

جامعة الانبار  
كلية التربية للعلوم الإنسانية  
قسم : اللغة الانكليزية  
مادة : المسرح الشكسبيري  
مرحلة: الثالثة  
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محاضرات مادة المسرح الشكسبيري (القوى الخفية في هاملت)

IN our over-riding concern, as literary critics, with the drama and the poetry of the early part of the seventeenth century, we often lose sight of the fact that neither the drama nor poetry was the staple reading diet of the average "middle- class" Elizabethan. A glance at Louis B. Wright's Middle- Class Culture in Elizabethan England is revealing. We see that what, in particular, concerned such an individual were tracts devoted in some way or other to self-improvement. Such a concern involved the promulgation and dispensing of a host of essays dealing with the numerous ethical problems social mobility produces. Above all, religious writings dealt not so much with theological cruxes as with problems of everyday morality. In an article devoted to religious writings, Wright notes:

. . .we are more interested in Shakespeare's dramatic development than in the career and influence of his contemporary, the Reverend William Perkins: but for every Elizabethan who saw or read one of Shakespeare's plays, a hundred bought and read Perkins' sermons.

He adds:

One fact that cannot be emphasized too often is that the most popular sermons were the least controversial; hence many puritan preachers-and Perkins is a good example-who stuck to exhortations to godliness and discourses on practical ethics were read by all sects. The reading public was less interested in theology than in ethics.

It is the phrase "practical ethics" which is interesting. In a world where the possibilities for different and new kinds of social action seemed to be increasing daily, there was an awareness that traditional morality was not adequate to meet the new demands. At the same time, some problems, because of their very nature, remained unchanged (man's relationship with God, the meaning of death, etc.). Theologians, whatever their denomination, were at pains to emphasize that men may, in their pride, confuse their right to make decisions in secular matters with a right to debate questions concerning the faith. As Roland Frye points out, Luther, Calvin and Hooker were at one in emphasizing this distinction.<sup>2</sup> A new morality, then, would have to take cognizance of traditional problems while being sufficiently flexible to be able to deal with the growing realization of the almost unlimited power of man qua man. The most delicate aspect of such a synthesis was that of definition: how does one define, and hence limit, man's power, to avoid the accusation of an encroachment upon God's province? Any new ethic had to steer clear of the possible charge of blasphemy.

In the majority of the religious writings of this time there is, above all, the demonstration of an acute concern for this problem, and a patent failure to deal with it in a lucid or definitive manner. There is a blurring of focus, a casuistry which obfuscates. The problem is most clearly stated by a writer not primarily concerned with religion, Machiavelli. He notes:

I am not unaware that many have held and hold the opinion that events are controlled by fortune and by God in such a way that the prudence of men has no influence whatsoever. Because of this, they could conclude that there is no point in sweating over things, but that one should submit to the rulings of chance.... Nonetheless, because free choice cannot be ruled out, I believe that it is probably true that fortune is the arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.

The Elizabethans were greatly interested in the power invested in such a phrase as the "prudence of men". They thought of its enactment in terms of "policy". For example, in "The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience", one of Perkins' subsections is headed: "Whether a man may lawfully and with good conscience use Policie in the affairs of this life ?" <sup>4</sup> He goes on to assert that the use of "policy" is essential in the affairs of this

world, particularly in order to defeat one's enemies or to determine truth. He even (in the best tradition of the ends justifying means) countenances the employment of "deceit". He says that there is "a kinde of deceit called dolus bonus, that is, a good deceit, and of this kind was the act of Josua."<sup>5</sup> Mosse adduces William Ames's support for the principle of dolus bonus: "acts that do Sonare in malum, have an evill sound . . . but by some circumstances comming to them they are sometimes made good. . . ." For both Ames and Perkins the test of the bonus in the deceit is the intention of its author. Ames notes: "a good intention with other conditions doth make very much to the constitution of a good action" (p. 209). We may say that Perkins and Ames are attempting to come to terms with the reality of their times, but we can see immediately, I think, how their position is fraught with all kinds of difficulties, not the least being the question: who determines and how is it determined that the intention is good? Perkins emphasises four caveats to his acceptance of the use of deceit:

Nothing whatever must be done against the honor of God; nothing must be done to prejudice the truth, especially the truth of the Gospel; nothing must be wrought or contrived against the justice that is due to men; and lastly, all actions of policy must be such as pertain to our calling.<sup>7</sup>