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The Elizabethan World  
Picture

E.M.W. Tillyard

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## About the Book

The Elizabethans took from the Middle Ages the modified view of the universe which, Platonic and biblical in origin, radically differed from our own. For them all creation was ranged in an unalterable order from the angels down to man - for whom the world existed - and thence to the beasts and plants.

In this short study Dr Tillyard not only elucidates such fairly familiar - though often mystifying - concepts as the four elements, the celestial harmony of 'nine enfolded Spheres', or macrocosm and microcosm; he also shows how this world picture was variously regarded as a chain of being, a network of correspondences, and a cosmic dance. Such concepts were commonplace to the Elizabethans. By expounding them the author has rendered plain, and not merely picturesque, the literature and thinking of an age.

## About the Author

E.M.W. Tillyard, Litt.D., who was Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, from 1945 to 1959, and a university lecturer in English for nearly thirty years, ranked among the leading authorities on both Shakespeare and Milton. He was born in 1889 and attended a school in Lausanne and the Perse School, Cambridge, before proceeding to Jesus College, where he gained a Double First in Classics and was Craven Student. After studying archaeology in Athens, he returned as a fellow to Jesus College in 1913. He was on active service in France and at Salonika during the First World War, at the end of which he was a liaison officer with the Greek forces. After the Second World War he was a special lecturer at three transatlantic universities. His publications include *Milton*, *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, *Shakespeare's History Plays*, *The Miltonic Setting*, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, *The Metaphysicals and Milton*, and *The Epic Strain in the English Novel*. Dr Tillyard, who was married and had three children, died in 1962.

# **THE ELIZABETHAN WORLD PICTURE**

E.M.W. Tillyard



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## PREFACE

THIS small book has come out of an attempt to write a larger one on Shakespeare's Histories. In studying these I concluded that the picture of civil war and disorder they present had no meaning apart from a background of order to judge them by. My first chapter set out to describe that background. When it was finished, I found that it applied to Shakespeare's Histories no more than to the rest of Shakespeare or indeed than to Elizabethan literature generally. I also found that the order I was describing was much more than political order, or, if political, was always a part of a larger cosmic order. I found, further, that the Elizabethans saw this single order under three aspects: a chain, a set of correspondences, and a dance. Here then was a subject too big for a single chapter in a more specialized book, a subject demanding separate treatment.

Now this idea of cosmic order was one of the genuine ruling ideas of the age, and perhaps the most characteristic. Such ideas, like our everyday manners, are the least disputed and the least paraded in the creative literature of the time. The Victorians believed in the virtue of self-help, yet we do not associate the poems of Tennyson or the novels of George Eliot with the belief. They take it too much for granted. Of course if we read these works with the idea in our minds we shall find abundant hints of it. And to be ignorant of it makes us less able to understand these two authors. The province of this book is some of the notions about the world and man which were quite taken for granted by the ordinary educated Elizabethan; the utter commonplaces too familiar for the poets to make detailed use of except in explicitly didactic passages, but essential as basic assumptions and invaluable at moments of high passion. Shakespeare glances at one of these essential commonplaces when, in *Julius Caesar*, he makes Brutus

compare the state of man to a little kingdom. The comparison of man to the state or 'body politic' was as fundamental to the Elizabethans as the belief in self-help was to the Victorians.

My object then is to extract and expound the most ordinary beliefs about the constitution of the world as pictured in the Elizabethan age and through this exposition to help the ordinary reader to understand and to enjoy the great writers of the age. In attempting this I have incidentally brought together a number of pieces of elementary lore which I have not found assembled elsewhere. This book may actually be a convenient factual aid to the bare construing of some of Spenser or Donne or Milton.

Though I have mainly expounded, I have sometimes drawn conclusions, and I have illustrated the way a belief passed into the literature of the time. As I write for the ordinary reader not the specialist I have used the best-known writers for such illustration. On the other hand when I am setting forth an actual doctrine I do not avoid illustrating from unfamiliar writers. It has been impossible always to distinguish between these two kinds of illustration; and the reader must not be surprised if he finds a piece of Shakespeare or Milton used simultaneously to state a doctrine and to exemplify the use poetry can make of it.

I must warn readers that some of the facts are only approximate. There were many variations of opinion about the way the universe was constituted impossible to record in a short book. I have done my best to choose always the most usual opinion. If any specialist in the period reads this book, I hope he may agree with me that the doctrines I have expounded are all sufficiently commonplace and may find that as few as possible of the relevant commonplaces have escaped me.

It is unfortunate that the facts with which I have to deal, though all equally familiar to an Elizabethan, are not so to a

modern. A part, like the four humours, is familiar, even to distress; but a part, like the notion of the 'vast chain of being', will be new to the ordinary reader. As in a short account proportion is everything, I cannot allow degrees of familiarity to dictate the space or the emphasis I give to different matters. First things must have first place. And if I speak of stale things as if they were fresh and obscure things as if they were known, it is to preserve the proportions in which I imagine the Elizabethans saw them all.

In quoting I have thought of the ordinary reader's convenience and have modernized spelling and punctuation, except for Milton. Milton took great care over these things and hardly suffers in intelligibility from having them preserved.

I sometimes use the word Elizabethan with great laxity, meaning anything within the compass of the English Renaissance, anything between the ages of Henry VIII and Charles I akin to the main trends of Elizabethan thought.

My thanks are due to friends who have put me on to references I might have missed: to Miss E. E. H. Welsford, M.A., Fellow of Newnham College, to Miss R. Freeman, PH.D., Girton College, Lecturer at Birkbeck College, to Professor Theodore Spencer, PH.D., of Trinity College Cambridge and Harvard University, and to Mr Donald Gordon, PH.D., of Edinburgh University and Trinity College Cambridge.

Finally I must pay my tribute to recent American work on Renaissance thought; work the cumulative magnitude of which is not always recognized in England. I mean, for instance, that of the late Edwin Greenlaw and his associates or of Professor Charles G. Osgood and the other editors of the *Variorum Spenser*. Without this work I should not have dared to generalize as I have done.

I regret that Professor Theodore Spencer's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York, 1942) reached me after my text was in type. We have been writing, independently,



of some of the same things, and I wish I could have made many references to this book. All I can do now is refer generally to the learning and the charm with which he develops his theme.

*Jesus College Cambridge*

E.M.W.T.

## INTRODUCTORY

PEOPLE still think of the Age of Elizabeth as a secular period between two outbreaks of Protestantism: a period in which religious enthusiasm was sufficiently dormant to allow the new humanism to shape our literature. They admit indeed that the quiet was precarious and that the Puritans were ever on the alert. But they allow the emphasis to be on the Queen's political intuitions, the voyages of discovery, and the brilliant externals of Elizabethan life. The first pages of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* are in these matters typical. They do not tell us that Queen Elizabeth translated Boethius, that Raleigh was a theologian as well as a discoverer, and that sermons were as much a part of an ordinary Elizabethan's life as bear-baiting. The way Hamlet's words on man are often taken will illustrate this habit of mind.

What a piece of work is a man: how noble in reason; how infinite in faculty; in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals.

This has been taken as one of the great English versions of Renaissance humanism, an assertion of the dignity of man against the asceticisms of medieval misanthropy. Actually it is in the purest medieval tradition: Shakespeare's version of the orthodox encomia of what man, created in God's image, was like in his prelapsarian state and of what ideally he is still capable of being. It also shows Shakespeare placing man in the traditional cosmic setting between the angels and the beasts. It was what the theologians had been saying for centuries. Here is a typical version, by Nemesius, a Syrian bishop of the fourth century, in George Wither's translation:

No eloquence may worthily publish forth the manifold pre-eminences and advantages which are bestowed on this creature. He passeth over the vast seas; he rangeth about the wide heavens by his contemplation and conceives the motions and magnitudes of the stars . . . He is learned in every science and skilful in artificial workings . . . He talketh with angels yea with God himself. He hath all the creatures within his dominion.

What is true of Hamlet on man is in the main true of Elizabethan modes of thought in general.

The thing that *Orlando* (and for that matter *Shakespeare's England* taken all in all) misses is that the Puritans and the courtiers were more united by a common theological bond than they were divided by ethical disagreements. They had in common a mass of basic assumptions about the world, which they never disputed and whose importance varied inversely with this very meagreness of controversy.

Coming to the world picture itself, one can say dogmatically that it was still solidly theocentric, and that it was a simplified version of a much more complicated medieval picture. Now the Middle Ages derived their world picture from an amalgam of Plato and the Old Testament, invented by the Jews of Alexandria and vivified by the new religion of Christ. It was unlike paganism (apart from Platonism and some mystery cults) in being theocentric, and it resembled Platonism and other theocentric cults in being perpetually subjected to the conflicting claims of this and another world. To hold that the other world, because so persistently advertised, had it all its own way in the experience of medieval thinkers is as simple-minded as to hold that all Germans are merciless because their leaders have ordered them to be so, or that England must have indeed been merry between the two wars because of all the incitements by theatre or wayside pulpit to be cheerful. On reflection we can only conclude that many Germans must be obstinately kind to need such orders and that many Englishmen refused to be comforted to need such advice.