

'Hamlet' and Historical Consciousness Towards an Oxfordian Criticism

Introductory: Cumberbatch *Hamlet*

On Thursday I saw the film broadcast version of the Benedict Cumberbatch *Hamlet*, which was to my mind good, but fairly classical and conventional, which is, however, so far, a good thing. However, the cutting was so drastic, the amputation so staggering, of crucial passages, that one wonders if there is any memory of Shakespeare left in our super-modern epoch: “What is a man...” cut from “How all occasions...”; “...as would perhaps trouble a woman” cut from the lead in to “Not a whit, we defy augury...”; something which might concern us Oxfordians “But byr lady a must build churches then...” cut from “Then there is hope that a great man’s memory might outlive his life half a year.....”; ‘yeoman service’ replaced with ‘faithful service’, when Hamlet relays to Horatio his forging of the King’s letter to the King of England; not to mention the cutting of the whole crucial first scene (without which *Hamlet* is a mere character study) - but I’ll come back to that! - and also, also ---- but *this* one I must deal with in especial....

‘As ’twere’

It is what they have done with Hamlet’s “to hold, *as ’twere*, the mirror up to nature”. I laughingly asked the Conference at Ashland whether we had mislaid Hamlet’s ‘as ’twere’ on the way to the Authorship Forum. But this was rudely directed merely at my fellow Oxfordians! I never could never have dreamt that the far the most widely broadcast, and in many ways quite traditional, ‘Hamlet’ of modern times would actually omit it. I could not believe my ears. I still cannot altogether. But I winced at it so forcefully that my wife gave me an odd look, so I think I must have heard it aright. I even neurotically checked it is really there in the Second Quarto and the First Folio, and it is in both, whilst *that whole section of the speech* is missing from the First Quarto, suggesting it is a late, and authoritative, - and very Greek, - authorial addition: “with this special, o’erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”

What do we lose if we lose the “as ’twere”, the “as ’twere” which implies *creative* realisation in art, not mere imitation? We lose that whole organic richness, which is essentially Shakespearean, of an enactive, identificatory-dramatic, not merely representative, mode of mimesis or imitation. We are reduced to a linear realisation of reality. Against this is set, in English criticism, persistent now for nearly 150 years (what a coincidence!), some variant version or other of Art for Art’s Sake, the complete denial of representative significance, culminating in Professor Shapiro’s anti-biographical stance in *Contested Will*. We lose, among so so much, all the teasing

of Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* literalism which Shakespeare indulges, in the Choruses of *Henry V*, for instance:

“And so our scene must to the battle fly;
Where--O for pity!--we shall much disgrace
With four or five most vile and ragged foils,
Right ill-disposed in brawl ridiculous,
The name of Agincourt. Yet sit and see,
Minding true things by what their mockeries be.”

which satirises Sidney's, for instance:

“...By and by we hear news of shipwreck in the same place, and then we are to blame if we accept it not for a rock. Upon the back of that comes out a hideous monster with fire and smoke, and then the miserable beholders are bound to take it for a cave. While in the mean time two armies fly in, represented with four swords and bucklers, and then what hard heart will not receive it for a pitched field?”

And out with all that goes all the fused multiplicity of Shakespearean verse, all the multiplicity of the Shakespearean total interface, of mythic-hermetic vision with the most compelling realism, comparable to the unfathomable reach of the symbolic-realistic music drama of Richard Wagner, and of Greek Tragedy, and unique on this scale in English, of which Ted Hughes has written so profoundly in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.

Dissociation of Sensibility and Historicity

And we lose the sense of historical evolution of consciousness, interspersed with phases of amnesia, the most recent, in English, version of which TS Eliot dubbed the ‘dissociation of sensibility’, of which I spoke last year, associated, roughly, with the Whig Enlightenment from, roughly, 1688, prepared by the Restoration of 1660, and the French Catholic Absolutist version of which is evoked by George Huppert in his important work on the 16th Century French Historians (including Francois Belleforest!), who had influenced the pioneer work in historicity of Gianbattista Vico of Naples, *The Idea of Perfect History*.

This is what I call historicity, the emergence of historical consciousness, which is present equally in the smallest fragment of text, and the vastest sweep of historical transformations.

A brief illustration from two advertisement clips will make the idea of historicity clearer!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7waiVCP-io>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Om15TM7t9g>

In the Heineken advert, from the early eighties, still just possible in Margaret Thatcher's time, we have a delightfully skilfully managed appeal to deep English historical-cultural values, embodied in the Wordsworth poem of the daffodils, and the accompanying music of the *Nimrod* variation from Elgar's *Enigma Variations*; the parody is so delicate and humorous as not to be at

all offensive but, rather, successfully to make us laugh out loud at both the lead up, and the final pun on 'poets' and 'parts'.

Now, historicity is the unique state and realisation of historical consciousness at a given moment. But therefore, already, the Heineken advert is in itself a very rich illustration of historicity. And if we further take account of the fact that that degree of seriousness about the cultural-historical heritage very soon afterwards became well-nigh impossible to sustain, in ironical post-modern Britain, because of the advance of technocracy, and of post-modern awareness, we have an even stronger illustration of historicity. So already in the Guinness advert, after 10 years of Thatcherism, and with ten years of Blairism shortly to come, the scale of cultural parody and dissociation has gone way beyond the serious appeal to cultural-historical meaning of the Heineken advert.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Om15TM7t9g>

This is completely post-modern. As such it is pure enactment. It has a mere illusion of a message. It implies a radical shift of consciousness in mass psychology.

Eliot's seminal, radically modern, and so historicity driven, *The Metaphysical Poets*, of 1921,

<http://www.usask.ca/english/prufrock/meta.htm>

one year after Looney's equally seminal, historicity driven, book came out, presupposes this kind of movement of historical consciousness:

“The difference is not a simple difference of degree between poets. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility. When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The poets of the seventeenth century, *the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth*, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. They are simple, artificial, difficult, or fantastic, as their predecessors were; no less nor more than Dante, Guido Cavalcanti, Guinicelli, or Cino. In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered;....”

Churchill Marlborough and Macaulay

I am going to address this shift directly in terms of history and the writing of history, and then this will lead me back to *Hamlet*, and to the recovery of Shakespearean sensibility, after 200 years. The history I am going to appeal to is to Winston Churchill and his epic narrative history of his legendary ancestor, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough. Churchill's history came out from 1933 to 1938, that is, in parallel to the rise of Hitler, whose nemesis, just like the nemesis

Marlborough was for the absolutist Louis XIV, Churchill (with his profound European mind) was shortly to become.

Now, in the course of his history, Churchill has a running argument with Lord Macaulay, which is of deep interest to us. For Macaulay, Marlborough was pre-eminently cold, malignant, avaricious, corrupt, treacherous, and double-dealing, - who just happened also to be a military and political genius. Is this sounding at all familiar? For Macaulay, he is nearest to a villain of all his *History of England*. This impression has lasted, despite Churchill's best efforts. And Macaulay plays the same game with James Boswell, author of the *Life of Dr Johnson*, of which Macaulay says:

"The Life of Johnson is assuredly a great, a very great work. Homer is not more decidedly the first of heroic poets, Shakspeare is not more decidedly the first of dramatists, Demosthenes is not more decidedly the first of orators, than Boswell is the first of biographers. He has no second. He has distanced all his competitors so decidedly that it is not worth while to place them. Eclipse is first, and the rest nowhere."

But here is the catch. Once again, the genius is belittled, with a legacy for both Johnson and Boswell not fully overcome today, and a grossly paradoxical theory of origins is propounded: "these men [Goldsmith, Fontenelle] attained literary eminence in spite of their weaknesses. Boswell attained it by reason of his weaknesses. If he had not been a great fool, he would never have been a great writer. Without all the qualities which made him the jest and the torment of those among whom he lived, without the officiousness, the inquisitiveness, the effrontery, the toad-eating, the insensibility to all reproof he never could have produced so excellent a book." Does this logic - Whig logic, anti-Feudal logic - sound familiar, for us Oxfordians?

For instance, Churchill movingly sets in the scales, on the other side, the love of John Churchill and Sarah his wife. First he quotes Macaulay:

"He must have been enamoured indeed. For he had little property except the annuity which he had bought with the infamous wages bestowed on him by the Duchess of Cleveland: he was insatiable of riches; Sarah was poor; and a plain girl with a large fortune was proposed to him. His love, after a struggle, prevailed over his avarice; marriage only strengthened his passion; and, to the last hour of his life, Sarah enjoyed the pleasure and distinction of being the one human being who was able to mislead that far-sighted and sure-footed judgement, who was fervently loved by that cold heart, and who was servilely feared by that intrepid spirit."

Then Churchill comments:

"How often men reveal their own secrets unconsciously when affronting others! This sentence, "He must have been enamoured indeed." shows the sphere to which Macaulay relegates love, and the limits within which, from his personal experience, he supposes it to be confined. It is to him a localised aberration which distorts judgement, and not a sublime passion which expresses and dominates all being."

He then quotes Paget, Macaulay's great refuter, who says that neither Macaulay nor Swift were able to understand erotic love, and who compares Macaulay's reaction to that of Milton's Satan observing Adam and Eve's love:

"The love of Churchill and Sarah Jennings seems to inspire Lord Macaulay with much the same feelings as those with which a certain personage, whom Dr. Johnson used to call 'the first Whig', regarded the happiness of our first parents in the Garden of Eden."

But Churchill goes on:

"The explanation of Macaulay's sourness is not, however, obscure. He had decided in the plan of his history that Marlborough was to be presented as the most odious figure in his cast. He was the villain who 'in the bloom of youth loved lucre more than wine and women and who at the height of greatness loved lucre more than power and fame.' This indictment, the most detestable than can be conceived, had to be sustained. The whole story of the courtship, marriage, and lifelong union, of John and Sarah was in brutal conflict with the great historian's theme. The facts could not be disputed. They proclaim the glory of that wedlock in which the vast majority of civilised mankind find happiness and salvation in a precarious world. After nearly a quarter of a century of married life, Churchill, sailing for the wars from Margate Quay, wrote to his wife:

'It is impossible to express with what a heavy heart I parted from you when I was at the waterside. I could have given my life to have come back, though I knew my own weakness so much I durst not, for I should have exposed myself to the company. I did for a great while have a perspective glass looking upon the cliffs in hopes I might have had one sight of you.'

Sarah, in a letter certainly later than 1689, and probably when he was in the Tower, wrote:

'Wherever you are while I have life my soul shall follow you, my ever dear Lord Marl., and wherever I am, I shall only kill the time, wish for night that I may sleep, and hope the next day to hear from you.'

Finally when, after his death, her hand was sought by the Duke of Somerset: 'If I were young and handsome as I was, instead of old and faded as I am, and you could lay the empire of the world at my feet, you should never share the hand and heart that once belonged to John Duke of Marlborough.'

These are tremendous facts, lifting the relations of men and women above the human scene, with all its faults and cares. They rekindle in every generous bosom the hope that things may happen here in the lives of the humblest mortals which roll round the universe and win universal sanction.

All this vexed the mind of Lord Macaulay. It marred the design of his history. It ruptured whole sets of epigrams and antitheses which had already become his literary pets. There was nothing for it but to sneer, and sneer he did, with all the resources of his nimble, sharp, unscrupulous pen."

Marlborough and Back to *Hamlet*

Marlborough embodied, perhaps directly influenced by Shakespeare, which he is said to have described as the only history book he had ever read, the numinous and courtly uncanniness of the great aristocratic warrior, celebrated to extremes in Nietzschean vision, but manifest unquenchably to us in Shakespeare's Henry V at Agincourt. In Churchill, in the history Heidegger's pupil, Leo Strauss, described as the greatest historical work of the twentieth century, we have the unique revelation of the systematic historical response of one such numinous and courtly warrior to another, both of them shaped by Shakespeare, the archetypal invoker of historical vision, and of mythic numinous figures out of Plutarch and others, in our canon. From Shakespeare Marlborough and Churchill acquired their unique sense of the historical cusp moment, the sense of a moment of time in which everything changes. This it is which is implicit in that amazing first scene of *Hamlet*, in the near neighbourhood to *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and which does not re-emerge until such moments as the beginning of the *Ancient Mariner* of Coleridge, and of Jane Austen's *Emma*, whose uncanny and demure opening sentence is such an epitome of the whole novel:

"Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and a happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her."

"Who's there?" "and what follows it ('Tis bitter cold and I am sick at heart..... Not a mouse stirring') evokes a different atmosphere but in the same way of epitome in the moment. To recognise, and be able to use this reflectingly, to evoke the cusp moment is the privilege of our last centuries, from Romanticism onwards. I believe it is no accident that the Authorship question re-awakened at that time. There is something lordly and aristocratic, tacitly feudal, in such multilayered mastery (it is present in Proust, Joyce, and Lawrence, and Eliot, and Yeats also, even in Dickens), which may account for the power of the Stratfordian myth (to destroy which Churchill is rumoured to have hesitated

<https://hankwhitemore.wordpress.com/2012/11/28/what-winston-churchill-said-about-questioning-the-shakespeare-authorship/>), and also for Macaulay's venom towards the aristocrats

Boswell and Marlborough. We do not wish to be confronted with the fact of greatness. And that accounts for the dumbing down of Shakespeare which continues apace and is part of what diminished, for me, the National Theatre *Hamlet* I just saw.

Blenheim

To end, I invite you to hear the tragic Shakespearean Agincourt note (with even the hint of the enemy's frivolity!), together with the Shakespeare note of cusp historicity in the instant of time, in Churchill's invocation of the dawn of the Battle of Blenheim:

“The Count of Merode Westerloo, a Flemish officer of distinction who commanded a Belgian contingent in the service of Spain forming part of Marshall Tallard’s army, has left us sprightly memoirs of this and other campaigns. He dined that night in Blenheim village with the generals and colonels of his division. Never was he in better spirits, when, having eaten and drunk excellently, he returned to his quarters. These were in a grange which overlooked the Nebel. His retinue had carpeted the floor and set up his bed. ‘Never I believe have I slept more sound and tranquil than this night.’ He was still sleeping profoundly at six o’clock in the morning when his trusty valet, all out of breath, entered the barn. ‘Milord the enemy are there!’ ‘Where?’ said the count, mocking him, ‘there?’ ‘Yes there, there!’ reiterated the servant, and, throwing open the door of the barn and the curtain of his master’s bed, he revealed a brilliant and astounding spectacle. The wide plain, bathed in the morning sunlight, was covered in hostile squadrons and battalions, already close at hand, and steadily marching on. But behind this magnificent array, if the count could have discerned them, were the shapes of great causes and the destinies of many powerful nations. Europe protested against the military domination of a single power. The Holy Roman Empire pleaded for another century of life. The ancient rights of the Papacy against Gallicanism, and the ascendancy of a Universal over a National Church - despite the mistaken partisanship of the reigning Pope, were in fact fatefully at stake. The Dutch Republic sought to preserve its independence and Prussia its kingdom rank, And from across the seas in England, the Protestant Succession, Parliamentary Government, and the future of the British Empire advanced with confident tread. All these had now brought their case before the dread tribunal now set up in this Danube plain.”

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