

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTORY

Of the many qualities of the plays of Shakespeare, which leave their indelible impression on the mind, one is of an atmosphere of refinement and gentility that pervades them. Courteous speech and refined manners are a prominent quality of perhaps the whole range of Elizabethan drama. Yet nowhere in the enormously rich dramatic literature of that age do we find the abundance, variety and charm of, even insistence on, polite speech and courteous behaviour as in the plays of Shakespeare. These expressions of courtesy are used in the plays in a way so completely free of any mere mechanical formality, they are so spontaneous and opposite to both character and situation, as well as are spread so deftly over his whole canvas that the quality stands out as a distinctive characteristic of the playwright.

To the modern reader, whose ideal of culture has been shaped by scientific thought and Darwin's theory of Evolution, whose sense of speech and form in dramatic art has been formed by the plays of Ibsen and Shaw, of Christopher Fry and Tennessee Williams, at this distance of time and at the present point in [the progress of] human civilisation, many of the ways and manners of speech and behaviour in the plays of Shakespeare, torn from the context, might seem strange, exaggerated, unintelligible. Why, he may ask, should people in a play, always be welcomed when they come, bidding farewell when they depart, or greetings be conveyed to those who are away? Why should Hamlet address his incestuous mother as 'Good Mother' or Brutus be so polite and considerate even to his servant as to refrain from using a single harsh word lest it might offend him? Even the Ghost in Hamlet beckons the Prince with 'courteous action'<sup>1</sup> and bids him 'adieu'! And yet on the other hand these and other modes of speech and conduct are an indispensable, inevitable part of the plays. They come naturally from the characters who use them, and

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<sup>1</sup> Hamlet, I, iv, 60 and I, v, 91.

are woven into the plays with such cunning and spontaneity, such dexterity and dramatic point that they become an integral part of the characters and of the plays themselves. Altogether, they conduce to a wholesome atmosphere of good breeding and refinement and become a vital part of the whole. We dare not tear them from where they occur without inflicting artistic injury both on the characters and the plays.

These acts and expressions might go by the common name of courtesy, though courtesy, both in the medieval and the Elizabethan sense means so much more than mere polite speech and behaviour. To the Middle Ages, courtesy was part of the chivalric code of conduct; for the age of Elizabeth, it embraced the entire code of conduct of the courtier. The Elizabethan courtly ideal was itself a balancing of the chivalric and the Renaissance ideals of conduct. Yet a close study of the acts and expressions of courtesy in the plays would reveal that Shakespeare has made use of courtesy as a subtle and effective instrument to produce and heighten artistic effect. He uses courtesy, as we shall see, in the very process of revealing character on the stage. He often intensifies

dramatic effect by setting off courteous characters against discourteous or dissemblingly courteous characters, as, for instance, Isabella and the Duke as Friar in Measure For Measure are cast among a whole lot of bawdy people; or Lady Macbeth and King Duncan are brought together in one scene<sup>1</sup>, both exuding the sweet breath of courtesy, the one dissembling, the other genuine. Shakespeare achieves similar effects by using courtesy or the absence of it in revealing characters. Menenius Agrippa in Coriolanus is all courtesy to the Romans while Coriolanus is by nature unable to show it to the common people and the absence of this attribute in him becomes indeed the cause of his fall. Leontes and Polixenes, again, in The Winter's Tale are sharply contrasted in courtesy and both are revealed by courtesy, the former by his niggardly courtesy, the latter by an effusion of it. Sometimes, the dramatist lets a whole plot hang on a single act of courtesy as in Twelfth Night when the Captain promises to introduce Viola as an eunuch to the Duke or when Antonio gives the purse to Sebastian. The dramatist, as we shall later see, deliberately

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<sup>1</sup> Macbeth : I, 6.

seems to bring about certain changes in the sources from where he adapts his plots to bring the incidents and characters in coherence with his ideal of courtesy. He employs even the formalities of behaviour, like greetings and farewells to produce subtle artistic effects. He uses these formalities in every conceivable way to wring out significance and effect, sometimes to vivify a situation, to endow it with sentiment, to accentuate a particular attribute of a character, <sup>but</sup> every time rendering them in a way consistent with both the character and the situation.

The plays are studied in the following pages to see how Shakespeare has with conscious aesthetic intention, used courtesy in various ways to produce different artistic effects. When we examine courtesy from this aesthetic point of view in the plays, we feel inclined to forget whether the dramatist's concept of courtesy was medieval or Renaissance. Shakespeare seems to have created out of courtesy something so beautiful and universal that it might endure in any place or for any time.

To appreciate fully Shakespeare's use of courtesy as an artistic device, it is necessary to understand courtesy in its historical perspective. Ideals of social behaviour and personal excellence vary from age to age, from Aristotle's Magnanimous Man to modern America's Business Administrator, but it is surprising how new ideals come to be based upon the ruins and remnants of old ones and how old ideals of living persist even when new ones are adapted. There are entire epoches in social and literary history when different, even conflicting, ideals have existed one beside the other in the same place and time. The age of Elizabeth was essentially such an age of differing ideals : yet it was the greatness of that age that with its tremendous vitality, it could fuse together even antipodal ideals and produce something, as Shakespeare and his contemporaries have done, which might in its essence outlive much else and endure for ever. We may reasonably doubt, as some people have done, the originality of the Elizabethans in their tremendous creative activity. Professor Hardin Craig,<sup>1</sup> for instance, thinks that the Elizabethans were as creative as they were because they were deficient in

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<sup>1</sup> Hardin Craig : The Enchanted Glass, p.207.

critical power and as they were unable to 'originate thought' they sought to build culture on a foundation of 'formalism of thought'. Nevertheless, what they did create has significant artistic and cultural value. A proper assessment of the creative ability of the Elizabethans would bear out that it consisted rather in harmonising what they found than in creating something independently of their own. In fact, absolute originality in artistic creation has always been justifiably questioned. The disconcerting thing about Elizabethan art is that it made no secret of its borrowings. In art, as in religion, the key-note of its activity was compromise. In religion it brought about the compromise by the formation of the Anglican Church : in architecture, by combining the Gothic with the Renaissance style. Similarly, in formulating its courtly ideal in literature, the age fused together the diverse ideals of the Chivalric and pastoral romances with the tenets of behaviour of the Renaissance Courtier.

In the Middle Ages the knight was the ideal of personal excellence and the code of chivalry ruled

his mode of behaviour<sup>1</sup>; in the age of Elizabeth the courtier stood for the ideal of excellence and courtly grace formed the index of his behaviour. Their relative qualities are discussed later in the essay. Criticism of Elizabethan literature becomes often prone to lay too much stress on the influence of the Renaissance and there is observable sometimes a tendency to attribute everything to that influence.<sup>2</sup> It is sometimes held, for instance, that the knight was entirely a product of the Middle Ages and the courtier was purely the off-spring of the Renaissance: that antithetical elements went to the making of their personalities. There is no doubt of course that the Renaissance radically influenced English life and thought, and its ideals went a long way in shaping the image of the ideal courtier; yet to say that there was little in common between him and the medieval

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<sup>1</sup> J.E. Mason also mentions - "the Churchmen of the Middle Ages described the modest and dignified Christian, and at the head of temporal affairs, the Christian Prince, while other secular writers of the same period portrayed the Courtois or man of the world". Gentlefolk in the Making, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Dr. Tillyard's complaint in his The English Renaissance, Fact or Fiction? pp.10-12.



knight would be to make assumptions altogether too unhistorical and fallacious. In the first place, it would have to be assumed that the Middle Ages had nothing like humanistic culture and that Medievalism had suddenly and mysteriously died somewhere in the fifteenth century with all that it stood for and the hoary knight was also buried with it. It would also have to be assumed that what the Tudor monarchs and particularly Queen Elizabeth did to change England economically, socially, politically and religiously had no bearing on the courtly ideal. Now, in fact, the Renaissance had started in England long before the age of Elizabeth, and even after that age Medievalism did not altogether disappear. In the plays of Shakespeare, there is much that is medieval, if also much that belongs to the Renaissance. And above all something which is peculiarly and positively Elizabethan. For a proper appraisal of the courtier's qualities it appears necessary to take into account all these three factors as each of them seems to have contributed to the fashioning of the courtier. The Elizabethans were a remarkable people. They could preserve their inheritance, borrow from others and at the same time could indulge, with zest and relish,

in an exceptionally intense creative activity. In this study of the acts and expressions of courtesy in the plays of Shakespeare, it is well not to forget that when Shakespeare wrote medieval ways of thinking were fresh in the minds of his audience, that classical learning was held in very high esteem and people were only too eager to exhibit their familiarity with it. It is also well to remember that England at the time was already developing as a result both of deliberate effort and good fortune a national consciousness and self-identity which distinguished her from other European countries, in particular from France and Italy.

One important factor which helped England to forge the ideal for a courtier in its literature was the spirit of nationalism. It was her good fortune that a strong, capable, devoted monarch was at the helm of her affairs. Elizabeth had secured all round peace and progress for the nation and her image in popular imagination of an 'earthly divinity', capable of arousing genuine devotion and passionate adoration was sufficient to inspire some of her gifted subjects

to seek for an ideal courtier for the court of Gloriana. Sir Philip Sidney, and Spenser wrote with the avowed purpose of shaping an ideal gentleman. Shakespeare had the ideal, as we see, deeply embedded in his consciousness when he wrote the plays. Elizabeth pulled the country out of civil chaos, held her own against the enemies of the country, patched up if not settled religious differences, restored the country's coinage, enforced severe national economy, but above all provided in her person an idol to her people which symbolised the spirit of nationalism. Not that therefore Gloriana's Court was some paradise inhabited only by model courtiers. On the contrary; the picture of contemporary court life makes depressing reading. Thus, to Lyly, the Court was a shipwreck of his hopes and wit; Spenser has voiced in bitter terms his experiences of Elizabeth's court. Yet like many other things in Elizabethan England, the Court also was a paradox. It attracted the most gifted among the artists and intellectuals of the realm. Sir Philip Sidney in his own person provided the ideal courtier; while he portrayed the courtly ideal in his Arcadia. Speaking of this paradox

Miss M. St. Clare Byrne says :

" It lies in the new conception of the courtier which became possible under the Tudor monarchs : at their courts men took their places as the counsellors of princes not by inheritance merely, but by fitness and education as well..... They all had due regard for birth and breeding..... but the way lay open to all who could conceive the new ideal of the courtier - the man liberally educated, trained for all affairs of State, fashioned into a gentleman or "noble person by virtuous and gentle discipline", the man ready to develop every power and capacity he possessed to fit himself for the service of his prince and country.

That was the ideal that the Elizabethan age set before itself; its imagination bodied forth the perfect courtier, and it saw its brave imaginings realised sufficiently often in the lives of such as Sidney to avoid disillusionment. It was not so much what Elizabeth was, but what men conceived her to be, that mattered; it was not the Court of the sycophants and the place-grabbers that mattered, but the Court

and the courtier that the nation's imagination could conceive that was the potent thing, focusing men's actions and desires. Its 'valuable reference' is not the squalid documentary records of monopolies, bribery and favouritism, but Spenser's "Faerie Queene" and Raleigh's Virginian Voyage. The Court of Gloriana existed, not in any point of time or space, but in the minds of men"<sup>1</sup>.

The ideal, still largely class-confined, is laid forth also in Sidney's Arcadia and in Shakespeare's plays. But it is important to remember that the ideal was inspired by the image of the Queen as Gloriana in the minds of literary men. The fact that the image was that of a Virgin Queen - a woman of purity is essential both to the inspiration that shaped the ideal and the content of the ideal itself. We shall see at a later stage how the concept of courtesy, which is the index of a courtier's conduct, is based on men's reverence for women and how the ideal of courtesy is thereby linked with the ceremonious behaviour of the medieval knight to his Lady.

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<sup>1</sup> Miss M. St. Clare Byrne : Elizabethan Life in Town and Country, pp. 13-14.

The literary artists, who were so inspired to forge an ideal for courtly behaviour, use every material that is available to them. Though medieval chivalry was then in a state of dissolution, some of its ideals still continue to inspire them; at the same they avail of the pastoral tradition as it suits them, and draw freely upon the ideals that the new learning of the Renaissance has brought to them. Nevertheless it was their genius that harmonised the old and the new and, in so far as the stimulus came from the Queen and the nationalism fostered by her image, the resulting product becomes peculiarly English. It is thus, that though the whole of Europe, was in search of a new standard of excellence in human behaviour, England produced one and clearly defined it. Though the ideal is apparently confined to the Court, it is sufficiently broad-based to be applicable to human behaviour, in general, irrespective of time or place, and the earnestness with which it is used by literary men in various literary forms, Sidney in the novel, Spenser in the epical allegory and Shakespeare in the plays, indicates the degree of the appeal the ideal had for them. Lyly applied his talent in forging out

the language for the ideal, Sidney devised a story to illustrate it, Spenser enunciated and formalised it into an allegory, and Shakespeare used it deliberately as a dramatic weapon to mould the characters and action in his plays.