
Introduction

THE RENAISSANCE, particularly the humanistic Renaissance, evinced a strong interest in self-knowledge. The ancients' slogan *nosce teipsum*, or γνῶθι σαυτόν, became a universal watchword. It was, it is true, not unknown in the Middle Ages, when self-knowledge was thought desirable by some thinkers, especially the mystics, as a prerequisite to the knowledge of God; but at no time was there the same fascination with the study of the self as in the Renaissance.¹ Sir Philip Sidney's was then one of the many voices to acclaim its significance and to do so with the characteristic admonition of making the results of self-study fruitful for the moral conduct of life. In *An Apology for Poetry*, he said that all sciences were "directed to the highest end of the mistress-knowledge, by the Greeks called ἀρχιτεκτονική, which stands, as I think, in the knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well-doing and not of well-knowing only. . . ." ² Sidney saw the poet, ahead of even the moralist and the historian, as the best guide toward this goal.

The idealistic hope expressed by Sidney that much can be gained for the conduct of life from the study of literature has in some form always been one of the major attractions of that part of literature which we consider great (but we must remember that great literature shares this attraction with much artistically inferior work). And this hope was and is one of the major reasons for the appeal of Shakespeare. Even of the activity of modern Shakespeare critics, averse as they are to being thought subjective and moralistic, more may be motivated by this feeling than appears at first sight. For instance, we have become fond of saying that Shakespeare's tragic heroes are destroyed because they do not know themselves. Surely, the indistinct hope that we can learn something from their failures is

a major reason for the popularity of this phrase. By saying that Shakespeare's tragic heroes do not know themselves, we can think of them as negative examples for us without being too obviously moralistic; we need not pose and answer the vexing question of what, if any, moral commitment Shakespeare had. We can use the phrase to mean vaguely that the tragic heroes have weaknesses that make it impossible for them to cope with their fate. Since all of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, with the possible exception of Romeo, have some responsibility for their downfall and destruction, we make a safe, even if hardly very meaningful, statement about them when accusing them of lack of self-knowledge.

The present study is not concerned with what we moderns think self-knowledge is, or with what Shakespeare may be able to contribute to our much-needed ethical amelioration, although perhaps I have not altogether been able to conceal my feelings on these matters. The subject of this book is what the Elizabethans and Jacobean thought self-knowledge was and what dramatic patterns Shakespeare created from this thought. If the concept of self-knowledge is to become useful in the criticism of Shakespeare, it will have to be given a more specific content than it has had; and I believe that little will be gained by asking our contemporary psychologists, philosophers, and theologians, vitally interested in ideas of self-knowledge as they are, for help. What they have to say differs widely, determined as it is by the special concern of the definers; and it differs even more from what the Renaissance theorists, particularly the Christian humanists, had to say. Neither do I think that much can be gained by asking the literary critics, ancient or modern.

This last point may require some illustration. Aristotle, whose *Poetics* has given rise to many clichés about tragedy, held a concept that superficially resembles the statement of modern critics that the tragic heroes do not know themselves. This is the famous *hamartia*, vulgarly translated in its application to Shakespeare as "the tragic flaw." But for Aristotle, the term did not have the psychological or moral implications it has in modern use, but meant merely something like "miscalculation." What he had in mind is perhaps best illustrated by *King Oedipus*, to which he repeatedly referred. The *hamartia* of Oedipus is his inquiry into his own background, not in itself blamable, particularly in view of the Greeks' intellectual curiosity. No more does that other often-invoked term *anagnorisis*, discovery or recognition, parallel what we mean when we say that at

some points during the action Shakespeare's tragic heroes get to know themselves or discover themselves or have a tragic illumination. According to Aristotle, *anagnorisis* is an external identification, whether of things, events, or persons, that is dramatically most effective when it occurs together with *peripeteia*, the change of fortune from good to ill or the reverse. The *anagnorisis* in *Oedipus* is the King's recognition that he has killed his father and married his mother as the oracle predicted he would. Thus Aristotle's *anagnorisis* reflects the Greeks' sympathy with human errors and their belief in the inexorable nature of fate. Aristotle did not have Shakespeare's interest in individual character; he was not concerned with the psychic constitution of particular men that makes them prone to failure. Neither did he have Shakespeare's Christian consciousness that some failures are different from others because they are sins rather than mistakes and that much more is at stake in committing the former than the latter. If we use the Aristotelian term for Shakespeare—and like others from the *Poetics* it has become too much a part of our critical vocabulary to do without it—we must redefine it with an awareness that concepts of self-knowledge are not independent of cultural contexts.

The idea of self-knowledge as a modern critic of drama may conceive it cannot be applied to Shakespeare without such an awareness. For instance, in an essay on the common man as tragic hero, Arthur Miller has said that tragedy is the consequence of man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly.³ What Miller may mean by this statement can presumably be illustrated by his own dramatic practice—best seen, perhaps, in his *Death of a Salesman*, when he has Willy Loman lose himself in the spiritual emptiness of his dream of success. This is the tragedy of a common man who abandons his individuality and humanity by listening to the siren songs of his age. Obviously, Shakespeare's tragic heroes are not common men, and he knew nothing of salesmen. He did not have Miller's sociological orientation or his heightened belief that an individual must build his own value system. Miller's, as well as Aristotle's, ideas of self-knowledge are too deeply rooted in their respective cultures to aid us in establishing Shakespeare's concept.

Our first and primary source for this purpose is, of course, Shakespeare himself. Direct allusions to self-knowledge through phrases denoting knowing oneself and not knowing oneself occur with some frequency in his dramas and poems—fifteen times altogether,⁴ and

considerably more often if variations are included, such as finding oneself, being oneself, being true to oneself, and losing oneself, not being oneself, and forgetting oneself. The context of these occurrences makes it clear that self-knowledge had for Shakespeare and his audience a different emphasis from what it has for us. In most cases, the primary reference is to the control of passion by reason. But this is generally more than the simple act of keeping one's temper. When, for instance, Regan says so unkindly of her father that "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (I.i.293), she is referring to his recent outbreak of anger; but when she goes on to predict that his infirm and choleric years will increase this weakness, she is alluding to assumptions about the behavior of men according to their age of life made by Shakespeare and his audience, but not by us. A few scenes later, Goneril accuses Lear of neglecting to check the "Epicurism and lust" of his retainers and demands that he restrict himself to "such men as may besort your age, / Which know themselves and you" (I.iv.250-51). Here again the reference is to proper behavior according to age, but Goneril's exhortation—we are, of course, not concerned with the question of whether it is justified—also points to a code of manners, to proper knightly behavior. As another illustration in which the reference to self-knowledge extends beyond its primary meaning of control of passion, we may note an instance in a comedy, *As You Like It*. When Rosalind lectures Phoebe on her disdainful rejection of Silvius's wooing, she concludes: "But, mistress, know yourself" (III.v.57). Here the allusion, as is evident from the context, points beyond the censure of pride to Elizabethan notions of the relationship of wooer and wooed, undeserving maid and deserving lover, man and woman.

In other allusions to self-knowledge in Shakespeare's plays, control of the emotions does not appear to be the main issue or is not involved at all. When Macbeth, after murdering Duncan, says "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself" (II.ii.73), he seems in some way to associate self-knowledge with a moral way of life. Elsewhere the context of the reference does not give any satisfactory explanation of its meaning. When Hamlet says of Osric that "to know a man well were to know himself" (V.ii.139), the turn of the phrase and the prince's enigmatic intellectuality suggest that something is meant in addition to the fencing skills that are the immediate reference; but the text gives no clue at all.

Shakespeare evidently used the concept of self-knowledge with

some vagueness, just as we do, but his vagueness differed from ours. Or we might say that the field of reference, a shifting one, differed in his time from that in ours. For him, as for us, the advantage of references to self-knowledge lay in their very vagueness and allusiveness. "Know thyself" was a signpost to a variety of ideas he and his audience considered important for man's behavior and character development. If we wish to identify and define these ideas, we must follow the signs into the territory to which they point, and this can best be done by reading Renaissance moral literature. But whatever explicit definitions we may find here are not likely to be very helpful since Renaissance definitions were notoriously unscientific, repeating generally what ancient or Christian authorities said on the subject. The meaning of self-knowledge in Shakespeare's time must be established in the same way in which Shakespeare acquired it, that is, contextually.

In following this procedure, I have undertaken something of a source study although I have not inflicted all my evidence on the reader. Even so, I have had to quote passages from Renaissance moral literature and, sometimes, extensively so. But my intention has been not to prove that Shakespeare read this or that book but that he received from somewhere similar currents of intellectual stimulation. One cannot, of course, read through many Renaissance tracts without lighting here and there on passages that give one the feeling that Shakespeare knew them. But it is not important whether my reader shares this feeling, provided I can convince him that these parallels prove that Shakespeare was interested in theories of self-knowledge and that he knew much about them. I hope to show that he was strongly and vitally interested in these theories by discussing a number of plays in which they are prominent in the dramatic patterns, be it in thought, theme, or character portrayal. Seeing these patterns in the Renaissance context of *nosce teipsum* notions, I believe, is a valuable and heretofore little-used means for Shakespeare interpretation.⁵

No study of this kind is free from assumptions based on what one confidently believes he knows clearly. As to the Renaissance intellectual background, my main assumptions, as far as I am aware, are two: first, that the Renaissance began as an educational movement, and, second, that it led to an increasing diversity in men's conceptions of themselves and of the world. Shakespeare's patterns of self-knowledge, I believe, reflect both this educational concern and this

increasing diversity. I have devoted the first part of the book and the introductory chapters of the other parts to general considerations of how the movement of the Renaissance, from its Christian humanist basis in the direction of greater individualization, influenced Shakespeare's patterns.

As to the Christian humanist aspect, I believe that the role of formal education is too often neglected in studies of Shakespeare's intellectual background. We sometimes talk vaguely about Shakespeare's inheritance of medieval or humanistic ideas and forget that the first and, I think, lasting stimulus came in grammar school, the institution designed by the Christian humanists to teach both good Latin and good morals. I have followed Professor T. W. Baldwin's footsteps over part of this terrain in search of the influence of school indoctrination on Shakespeare's moral ideas, and my reader will find some reflections on this matter in my first chapter.⁶ Insofar as the humanism into which Shakespeare grew was Christian, we must not forget the religious ingredients, contained as they were sometimes in such literary exercises as translations of biblical passages from Latin into English and from English into Latin. However, the Christianization of pagan *nosce teipsum* concepts can best be seen in some English moral tracts that I have used throughout and whose nature I have briefly examined in the first chapter.

My second assumption, that the Renaissance led to an increasing diversification of ideas (and that the Reformation, child of the Renaissance, contributed to that), is one of the oldest assumptions concerning the period; but it has been drawn into doubt so as to require some defense, at least in its validity for sixteenth-century England. When Jakob Burckhardt defined the Renaissance as the discovery of man and nature, he saw its ethos in the emancipation from medieval unity and in the development of individual impulses that shaped man's conception of art and his attitude toward nature. Nobody today is likely to accept this thesis *in toto*. The change from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance was not a revolution; many of the old ideas and attitudes persisted and became in Christian humanism the core of a new attempt at an old synthesis. Yet the sixteenth century was different from the fourteenth and fifteenth, and Shakespeare was not Chaucer. There is, I believe, much that is persuasive in the view of an early Burckhardtian like Wilhelm Dilthey that Renaissance literature arose from a change in *Lebensgefühl* and *Lebensführung*, which gave the individual greater scope

by acquainting him with choices of conduct and philosophy.⁷ Although this individualization was a slow process, it did reach England in Shakespeare's time. In my second chapter, I have analyzed what I think were the major impulses on changes in the concepts of the self and self-knowledge owing to this development.

As I studied the patterns of self-knowledge in Shakespeare's whole dramatic work, I distinguished three major periods: an early one in which he took the patterns as he found them and adapted them to his dramatic designs; a middle one, in which he showed an increasing awareness of their rigidity and occasional incongruity with experience; and a final one, in which he accepted diversity as a fact of life and overcame his earlier hesitations in an emphatic synthesis of theory and life. The first period is that of his early and middle plays up to and including *Henry V* and the great romantic comedies. The second, overlapping with the first, is dominated by plays that, by various critics, have been called "problem plays": *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*. The third period begins with *Othello* and includes the major tragedies and the romances. I have examined four plays from each of these periods, plays in which the patterns of self-knowledge are particularly prominent.

In selecting these I have not been guided by considerations of genre, and I have included examples from comedy, history, tragedy, and romance not in order to have a sample of Shakespeare's work in each of these categories but because I saw strong patterns of self-knowledge in the particular plays. I came to the conclusion that for Shakespeare there was no separate comic, tragic, or historical man, nor were there different kinds of self-knowledge; for him, man was one and the same being whether he exulted in victory or writhed in defeat. I admit that I was temporarily drawn to a provocative distinction made by L. J. Potts:

I connect the essential distinction between tragedy and comedy with two opposing impulses deeply rooted in human nature. Until we can find a way of reconciling the antinomy in our nature, we are all torn between the desire to *find* ourselves and the desire to *lose* ourselves.⁸

I believe that Shakespeare very much addresses himself to the antinomy of our desire to find ourselves and to lose ourselves and also to the antinomy of our fear of finding ourselves and of losing our-

selves; but I do not think that a real distinction can be made on this basis between Shakespeare's comedy and tragedy, or between his comical and tragical history. The patterns of self-loss and self-recovery pervade all of Shakespeare's dramas regardless of genre. Even if it is true that some kind of "finding" must take place at the end of the comedies and tragicomedies, in some of these the losses cannot be eradicated from our minds. Not all characters in Shakespeare's comedies find themselves in the end—consider Malvolio, for instance—and not all endings lead to unconditional findings—consider, for instance, the very conditional happiness of Bertram and Helena at the end of *All's Well*. No more do the tragedies present merely self-loss: Edgar at the end of *King Lear* emerges as a character who has made one of the most spectacular self-discoveries. For that matter, all losing is not tragic or potentially so; the kind of self-loss in romantic love that leads to marriage in the comedies and in *Romeo and Juliet* is an eminently desirable state, a paradoxical finding-in-losing. Shakespeare holds the mirror up to nature in not separating completely the tragic and comic worlds, which, we know, cannot be separated in life.

I should say that my principle for selecting plays and my way of discussing them owes something to my twofold assumption concerning the Renaissance as an educational and individualizing movement. In the second part of the book, which is devoted to Shakespeare's first period, I have concentrated on those earlier plays that seemed to me to demonstrate best Shakespeare's technical familiarity with the humanistic lore of self-knowledge; and I have discussed these with an eye on what was to come, particularly in the later tragedies. For that very reason, I have felt that it was more valuable to examine two early comedies like *Love's Labor's Lost* and *The Comedy of Errors*, which deal with the antinomy of losing and finding in an almost formulaic way, rather than to examine Shakespeare's two early tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, which have less explicit patterns of self-loss and self-recovery. Of the histories, *Richard II* was an obvious choice since in the fate of its hero, the royal failure and sufferer, it foreshadows the self-loss of Shakespeare's later tragic heroes. The last chapter of this part, on *Henry V*, examines the hero-king as Shakespeare's embodiment of conventional humanistic ideals and thus as a norm by which to measure Shakespeare's later approaches to, and deviations from, the recognized Renaissance pattern of perfection. My later comparisons

of the portrait of Henry with modifications of the pattern—Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure*, and Prospero in *The Tempest*—will, I hope, be instructive demonstrations of Shakespeare's developing concepts of self-knowledge.

I have chosen to include all plays that belong to the second period with the exception of the artistically least satisfactory *All's Well*. The two tragedies *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* are, of course, master-works that had to be included; but I have discussed them as well as the difficult-to-classify *Troilus and Cressida* and the problematic comedy *Measure for Measure* for the transitional, searching, and sometimes tentative patterns of self-knowledge they contain. The relatively prominent place they have in my study comes from their significance in showing the interplay of tradition and a new spirit. The very tentativeness of the questions posed and answered in these plays has made them so congenial to our own age, which has lost many certainties, as to warrant greater interest in them.

The selection of plays for individual discussion from Shakespeare's third period has been painful. Since everybody's interest in Shakespeare's patterns of self-knowledge centers on the tragic heroes, I have chosen the three major tragedies, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. I regret the omission of *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*, dictated by considerations of time and prudence. In discussing the tragedies, I have interpreted from the patterns of self-knowledge outward to attempt a whole critical assessment of the plays. I have also dealt thus with *The Tempest*, the one romance included. The patterns of self-knowledge in this play form a natural culmination of those that preceded, and this chapter is therefore a fitting conclusion to the book.

Inevitably, I have had to concern myself throughout with the analysis of Shakespeare's dramatic characters; it is primarily through character that self-knowledge is sought, expressed, and achieved. But character analysis is at present somewhat out of fashion—a recent critic of *Hamlet* calls it "a valetudinarian topic."⁹ This attitude is an understandable and largely wholesome reaction to the excrescences of romantic, impressionistic, and Bradleyan psychological criticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which often treated Shakespeare's characters as if they had a life independent of their parts in the dramas. But the main reactors to character analysis, the historical critics, have in turn become passé; and alternative critical modes, such as the close reading of the poetic fabric of the plays,

valuable as they are, have not succeeded in totally suppressing the universal and, I think, legitimate interest in what makes Shakespeare's characters behave as they do. The time may have come to return to character analysis, chastened by the valid critique of the post-Bradleyans.

If the thought of having engaged in a *démodé* subject does not really disturb me, the realization does that I may have contributed somewhat to the more questionable endeavor of searching in Shakespeare's plays for his own philosophy. His infinite variety and the temptation of passing off one's own thoughts for Shakespeare's make this a notoriously perilous enterprise, but paying heed to dramatic and historical conditions can be something of a check to the threatening subjectivism. I have examined Shakespeare's words and not my feelings about them, and I have tried to be sensitive to the poetic texture and to the plot situations. We may, on the whole, assume that Shakespeare gave his views to sympathetic characters, but this is certainly not a uniform rule; even a villainous Iago can cite scripture to his purpose, and an unselfish idealist like Brutus can be dead wrong. We must see the ideas expressed by Shakespeare's characters in the total context, and we should use only legitimate means to interpret their relevance to Shakespeare's philosophy. Such means are comparisons with sources and with moral attitudes as they can be identified by the study of the intellectual background. Even so, we can often achieve only probability. Shakespeare was not a propagandist; his attitudes were subtle and qualified. But he was certainly not morally indifferent; if an idea is repeated in his plays by sympathetic characters and is underlined by theme and dramatic structure, we can, with some assurance, say that it was part of his philosophic credo, at least at the time he stated it.

Shakespeare was not, of course, a philosopher in the sense of an inventor or propagator of a coherent and consistent system. In any case, such synthesis would have been difficult to achieve in the fermenting and changing climate of the Renaissance. Even Bacon, who did not have Shakespeare's need to present dramatic tensions and conflicts, was more a herald of a new system than its instigator. If Shakespeare had aspired to the single-minded eminence of founding a philosophic system, he could not have been "myriad-minded"; he could not have looked at the world through the devilish soul of an Iago as well as the freedom-loving mind of a Brutus.

Shakespeare had a "philosophy" in the sense in which all thinking

men have one: a body of ideas, not totally consistent and very much subject to revisions, on man, life, and the world. This was a changing and growing structure of thought, as his was a growing and changing art. His philosophy was sometimes articulated and more often merely intimated, but it was almost always subordinated to dramatic purposes. Shakespeare so skillfully infused ideas—moral and immoral—into the thoughts of his characters that we tend to forget that these ideas were in some sense conceived by him, that is, acquired or invented, and in any case deeply understood in their bearing on life. How else could he have made them so powerfully appropriate?

In the course of my study I have come to appreciate increasingly Shakespeare's philosophical acumen, both in the way he used traditional ethical concepts and modified them or supplanted them with newer ones or with his own ideas. In the conflict between tradition and innovation, Shakespeare gradually came to realize his inner resources; he learned to know himself. And as he learned to know himself, he came to master his art.

