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NAIVE AND SOPHISTICATED READING

ON THE MOVIE-HOUSE SCREEN the hero cautiously edges himself around the corner of a house in search of the villain. Suddenly, thirty yards behind him down the street, that same villain steps into the open, gun raised. From the darkness at the rear of the movie house comes a cry of anguish, "Look out, Dan! He's behind you!"

How many times this sort of thing has happened, and not only with children. Those who respond in this way of course confuse fiction with fact; for the moment at least they think that the actor is really the person he portrays and that the feigned action is spontaneous and real. These people are not as few as one might expect, or to put the same observation another way, they are joined in their naïveté by many, many people who, in reading a book or in watching a play, regard the characters of fiction and drama as actual, living people. These readers (and viewers) are certainly not confined to the unlearned, for many scholarly critics, especially those who approach literature from the viewpoint of psychology, make the same basic assumption.

This assumption, that fictional characters are autonomous and the same as complete, living human beings, is at odds with the basic assumption made by the sophisticated reader. For this kind of reader, fictional characters are far from being autonomous; like individual scenes and episodes, they are elaborate devices to be manipulated by the author so as to create certain intellectual and emotional effects—they are, like the other devices, small parts contributing to a much larger whole. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, Charlotte Lucas is far from being autonomous or whole. She is basically a device used to highlight, by contrast, the attitude of Elizabeth Bennet towards love and marriage; of course Charlotte must also be a convincing representation of a human being if she is to be credible and if her contrast with Elizabeth is consequently to make its point, but certainly we know very little about her in addition to the minimum required for these effects. Compare her, for a

moment, with an actual human being you have known casually for a few months: you will realize at once that you have already come into contact with many more facets of the living person than you ever do with Charlotte. She serves essentially the same function in the book as the incident of Lydia's elopement: both bring the attitude of Elizabeth into greater relief.

Much the same divergence in basic assumptions can be seen in readers' responses to Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. Some have believed that Shakespeare deliberately killed Mercutio because he was becoming more attractive and appealing than the hero. Such a view presupposes that Shakespeare did not have the shape and direction of the play in mind from the time he began to write: in fact there is in effect a further assumption, that the characters of the play were autonomous beings who came together and began interacting—until they got out of hand and Shakespeare had to interfere. The sophisticated reader, on the other hand, regards Mercutio as a device that, besides being a vehicle for incidental fun—largely verbal—serves principally as a foil to highlight the mood of Romeo at a particular point in the play. When this function has been fulfilled, the device is disposed of. Mercutio was needed to show us something of Romeo, just as the death of Tybalt is needed to move the play in the direction desired: when either of these devices has served its purpose, there is of course no point in keeping it around.

The extreme lengths to which the naïve assumption about characters can be pushed was seen in a Victorian study written by the actress and commentator Helena Faucit, Lady Martin. In contrast to the sophisticated reader, who looks for only that part of the feigned past of fictional characters which an author regards as pertinent to the work of art at hand, Lady Martin extrapolated back from what Shakespeare provided for us, and constructed a childhood past for his heroines. If we are to know how Portia accomplishes what she does in the play, "we must go back to her youth," which is outside the play. As for Ophelia, well, this is what Lady Martin writes: "The baby Ophelia was left, as I fancy, to the kindly but thoroughly unsympathetic tending of country-folk, who knew little of 'inland nature.' Think of her, sweet, fond, sensitive, tender-hearted, the offspring of a delicate dead mother, tended only by roughly-mannered and uncultured natures! One can see the sweet child with no playmates of her kind, wandering by the streams, plucking flowers, making wreaths and coronals, learning the names of all the wildflowers in glade and dingle . . ." Such an extrapolation, while it strikes the sophis-

ticated reader as marvellously mad and completely beside the point, is of course perfectly understandable: if one assumes that fictional characters are actual living persons, they must then, naturally enough, have had a past. Since the author has not chosen to provide us with any information about the past of these autonomous characters, it is then the duty of scholars to do so.

In the present century the extrapolation of fictional characters has been not so much into their past, as into their unconscious. Ernest Jones, M.D., has provided a classic illustration of this extrapolation in *The Problem of Hamlet and the Oedipus-Complex*. "As a child," Dr. Jones writes, emulating Lady Martin, "Hamlet had experienced the warmest affection for his mother, and this, as is always so, had contained elements of a disguised erotic quality."² These elements, of course, led him, unconsciously, to desire to kill his father and to take his father's place in his mother's affections. This desire was rigorously repressed by the censor in his mind, until he saw his uncle in fact kill his father and take the elder Hamlet's place in the affections of Gertrude. Then, "without his being in the least aware of it these ancient [incestuous] desires are ringing in his mind, are once more struggling to find conscious expression, and need such an expenditure of energy again to repress them that he is reduced to the deplorable mental state he himself so vividly depicts" (p. 25). Nor is this all, for Hamlet's "unconscious" works in other directions as well: "the relationship with Ophelia never flowers because Hamlet's unconscious only partly desires her; in part Ophelia is felt to be a permitted substitute for the desired relationship with Laertes" (p. 20). (Perhaps I should explain to the reader that I quote chapter and verse, and give page references, not at all to pick a quarrel with any critic, but simply to assure the reader that I have not created straw men to illustrate the naïve assumption.)

Another illustration of extrapolating an unconscious for a fictional character appears in a study, "Prince Hal's Conflict,"³ by Ernst Kris. Prince Hal, it appears, also has an unconscious in which is repressed the desire to kill his father. Since (if "since" is really the word for the relation) for him regicide would be parricide, he dissociates himself from Henry IV's action in killing Richard II: "he avoids contamination with regicide because the impulse to regicide (parricide) is alive in his unconscious" (p. 270). When Hotspur threatens to kill Henry IV, Hal unconsciously sees in Hotspur an embodiment of his own desire to kill his father and so, seeking to repress that desire, kills Hotspur. By "shunning the court for the tavern," Hal can have the best of both worlds: he can give vent to "his hostility to his father" and at the same time he safely removes himself from "the temptation to parricide." When

Hal ascends to the throne, he can afford to give further vent to his hostility and so cruelly rejects Falstaff, who all along has served as a father-substitute for him.

Now the sophisticated reader would not quarrel with the possibility that real, living human beings may behave in the way, and for the reasons, ascribed by these scholars to Hamlet and Prince Hal. But he would question their basic assumption. When they attribute an unconscious to these characters, they have first assumed that these fictional characters are the same as living persons: that they are independent of the author and that they have an existence outside the areas of time and space with which the play is directly concerned. This assumption appears to the sophisticated reader as extremely naïve, and the critical studies based upon it seem to be merely learned elaborations of the fundamental naïveté. It is a point of merely peripheral interest to these critics that Shakespeare himself had no idea what was going on in the unconscious minds of his characters.

As far as the sophisticated reader can see, whenever an author writes, he is concerned with creating a series of effects, intellectual and emotional, often in order to communicate something about a certain theme, which in turn may be intellectual, emotional, or both. To create these effects, he will make use of such devices as scenes, episodes, and characters, but each of these devices will be only partial. No scene that he describes will have in it all the details he could possibly have included (the mind boggles at the multiplicity possible); no episodes or actions will have all the details he (not even Henry James) might have included; and similarly no character will be presented in all the detail that the author might have included. Why should we, the readers, attempt to fill in what the author has chosen to leave out? Presumably in making his selection of the details to include in his scenes, episodes, and characters, he has chosen only those—and all those—which will contribute in the way he wants to the series of effects he wishes to create. What is left over is either inferior to what has been included, or is simply irrelevant. Consequently if an author does not wish to create an unconscious for a character, and to present it to us, what business have we to go about creating one? Who do we think we are—the author? If so, we have confused, not only fiction with fact, characters with persons, but also ourselves with someone else.

The credibility of fictional characters, the sophisticated reader feels, depends not so much on a multiplicity of detail as on the accuracy with which

those details that are presented depict the kind of thoughts and actions in which living persons actually engage. The more we are convinced that fictional characters are doing the sort of thing that living people do, the more we are willing to allow our emotions to be engaged. What makes the character of Hamlet so believable is not what is thought to be going on in an unconscious that does not exist, but that what Hamlet does and says parallels with convincing accuracy what we have seen actual persons do or what we have heard or read of actual persons doing. And as F. L. Lucas points out in his *Literature and Psychology*, Shakespeare's contemporaries would have been exposed to more instances of behaviour like Hamlet's—and Ophelia's—than we are today.⁴ Certainly, as the example of Mr. Lucas makes clear, a knowledge of psychology can help us judge how accurately an author has represented human behaviour, without having to try to delve into an assumed unconscious.

A further reason for feeling that it is unnecessary to look for an unconscious is the fact that most authors writing before Freud became fashionable took pains, by using various conventions, to let the reader or the audience know why their characters were acting as they did. Shakespeare, for instance, chose a most prominent part of his play, Hamlet's first soliloquy—delivered *solus* of course, and probably front and centre as well, to provide us with a reason for his peculiar state of mind. And even Lucas, who uses the psychological approach, finds this reason, along with the actions that follow in the play, sufficient to make Hamlet's behaviour appear credibly parallel to that of actual, living human beings. One might add, with reference to Prince Hal and Ernst Kris's search for a reason for his behaviour, that here, too, Shakespeare chose a most prominent part of his play—again the hero's first soliloquy—to provide the audience with all the explanation it needed for the dramatic actions that were to follow. What M. H. Abrams has called "a keen eye for the obvious" would appear, to the sophisticated at least, to be of greater value to the reader than an effort to plumb the depths of a character's unconscious.

Extrapolating a fictional character's past and creating an unconscious for him are not the only ways in which the naïve reader confuses fiction with fact. Even such a knowledgeable critic as Edmund Wilson imagines a future for the principal characters of Jane Austen's *Emma*, a future that would take place after the end of the book. He sees Emma adopting another protégée as she had Harriet Smith and even establishing her in her household, much to the exasperation of Knightley.⁵ Such an extrapolation forward into the future

appears, to the reader wise in the ways of literary conventions, to be based on two false assumptions, one naïve and the other perverse. The naïve assumption is of course that these characters are the same as living persons, and the perverse assumption is that when the work of art ends, the action carries on. This view runs counter to the observation of Aristotle, repeated many times since, that a literary work of art is distinguished by having a beginning, a middle, and an *end*, or in other words, to adapt a phrase of Keats, that a work of art should, like the sun, rise, shine, and *set*. Just as fictional characters are distinguished from real persons by being only partial, so, conversely, a work of art is distinguished from real life by having an artistic unity and whole—it does not dribble on.

The other way in which fiction is confused with fact is more understandable. With regard to Prince Hal, for instance, the reader who is not aware of literary conventions and the way they work may well assume that since there was an historical person of that name, the character bearing the same name is meant to be he. But, the reader who is aware of literary conventions would say, pause a moment. Consider the fact that, even if a dramatic character is meant to parallel an historical person, only a very small fraction indeed of the details of what that historical person said and did can be represented on the stage in two-and-a-half hours—or seven-and-a-half hours for the whole trilogy involving Hal. It follows, then, that the dramatic character is going to be extremely incomplete when compared with the historical person. Consider the further fact that presumably, since Shakespeare had to make a selection from the details available concerning Hal, he did so on the basis of choosing only those details which were relevant to his dramatic theme. It follows, then, that on life he superimposed a literary purpose and a literary method. Consider also that Shakespeare could not properly assume that all, or even most, of his audience would know enough about the historical person to be able to fill in any important details which Shakespeare may have felt he did not have time enough to represent on stage. It follows, then, that he would have to make his stage representation of Hal complete as far as his dramatic purpose was concerned. With all these considerations in mind, the sophisticated reader feels that, for practical purposes, the fictional character of Prince Hal, representing Henry Plantagenet, is very little different from a fictional character pieced together from the observations an author has made of twenty or more different living persons. For the practical purposes of reading or watching the play, it is merely an interesting coincidence that the fictional character and the historical person have the same name. Any com-

parison made between the fictional Hal and the historical Henry is entirely outside the purview of the play, which has an artistic wholeness simply not related to historical fact.

An illustration of what can happen when a reader mistakes coincidence for identity of character and person appears in the study by Ernst Kris already referred to. At one point Kris admits that Shakespeare makes no use of the fact that Prince Henry, when only a youth, accompanied Richard II to Ireland and was indeed knighted by him (p. 269). Yet, shortly after, Kris writes, with regard to the fictional Hal's ideals of kingship, royal duty, and chivalry: "These ideals, one might speculate, may have been modeled on an idealization of Richard II, the murdered King, whom Prince Hal as a boy accompanied to Ireland and whose favor he had won" (p. 270). Even as a speculation, this comment confuses the historical Henry, who had a contact with Richard, with the fictional Hal who had not—and had not because, evidently, Shakespeare was determined to see to it that he had not. If one persists in reading the fictional Hal in terms of the historical Plantagenet, then one makes of the trilogy something different from the unified series of unified works of art which Shakespeare wrote.

Much the same confusion of drama with history can be seen in the two characters of Shakespeare that go by the name of Mark Antony. Here the further confusion is made between two different plays, hence between two different dramatic purposes, and hence between two different sets of dramatic characters. *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* are not like the two parts of *Henry IV* and the one of *Henry V*. This latter group was written as a trilogy, which has a single thematic purpose and in which the latter parts were meant to recall the earlier ones. But this is not the case with the two Roman plays. In *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare had need of a cold-blooded, rabble-rousing opportunist to serve as a foil to Brutus; he created such a character and called him Mark Antony. When, six years or so later, he came to write a dramatic tragedy that drew its inspiration from the relation between the historical Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra of Egypt, he needed as hero a noble, magnanimous leader who is in love with the most fascinating woman on earth: he needed an object of growing admiration and a focus for accelerating exaltation. He created such a character and called him Mark Antony. For a reader to be puzzled how Mark Antony could change in character so radically from one play to another makes the naïve assumptions, as far as the sophisticated reader can see, that the two Mark Antonys are in fact the same and that both are identical with the historical Marcus Antonius. But the reader who realizes that liter-

ature is a consciously manipulated art has no such difficulty: he sees the two Mark Antonys as precisely that—two different fictional characters fulfilling two different dramatic functions in two different plays.

As early as the sixteenth century Sir Philip Sidney pointed out how naïve it is to confuse fictional characters with living persons. In his *Apologie for Poetrie* he wrote, "The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes." About the stage setting in drama, he said, "What child is there that, coming to a play, and seeing *Thebes* written in great letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is *Thebes*?" In the same way the characters and actions in the play are recognized as "pictures"—representations only, not the actual things depicted. The authors give names to their characters simply "to make their picture the more lively . . . ; painting men, they cannot leave men nameless. We see we cannot play at chess but that we must give names to our chessmen . . ." And few have been so naïve as to think that a bishop on a chess board is the same as a bishop in his cathedral.

Samuel Johnson, too, in the Preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1765) was at some pains to point out, with regard to drama, that "the truth is, that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players. They came to hear a certain number of lines recited with just gesture and elegant modulation." For him, too, the characters are representations of living persons, not those persons themselves. "It will be asked, how the drama moves, if it is not credited. It is credited with all the credit due to a drama. It is credited, whenever it moves, as a just picture of a real original; as representing to the auditor what he would himself feel, if he were to do or suffer what is there feigned to be suffered or to be done." Representations, he concludes, "produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind. When the imagination is recreated by a painted landscape, the trees are not supposed capable to give us shade, or the fountains coolness; but we consider, how we should be pleased with such fountains playing beside us, and such woods waving over us. We are agitated in reading the history of *Henry* the Fifth, yet no man takes his book for the field of *Agencourt*."

No man, that is, until Samuel Taylor Coleridge mistook the trumpery of illusion for the art of representation. He it was who lent a cloak of respect-

ability to the naïve assumption when, in the fourteenth chapter of his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he referred to "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." Johnson had phrased this view half a century before when he said, with reference to the unities of time and place: "The objection arising from the impossibility of passing the first hour at *Alexandria*, and the next at *Rome*, supposes, that when the play opens, the spectator really imagines himself at *Alexandria*, and believes that his walk to the theatre has been a voyage to *Egypt*, and that he lives in the days of *Antony* and *Cleopatra*." He answers, "Surely he that imagines this may imagine more." If one can suspend disbelief, even for a moment, there is no limit to what one can accept. "Delusion, if delusion be admitted, has no certain limitation; if the spectator can be once persuaded, that his old acquaintance [the actors] are *Alexander* and *Caesar*, that a room illuminated with candles is the plain of *Pharsalia*, or the bank of *Granicus*, he is in a state of elevation above the reach of reason, or of truth . . ."

This dictum of Coleridge's concerning the suspension of disbelief is one of two parts of a Romantic tradition that has continued to the present day and still greatly influences the popular mind and even, as we have seen, the minds of some critics. The other part of this tradition is the tremendous emphasis placed by Romantic critics on characters in works of fiction and drama. Coleridge himself and Hazlitt in the Romantic period, and later Romantic critics writing in the Victorian and Edwardian periods—Dowden and Bradley for instance—all approach plays and novels as if the characters in them were by far the most important concern, and at times indeed the only concern. This emphasis of course slights all other aspects of fictional and dramatic representation, such as the choice and manipulation of episodes, actions, scenes, dialogue, recurring motifs, and patterns of imagery. Such slighting fosters an ignoring of the consciously manipulated nature of literature and encourages the belief that art is to be approached as an illusion. In short, this particular Romantic tradition discounts sophistication and puts a premium on the naïve assumption that has been the subject of this essay. Let us hope that as the influence of Romanticism continues to wane in the popular mind, it will give way to a growing awareness of how various literary conventions work together, so as to produce the art of representation.

NOTES

1. Helena Faucit, Lady Martin, *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters*, 7th edn. (London, 1904), pp. 7-8, 26. (First edn., 1885).

2. Ernest Jones, *The Problem of Hamlet and the Oedipus-Complex* (London, 1947), p. 22.
3. This appeared originally in *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly* for 1948 and is reprinted in *The Modern Critical Spectrum*, ed. Goldberg & Goldberg (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1962). Page references are to this anthology.
4. F. L. Lucas, *Literature and Psychology*, American edn. (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1957), p. 25.
5. Edmund Wilson, "A Long Talk About Jane Austen," in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), p. 39. The essay first appeared in *The New Yorker* of Oct. 13, 1945.

POWER

Geoffrey Johnson

For days, through breakdown of electric power,
 We shared the joys of going primitive
 In isolation of the dark and snow
 Half-lit by hearth-fire, cavemen we became,
 Our only problems those of warmth and food.
 More intimate, lovelier for the dearth of light
 The family texture felt; we finger-read
 What depths of bear-cub fur our children wore,
 Sign-language spoke our heart's beatitude.

It was a dream deep down ancestral pasts
 Far older than the Seven Sleepers' Cavern
 We sheltered in. But when the power came back
 Sudden as daylight, with the radio-news
 Of nuclear bomb-tests in as full a flood,
 We woke and stared, then laughed ashamed, as though
 Our revels in that backward episode
 Were best forgotten. How we brisked about
 Rejoicing to be civilized once more —
 Even in world whose madness froze the blood.