Shakespeare *and*
Platonic Beauty

1564
1616
To the memory of
Bonavia Hunt
this College
William Shakespeare

John Vyvyan

SHAKESPEARE
AND PLATONIC
BEAUTY

By the same Author

⁂

THE SHAKESPEAREAN ETHIC
SHAKESPEARE AND THE ROSE OF LOVE

John Vyvyan in 1947

SHAKESPEARE
AND PLATONIC
BEAUTY

John Vyvyan

SHEPHEARD-WALWYN (PUBLISHERS) LTD

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of the publisher, Shepheard-Walwyn (Publishers) Ltd

First published in 1961
by Chatto & Windus, London

This edition published 2013 by
Shepheard-Walwyn (Publishers) Ltd
107 Parkway House, Sheen Lane,
London SW14 8LS
www.shepheard-walwyn.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record of this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-85683-294-9

Typeset by Alacrity, Chesterfield, Sandford, Somerset
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by Short Run Press Ltd, Exeter

Contents

Publishers' Note

1 Theseus and Hippolyta

2 The Classical Background

3 Plato in Florence

4 An Introduction to the Heroine as the Heavenly Venus

5 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

6 *As You Like It*

7 *All's Well that Ends Well*

8 *Troilus and Cressida*

9 Conclusion

APPENDICES

1 Selected Stanzas from *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie*

2 Passages from Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on the *Symposium*

3 Pico della Mirandola's Version of the Ascent

Author's Shakespearean References

Index

I find the whole in elusive fragments: let one be caught
And profoundly known – that way, like a skeleton key, the part
May unlock the intricate whole. What else is the work of art?

C. DAY LEWIS

I son colui che ne' prim anni tuoi
Gli occhi tuoi infermi volsi alla bellate
Che dalla terra al ciel vivo conduce.

It was I, Love, who in your youth, turned your feeble sight to Beauty;
and that will lead you, living from earth to heaven.

MICHELANGELO

Publishers' Note

THIS IS AN entirely new edition of the third of John Vyvyan's three insightful books on the philosophy of Shakespeare. It is new in that the entire text has been reset in the same style as our editions of *The Shakespearean Ethic* and *Shakespeare and the Rose of Love.*

However, here too some additions have been made which we hope will enhance the usefulness of this edition. Having been educated in Switzerland, John Vyvyan was clearly familiar with the great literature of Italy, France and Germany and has sometimes quoted phrases or passages in the original language. In many cases he gave his own translation or paraphrased the quote. There are, however, some instances where we have felt it helpful, for the benefit of readers less familiar with these languages, to provide some translations as footnotes. We appreciate that translations can never be as apt as the original but we hope they will be useful.

Vyvyan illustrates his argument with many quotations from Shakespeare's plays. To assist in finding where they appear in the respective plays, we have listed the first line of the quotations at the end of the book and relied on the Oxford University Press edition of *The Complete Works* for the references. The index has also been considerably enlarged.

In this book Vyvyan traces the influence of Platonism on Shakespeare, particularly as interpreted by the 15th century Florentine philosopher-priest, Marsilio Ficino. At the time Vyvyan was writing few of Ficino's works were available in English translation, but now most of his works are, or are in the process of translation. Nine volumes of *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* and most of the *Commentaries* on Plato have been published by Shepheard-Walwyn, while Harvard University Press has published a translation of his *Platonic Theology.*

The Publishers would like to thank the Newman Trust in Dublin for their support in making possible this new edition.

Happily, since we published *The Shakespearean Ethic,* we have traced the copyright owner, John Vyvyan's son, Michael Vernon.

1

Theseus and Hippolyta

THE FIGURES of Theseus and Hippolyta, firmly enthroned, save *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from dissolving into moonlight. They are never led astray by the fairies, and they give the play substantiality. This is more than a stage impression, the stiffening is also intellectual. When Theseus hears the story of the night's confusions, his comment is, 'More strange than true'. But Hippolyta insists that it 'grows to something of great constancy'. The play itself does that. But what is the thing of constancy? The brief answer, I think, is beauty. That may sound deceptively simple; for behind it lies a great part of the Neo-Platonist philosophy of the Renaissance.

Why did Shakespeare choose Theseus and Hippolyta to frame his dream-story? This is the kind of question we ought to ask whenever he brings in mythological figures; because they are always more than ornament, they are part of his parable as well. The Theseus-and-Hippolyta theme – as it is presented to us here – is the turning of a war into a wedding, a sword into a ring: out of chaos has come a birth of beauty. It is to this that the regal couple in the background owe their stability. For the symbolic purpose of this play they have attained the thing of constancy towards which the wavering characters are shown to grow.

This miracle – the bringing of order out of confusion – is performed by love. In Theseus and Hippolyta we see it as achieved; while in the bewildered lovers it is gradually taking place. The principle holds throughout Shakespeare's comedies. And again we touch a subject where philosophy and drama meet.

Considered philosophically, love and beauty were invented by Plato. And whenever the European mind has theorized about them since – until the Freudians set a cat among the pigeons – some echo of the *Symposium* or the *Phaedrus* is nearly always to be caught. Even during the centuries when these dialogues were lost, their influence was felt through intermediaries; and when the Platonic revival came in the Renaissance, they pervaded the thinking of the age. The result was not Platonism, but a radical re-interpretation of it, fused with much else, into a brilliant new amalgam of ideas.

In the first speech of the *Symposium,* love is said to be the unbegotten power that arose from Chaos in the beginning to create an ordered world; and in the *Phaedrus* it is a longing that will not rest until man has discovered and become united with immortal Beauty. Both these conceptions – love as creator, and revealer – are important in the Renaissance, but altered by their passage through many lively minds. From the point of view of our present enquiry, the most notable minds linking Plato with Shakespeare are Plotinus, Ficino and Spenser. These we shall consider individually. But what must never be forgotten, in spite of all the newness of the Renaissance, is the background power of medieval thought; because it is due to this that 'Platonism' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is so confusingly different from the classical philosophy of the same name.

Socrates speaks of the ascent of love, and Dante of its pilgrimage. Shakespeare uses both metaphors, but he prefers the more dramatic idea of love's testing. Pilgrimage and testing are contributions from medieval religion and drama, and both are valuable to a playwright. But incomparably the most important and striking bequest of the Middle Ages is the heroine: no pretty lady could have insinuated herself into 'Platonism' – still less have been enthroned there – but for the prestige of centuries of courtly love.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, besides everything else that it has to offer, presents a parable. The parable is based on Platonist ideas, but it is erected in a romantic shape that Socrates would have found trivial. Romance was not trivial to Shakespeare. Long before his time, a poetic and mystical tradition had so raised its status that it had become a serviceable vehicle for philosophy: and in studying Shakespeare's romantic parables, we might perhaps adapt the exclamation of Troilus: 'This is and is not Plato!'

As soon as the scene has been established by Theseus and Hippolyta, we have a love-test. The union of a pair of lovers, Lysander and Hermia, is opposed by parental and legal authority. If Hermia refuses to give Lysander up, she will either be put to death, or forced to take the veil:

> For aye to be in shady cloister mewed,
> To live a barren sister all your life.

What ought the lovers to do? Nowadays, we have been so conditioned to accept the rightness of free choice in love that we may not notice that there is an ethical problem. But this is quite a recent outlook. In Shakespeare's time, even sweethearts would have granted that parents and the law had a certain claim upon their duty, and this consideration is a part of their dilemma. Shakespeare often presents this situation. It is more than a dramatic *cliché:* it is the problem of Juliet and of Desdemona. And the answer he gives to it is always the same – the highest duty is to love.

Is this mere romanticism? I think it can be shown to be a great deal more. But before attempting to interpret the parable – if there is one – some simpler explanations must be given due weight.

From the point of view of the theatre, Shakespeare took this basic pattern – young love in conflict with old authority – from Terence. In *The Lady of Andros,* which all Elizabethan schoolboys knew, two pairs of lovers are thwarted by their well-meaning elders; and at the close of a cleverly plotted and amusing story, harmony is made to reign. Terence, with a feeling that is remarkably modern, is always on the side of love, and the sympathies of the audience are engaged accordingly. It is irrelevant, from our present standpoint, that the Roman comedy was indebted to the Athenian; theatrically, *The Lady of Andros* may be taken as the type of this situation. In Terence, as in Shakespeare, the conclusion is legal marriage; so love and legality are united at last.

In Ovid, whose influence on medieval and Renaissance writers was so great that his ideas can never be safely overlooked, legality does not count for much. For this very reason, since Ovid was far from being a mere Don Juan, a love-relationship imposes for him obligations of its own. And even if Ovid understood these lightly – as matters of good taste and civilized feeling – the love philosophy of the Middle Ages re-interpreted them in depth. When, therefore, Ovid tells his lovers that, because their love is not regulated by law, therefore love itself must make the law between them —

> *fungitur in vobis munere legis amor…*[*]

he unintentionally enunciated a principle that came to have an almost religious sanction. For Shakespeare's lovers – although Ovid *is* not the main reason for it – the love between them is the highest law, and the exterior law must eventually conform to it, and not conversely.

In Ovid, infidelities by either partner were permissible. In the medieval tradition, fidelity between lovers was essential, but marriage was irrelevant and sometimes excluded. The ideal Shakespeare presents combined fidelity with marriage. But marriage may have an other than ordinary meaning in Shakespeare. It is rather a symbol of love's permanence – 'the marriage of true minds' – than any kind of ceremony. And in the sonnets, where his deepest intuitions are expressed, and where no ceremony is in question, what is being recognized is an indestructible relationship:

> As easy might I from myself depart,
> As from my soul which in thy breast doth lie:
> That is my home of love… 109

As in the *Phaedrus,* sex is beside the point here. But it is not always so. Spenser is also drawing on the *Phaedrus* – ultimately – for his doctrine of companion souls; and they do become lovers, in the normal romantic sense, on earth. It was possible to have it both ways; and I am inclined to think that Shakespeare did.

In *The Passionate Pilgrim,* he himself tells us of his admiration for Spenser:

> Spenser to me, whose deep conceit is such
> As, passing all conceit, needs no defence.

'Conceit', of course, is being used in a good sense here; and this reference gives Spenser unique importance as a link.* He is a poet with whose prolixity it is easy to become impatient; but for our present purpose we have only to regard him as a transmitter of ideas, and in this role he is of lively interest. On the one hand, his debt can be traced to the Florentine academicians, and on the other, it is virtually certain that Shakespeare gave sympathetic consideration to his version of their theory of love.

The main points of this theory are conveniently set out in *An Hymne in Honour of Beautie.* It depends on the Platonic belief in pre-existence – as adapted by the Italian Neo-Platonists – and it explains true love as an act of recognition between immortal companions:

> For love is a celestiall harmonie
> Of likely harts composed of starres concent,
> Which joyne together in sweete sympathie,
> To work each others joye and true content,
> Which they have harbourd since their first descent
> Out of their heavenly bowres, where they did see
> And knew each other here belov'd to bee.

If all goes well, something of the harmony of heaven will be realized upon earth. But it is by no means certain that the lovers will recognize each other in this world. They may get entangled with the wrong partners; and in that case, says Spenser warningly, 'It is not love but a discordant warre'. Clearly, all this has dramatic possibilities; and Shakespeare might have used them, even if he did not believe the theory in its Spenserian form. At all events, it will not be frivolous to enquire if he did, and whether the couples in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* for instance, are moved by such concealed strings.

But whatever conclusion we may come to on this, Shakespeare's main statement is something more fundamental. If we press our original question – 'Why, for more than romantic reasons, is the highest duty of Shakespearean lovers neither to their parents nor to the law, but to love?' – the answer might be because love, and nothing else, will lead the soul to perfection. The Renaissance 'Platonists' were agreed about that, and I suggest it provisionally. But it leaves many knots to unravel; and they will be impossible to loosen, unless we take hold of the threads of philosophic argument at their beginnings in Plato and Plotinus. Sometimes, it may almost seem as if Shakespeare is being difficult on purpose, as if he thought rather as Yeats did:

> God loves dim ways of glint and gleam;
> To please him well my verse must be
> A dyed and figured mystery;
> Thought hid in thought, dream hid in dream.

It should cause no surprise to us if Shakespeare held the same opinion. The Renaissance was an age of mysterious philosophies; and it delighted to express them in a veiled way, so that they should be both published and not published, in Pico della Mirandola's phrase, '*editos esse et non editos*'.[*] At least it would be unwise to assume, in studying Shakespeare, that what shows on the surface is all that he intends. But although his thought may be difficult to explore, I am convinced that it was not confused: he himself knew clearly what he meant, and it should not be impossible for us to find out what it was.

[*] for you love fulfills the function of law.

[*] Professor A.F. Potts has shown that the subject is even more important than I had suspected; see his *Shakespeare and The Faerie Queene,* 1958.

[*] *De hominis dignitate,* ed. Garin, p.156.

2

The Classical Background

The Symposium

It may be thought superfluous – if not rude – to quote from anything so familiar as the *Symposium.* Writers on Renaissance philosophy usually take Plato and Plotinus as read, and plunge straight into the fifteenth century. This is proper in a general work; but in a book that aims to trace the vicissitudes of one line of thought, it seems to me that the point of origin ought to be included. Nearly all Renaissance theorizing on love and beauty stems from the two great speeches of Socrates, in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus.* Besides the legitimate development of Plato's thought on these subjects, a great deal has been fathered on to him that he never said, and would possibly have disapproved of; and this surely makes it excusable to reiterate his principal points.

During their preliminary conversations, as Socrates relates them, Diotima says to him:

> 'What is this activity called Love? Can you tell me that, Socrates?'
>
> 'If I could, my dear Diotima,' I retorted, 'I shouldn't be so much amazed at *your* grasp of the subject; and I shouldn't be coming to you to learn the answer to that very question.'
>
> 'Well, I'll tell you, then,' she said; 'to love is to bring forth upon the beautiful, both in body and in soul.'*

This definition raises more questions than it answers. To bring forth upon a beautiful body is simple enough; but both speakers look on the begetting of children as an unphilosophical activity, and so Diotima proceeds to explain the second kind of love:

> But those whose procreancy is of the spirit rather than of the flesh – and they are not unknown, Socrates – conceive and bear the things of the spirit. And what are they? you ask. Wisdom and all her sister virtues: it is the office of every poet to beget them, and of every artist whom we may call creative.