

ÚJ MAGYAR SHAKESPEARE-TÁR

On February 10, 1987, some seventy drama historians, directors, literary critics, and translators met at ELTE for the purpose of organizing what was to become the third Hungarian Shakespeare Committee (the first was formed in 1860, the second in 1907). The organizers elected László Kéry, the dean of Hungarian Shakespeare studies, president, Dezső Mészöly vice president, and Tibor Fabiny executive secretary. In addition, they established as the Committee's official publication *Hungarian Studies in Shakespeare*, the first volume of which has now appeared. The book is divided into essentially two major divisions, the second of which presents the activities of the Shakespeare Committee and a 70-page bibliography, and the first of a group of sixteen essays dealing with historical and critical trends in Hungary and the United States; with one or another aspect of individual plays; and with the ins-and-outs of translations and stage performances. Many of the selections are papers that were read at various meetings of the Committee.

Writing as an American, I turned first to György Endre Szőnyi's review of contemporary American Shakespeare research. I would like to register my gratitude to Szőnyi for disregarding so much of what these days passes for literary criticism (Shakespearian or otherwise), and for concentrating on the one critical movement that has already achieved some noteworthy results in the less than ten years that it has been in existence, the new historicism. The gist of the matter is that, partly as a result of the turmoil of the 1960's, and partly because of the impact of French poststructuralism, the literary branch of American academia has become heavily politicized. With the exception of reader-response criticism, the newer critical schools of the last two decades belong more or less to what Paul Ricoeur has called "the school of suspicion". Whatever their point of departure or methodology, the adherents of these newer views seem to agree that the present order of things, both in the academy and society at large, must be overthrown. Radicalism is the fashion of the day, especially among graduate students at elite universities. Name-calling and slogan-labeling are common, together with the dismissal of other-than-radical views on the ground that their proponents are members of a privileged "race, gender or class". (So widespread are these practices that the distinguished historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has suggested that in the future word processors be manufactured with a new key marked Race-Gender-Class.) All this accounts for the dispiriting spectacle of a senior critic, Gerald Graff, having to explain to his colleagues, junior and not so junior, what the *ad hominem* fallacy is all about. (Michael Sprinkler: *Criticism as Reaction* as quoted by Graff pp. 597-8 above.) As for those who speak up in favor of pursuing, insofar as that is humanly possible, the ideal of an ideology-free stance, they are taken severely to task for being the naive spokesmen for the "exploitative logocentrism (phallogocentrism, in the case of the radical feminists) of Western metaphysics". Thus a critic of this newer breed can write of the "growing *reactionary* movement in the academy to *recover* the ideals of logic, reason, and determinate meaning and to repudiate the radicalism of the sixties and the early seventies". (Gerald Graff: *The Pseudo-Politics of Interpretation*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9 (1983), 597-610.) (Italics mine.) To the best of my knowledge, never before have universities been *accused* of cultivating "the ideals of logic, reason, and determinate meaning". To repeat, I am most grateful to Szőnyi for his judicious selectivity.

The new historicism, to put it as succinctly as possible, strives to place the literary text back into the socio-cultural context in which it was produced. The older historical critics tended to explain the *Zeitgeist* in terms of one overarching principle, the best known of which would be the idea of hierarchy. All of society, it was argued, would be familiar with the idea of a "natural", divinely ordered hierarchy which governs the astronomical heavens, the political order, the structure of the family, and indeed the whole creation. When other critics of the older school, e.g. Hiram Haydn in his *The Counter-Renaissance*, traced various ideologies that stood opposed to the notion of cosmic harmony — Renaissance skepticism and pessimism, naturalism, fideism, and Macchiavellianism — they assumed that such subversive ideologies had a kind of free-floating existence in the minds of readers and audiences, and made no effort to connect concrete texts with concrete events of the day. Not so the new historicists. They seek to place the text back into the "dense" historical context of its origins and, more importantly, to explain the various forms of competing power — social, financial, legal, political — that surround the text. The older critics would search for harmonies, agreements, and generally shared values, while the new historicists, representing one or another variety of Marxism, see

matters in terms of struggle, clashing interests, and ideologies of domination, involving such things as male power, monied interests, aristocratic privileges, exploitative legalities, etc.

Szónyi's overview, with his emphasis on the new historicism, deserves high praise, for it succeeds in packing so much into so short a space — a bare seventeen pages. Szónyi's readers will receive a clear introduction not only to the American critical scene but, almost necessarily, to many of the major literary and philosophical developments of the last two decades in France and Germany. (It is certainly not Szónyi's fault that throughout his study we get *Athusser!* instead of *Althusser*.) The intellectual density of this study makes re-reading mandatory: it is almost as if every sentence were a summary of one or another book or article. But never does the elegance of Szónyi's style or the clarity of this organization allow his study to degenerate into a mere compendium.

A few years ago, Péter Egri published in English an entertaining study of Thomas Godfrey's *The Prince of Parthia*, the first professionally performed drama (1767) in America to be written by a born American. Egri's work, here reprinted in Hungarian, will provide readers with many a happy chuckle. "Godfrey", writes Egri, "a történelem tragédiáját kívánta bemutatni, helyett azonban az utánzás komédiáját írta meg". All told, Godfrey's play is a mish-mash of motifs, linguistic devices, and dramatic gestures found in one or another play of Shakespeare's, all of them reduced to melodramatic claptrap. With energy and obvious relish, Egri traces the Shakespearian sources of dozens of passages in Godfrey's work, amply supporting his thesis that Godfrey's "tragic" play becomes an unintended Shakespeare-parody. The serious side of Egri's argument is that neither Godfrey nor any other American playwright was able to transplant the Shakespearian ethos into the New World. The task of embodying the typically American experience belonged to the novel (in the 19th century) and to O'Neill (in the 20th).

It is the eight critical essays grouped under the heading *Mű és értelmezés* that will, I am sure, be the section of the book with the greatest appeal to most readers. Dealing with six plays — *King Lear*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *1 Henry IV*, and *Hamlet* — these essays reveal such a variety of interests and approaches that it is impossible to find a common thread running them. They range from Tibor Fabiny's study of Renaissance numerology and number symbolism in *Love's Labour's Lost* through two fine studies of *The Tempest* by Emma P. Szabó and Péter Litván, Géza Kállay's sensitive rhetorical analysis of the Temptation Scene in *Othello*, László Kéry's examination of the revenge motif in *Hamlet* in the light of Renaissance ideology, to two searching essays on *King Lear* by István Bogárdi Szabó and Marcell Gellért.

Is it possible to say something new (and worth-while) about a work like *Hamlet*? Kéry shows that it is. Placing the figure of Hamlet firmly in the conventions of the Elizabethan-Jacobean revenge tragedies, Kéry argues that *Hamlet* is unique, in that, first, the protagonist decides to test the truth of the evidence urging him on to revenge and, second, he does not actively promote circumstances that would favor his revenge, but waits for the propitious moment, thereby avoiding the self-created and self-imposed madness into which other revenge figures inevitably rushed. Hamlet's refusal to kill the praying Claudius must be seen neither as a sign of his becoming the devil's ally, nor as a symptom of the temporary predominance of the evil side of his nature, but as an indication of his radical firmness in achieving a truly perfect revenge for his murdered father — who was, we must remember, murdered without "shriving-time allowed". An eye for an eye. But unlike the revenge-protagonists of other plays, Hamlet, the Christian-Stoic figure, leaves it up to Providence (or Fate) to provide the opportune moment.

Intriguing as the exegetical problems of *Hamlet* may be, it is *King Lear* that has most engaged the attention of critics of the last half of our century. Nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism, beguiled as it was by the overwhelming success of the novel, gave us a Shakespeare who was, like Dickens, a creator of a gallery of individual characters who were seen as unique in their life-like, vivid three-dimensionality. It became the critic's task to delineate and explore the complexities of these Shakespearian characters, and what more attractive object for character analysis than the melancholy Danish prince? As a result, it was on *Hamlet* that nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism lavished the most and best of its energies. Conversely, the age showed itself unable to read *King Lear*, a work that plays fast and loose with the accepted criteria of realism and psychological verisimilitude. (One thinks of Tolstoy's bafflement by the play and by his rejection of all of Shakespeare as the "supreme delineator of character". We today, however, do much better by *King Lear*, as witnessed by the essays of Bogárdi Szabó and Gellért. Neither critic has a word to say about char-

acter as such, and neither considers one or another scene or passage as centrally illustrative of certain traits of this or that persona. They are after bigger, more significant game. Bogárdi Szabó, for instance, taking as his point of departure Paul Ricoeur's analysis of the concept of witnessing as basic to an understanding of many human phenomena, studies the manner in which the quasi-legal act of witnessing enables us to understand so much that is to be found in *King Lear*: adoption (Edmund) and disinheritances (Cordelia and Edgar), trials (the love-trial in the play's opening scene, the trial and blinding of Gloucester), the false witness borne by Goneril and Regan against their father, the theme of justice that appears throughout so much of the play, and the great Judgment Scene (III, 6) in which a mad King, a professional Fool, and a man playing the role of a madman sit in judgment on a supposedly sane world. Why then is Lear made to suffer? That he may be a true witness of the truth and to the truths of this world. The overwhelming emphasis therefore falls on the world, not on the idiosyncracies of Lear's personality. In much the same vein, Gellért argues that the essence of *King Lear* is the process of undressing of the readers (or the audience). The aim of the play is to move us out of our static selves as outside, objective observers, to alienate us from our rational selves, and to make us as exposed and as uncertain as are some of the personae within the play. Like so much of mannerist art, *King Lear* is replete with dualities and ambivalences: Christian monotheism and pagan polytheism, ethical objectivism and moral nihilism, the clash of traditional values with contemporary ones, belief in striving and belief in passive acquiescence — all resulting in a cosmic stalemate, the only solution to which is a new beginning. The Lear-universe is permeated by the meaninglessness of a continually reiterated "nothing", a category that constitutes the realm of power, the domain of tragedy. Only the uniquely human category of dignity, achieved by loyalty and love, enables man to achieve that positive something that sets limits to the "nothing" that fosters tragic meaninglessness. Gellért's close, sensitive reading of *King Lear* is a work of criticism that is as perceptive as it is moving.

Though limitations of space prevent me from commenting on the other essays in this book, I feel I must say something about the 70-page bibliography at the end of this work. Ágnes Gál and Júlia Gál give us a finding list of journals relating specifically to Shakespeare, the Renaissance, and English literature in general in 37 libraries throughout the country; Attila Kiss, Péter Nyáry, and Ágota Révész provide a selective annotated bibliography of some 30 pages of major books and articles published outside Hungary during the course of the last fifteen years, noting especially works that relate to emblems and iconography; Katalin Kürtösi offers an English-language compilation of Hungarian Shakespeare scholarship for 1986–7, each item on her list accompanied by an elegantly clear summary of the author's thesis. Clearly, this section of the book will prove eminently valuable and convenient for those with more than a cursory interest in Shakespeare.

In conclusion, I should like to return to February 10, 1987, the first organizational meeting of the new Hungarian Shakespeare Association, and to Géher István's inaugural address. Reviewing with satisfaction the various activities of the last twenty-five years — general volumes of Shakespeare studies, visits by the Royal Shakespeare Company, the BBC series of TV productions on Hungarian TV, the single-volume edition of individual plays — Géher notes that the cultivation of Shakespeare in Hungary is alive and well — on the stage, in the study, on radio and TV, and in the schoolroom. But, argues Géher, all this life, all these activities are diffuse, lacking a central focus, in other words, a national forum. The scholar who writes a study does so in the knowledge that his work will not enter "the bloodstream of international Shakespeare-scholarship" and, perhaps worse yet, that it will have hardly any impact on Hungarian intellectual life. It is to be hoped, says Géher, that the establishment of the new Association will help correct matters. But there is still one great need: new translations. The Hungarian Shakespeare canon is essentially 40–50 years old: six plays are classics from the 19th century; seventeen are from the Franklin edition of 1948, and eleven derive from the 1955 edition. Géher then calls on the new generation of poets to give us not just good Shakespeare, but contemporary Shakespeare, as well. Given the competence and the energy so clearly shown in this volume, one cannot doubt that Géher's call will be heeded.

Colorado State University
U.S.A.

Thomas R. Mark