify with their fictional heroes and give vent through them to their own feelings and motives, as many professional authors such as Herman Melville and Thomas Wolfe. The proposition is not that a simple one-to-one correspondence occurs between the external details of an author's life and the contents of his literary works. Something much more complex than that is meant ("in explaining the contents of works of art one may have to include in one's formulation archetypal tendencies, certain critical situations of childhood, the fantasies arising out of them, a host of later experiences, and the artist's immediate situation"), but the connection is held by Murray, and many other psychologists, to be substantial.

It seems highly unlikely that the relations between Will Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, as viewed by Will himself, could be adequately rendered in an account drawn up by a modern positivist historian working from such primary sources as the marriage, baptismal, and burial records, the legal papers, dubious portraits and the gossip of Stratford, and the typography but not the content of the First Folio. Any of us can test out the likelihood of that by considering what sort of story of his own domestic experience would emerge from a similar compilation of the documents and fingerprints he has left scattered about in county courthouses, the offices of the Internal Revenue Service, and the files of the FBI. Our lives are dramas; the events are loaded with personal meaning and intertwined by complicated plots. When all the living reality is winnowed out and only the husks of legal documents remain, our story falls apart into incoherence or achieves a coherence uncannily remote from us. If we are to enter into intimacy with Shakespeare it must be by reading his plays rather than

by reading an "objective" biography.

Even so, there is reason to argue that Shakespeare's plays touch down here and there on the objective plane at points that would be mentioned in any biography of him, whether written by Shakespeare himself or by a 20th Century scientific scholar of the bare facts.

"Your monument shall be my gentle verse"

Two such points are the death of Shakespeare's father in 1601 and the death of his mother in 1608. The tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus*, written close to these dates, can be understood without strained interpretation as mourning pieces, by which I do not mean sentimental funeral orations but poignant analyses of the son's relations with these important human beings, as seen in the perspective of actual or impending bereavement.

To put it briefly, *Hamlet* tells us about a son unwillingly involved in carrying out vengeance for a dead father against an uncle of whom he is not fond and a mother of whom he is very fond indeed, albeit the fondness has been bitterly laced with horror and disgust. *Coriolanus* tells us about a son spurred on to heroic military exploits by a proud mother until he finds himself an outlaw laying siege to his own city, which he would have destroyed had it not been for the pleading of this very mother, who thus unmans him by thwarting the motive by which he lives. To put it even more briefly, *Hamlet* is a story about a son's duty to his father, *Coriolanus* about a son's duty to his mother. In both cases the duty involves the son in actions that wreck his life—in particular, his life as lover of Ophelia in *Hamlet* and of Virgilia in *Coriolanus*. When one recognizes how central the son-parent relationship is in these plays, it becomes a highly significant fact that Shakespeare composed *Hamlet* around the time of his father's death and *Coriolanus* around the time of his mother's.

Shakespeare's father, John Shakespeare, was buried in Stratford on September 8, 1601. The exact date of the composition of *Hamlet* is uncertain, but scholarly consensus places it within a year of John Shakespeare's death, either slightly before or slightly after. In either case, it is reasonable to guess that the dramatist would have been preoccupied with thoughts of his father at that period. We know that he busied himself with his father's affairs before that time. From at least as early as October 1596 he was persistent in application for a coat of arms for the old man and in 1597 he joined him in a lawsuit against his cousin, John Lambert, in another vain effort to regain property inherited by his mother from her father and lost to his uncle, Edmund Lambert (his mother's brother-in-law), in the general decline of John Shakespeare's fortunes in 1578.

In this context it seems a pertinent fact that *Henry IV*, composed in 1597-1598, gives an account of the reformation of a scapegrace son, Prince Hal, conscience-driven to justify himself in the eyes of his father the King. This he does in the first part by heroic feats on the battlefield, where he rescues his father from imminent death and in single combat kills Percy, whom his father had held up before him as a model of true manhood, and in the second part by his grief at his father's death, his austere assumption of his kingly duties, and his renunciation of the licentious companions of his playboy youth, namely Falstaff and his hangers-on.

In short, there is evidence that in the years preceding his father's death Shakespeare's concern for him, and for justifying himself to him, was more than nominal. This concern becomes more intelligible when we consider that Shakespeare's father had scaled the heights of glory possible for a merchant in the little town of Stratford and also experienced the depths of humiliation. He had risen to be its chief citizen during Shakespeare's boyhood, as much of a king as he could be there, and then had so sharply declined in wealth and influence that his wife's property had to be sacrificed and he was incapable of meeting small financial obligations (such as a contribution of fourpence for the relief of the poor, expected of a member of the town council). From that decline John Shakespeare never recovered, and neither, we may surmise, did William. That is, William seems to have felt it necessary to try to build up his father's image (the coat of arms) and to exact tribute from his father's enemies (the lawsuits against the Lamberts) in a style understandable by Stratfordians, while simultaneously engaged in a kindred enterprise on the high dramatic level of *Henry IV* and *Hamlet*.

It makes persuasive sense to say that *Hamlet* recapitulates in dramatic form and with dramatic intensity the pattern of tensions lived through by Shakespeare as a boy, and felt still by Shakespeare the man, that emanated from his father's decline and fall in Stratford. William was four years old when his father rose in 1568 to the office of bailiff. During that year John Shakespeare officially welcomed on two occasions companies of traveling actors, the Queen's and the Earl of Worcester's, thus becoming associated with the sort of gorgeousness and pomp most suited, one would suppose, to arouse the interest of a four-year-old boy, and to add luster to the father's eminence. When William was seven, his father was chief alderman; and in that year, 1571, his sister Anne was born, the last of the daughters, notable for the fact that her birth occurred in her father's ascendancy and her death at the time of his eclipse. For in November of 1578, when William was 14, his father was compelled to mortgage his wife's Wilmcote property to Edmund Lambert, the brother-in-law (and consequently William's wicked uncle, as Claudius was Hamlet's), and five months later Anne died. All in all it was a disastrous year for William and his family, this year in which he experienced his father's ruin and his sister's death, the only death that he had yet personally known in the family.

It was an uncanny year, too, by reason of two drownings in the Avon—a certain William Shaxsper (!), son of a Warwick shoemaker, in June, and a certain Katherine Hamlett (!) in December. The latter event, according to one cautious Shakespearean scholar, "may have given a hint for Ophelia's end." Indeed!

To take these materials some 20 years later and weave them together with a Danish legend into the play *Hamlet*, where a dead father demands revenge on a murderous uncle and a colluding mother and where the son in consequence loses his Ophelia, his kingdom, and his life in futile and confusing maneuvers, seems an appropriate way for a great poet to mourn not only his father's death but his own sorrows and defeats as well. The ambiguities of *Hamlet* gain further illumination from considering the double image of a father that Shakespeare had before him, perhaps in "real life" and certainly in *Henry IV*, where the old monarch is a severe father demanding that the Prince live virtuously and Falstaff is a debauched rival father drawing him off into depravity in imitation of himself.

In due time comes *Coriolanus*. Writ-

ten in or around 1608, the year of Mary Arden Shakespeare's death (she was buried in Stratford on September 9, 1608), the play centers upon the relationship between the Roman military hero Coriolanus and his mother Volumnia, who is devoted to him but not indulgent. As she puts it to her daughter-in-law Virgilia, "if my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love." When banished from Rome because of his aristocratic contempt for the citizens, Coriolanus promises his mother that he will achieve an uncommon fame, and then he sets himself to conquer Rome and revenge himself for the affront to his pride. He sweeps all opposition before him and is at the gates of the city when the Roman emissaries come out to beseech him for favorable terms. He is adamant against them. Finally his mother, humbling her own pride, kneels at his feet, saying,

There's no man in the world
More bound to's mother; yet here he
lets me prate
Like one i' the stocks,

and where others have failed she succeeds. He makes peace with Rome. His vengeance unachieved, his will broken, considered a traitor by his allies (who murder him in the end), he exclaims prophetically:

O mother, mother!
What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,
The gods look down, and this unnatural scene
They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O!
You have won a happy victory to Rome;
But, for your son,—believe it, O, believe it,
Most dangerously you have with him prevailed,
If not most mortal to him.

Scale this heroic tragedy down to more modest proportions, letting Rome become Stratford, Volumnia become Mary Arden Shakespeare, Coriolanus become William, the war against Rome become legal and financial and social measures taken against Stratford, and the story approaches the kind of everyday reality befitting the playright considered as a man in exile. For Shakespeare, even in London, was not indifferent to his home town.

Edwin Arlington Robinson dwells on this fact in his "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," particularly on Shakespeare's concern for having a big house there. Why that house? Was it that he loved the town, or was it that he wanted to put the Shakespeares on top again? At any rate, he purchased New Place, the second largest house in Stratford, in 1597. This was the same year in which he joined forces with his father in bringing suit against the Lamberts for recovery of his mother's patrimony, the Wilmcote property. He also sued Stratfordians for small sums, and he appears to have been among those excessive maltsters and engrossers of corn in a time of local famine against whom it was complained in 1597 that they were "wyked people . . . more lyke to wolves or cormerants than to naturall men" even though "in estymacion of worshipp." The notion does not seem exaggerated that he was waging a sort of campaign against the town that had witnessed his father's disgrace and perhaps exiled William in his deer-poaching youth, and it is possible that his mother, like Volumnia, had mitigated her son's rancor against his kinsmen and fellow townsmen.

"Out, out!"

The high pitch of fury of a man against a city, and against mankind at large, is reached in *Timon of Athens*, which immediately follows *Coriolanus* Afterwards there comes the relaxation of *Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale, The Tempest*, dramas of forgiveness and recovery of the lost and dead, where tenderness emerges as nowhere else in Shakespeare, but accompanied, it must be added, by an eerie quality of out-of-this-worldness. Four years before his death he writes the epitaph of his dramatic life in the famous words of Prospero:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself.
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Is the prophetic voice of Prospero any different from the despairing voice of Macbeth?

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

The human imagination does not simply reflect some abstract or concrete world known to reason or sensory experience. It builds a world of its own, marked by individual personal biases, and this in turn affects our expectations and our behavior. The scientific fact that the human population of the earth is about equally divided between male and female does not prevent the world of Shakespeare's imagination from being populated chiefly by men and boys. Again, no matter how much fidelity there may actually be in the world, the world of Shakespeare's imagination is riddled with infidelity, and fidelity appears more as a miracle than as a routine occurrence. In that world, "most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly." Finally, whether or not it is true that human life does not end in nothingness but proceeds on into eternity in the sustaining love of God, as taught by the Christian theology that Shakespeare knew, the world of his imagination declines to affirm it, except as an occasional sad last resort.

Shakespeare's imagination has great scope and richness but it is the imagination of a man who has bad dreams. We can set other great imaginations beside his, like Milton's and Dante's, and see at once that he has not given us the only world imaginable. Opinions will vary as to whether his is truer or less true than theirs, but certainly it is not the same. It lacks a divine hierarchy of power undergirding it with eternity.

I am referring to the surface of the plays. Beneath the surface, of course, one may discover other currents of meaning: more sex and more Oedipus complex, if one follows Freud and Ernest Jones; more Christianity, if one follows E. A. Armstrong. Yet whatever may be obscurely present in the depths of Shakespeare or anybody else, we must have a concern for what reaches the surface and is given public expression. There's the cutting edge of the imagination that shapes the future. In many respects Shakespeare is a very modern man, ready for alienation, *Being and Nothingness*, and the death of God.