Caroline SPURGEON: Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us
Cambridge UP, 1952 /1935/

1930 marked the beginning of a new period in Shakespeare-criticism. This was the year which saw the publication of G. Wilson Knight's The Wheel of Fire and Caroline Spurgeon's lecture on the Leading Motives in the Imagery of Shakespeare's Tragedies. The important novelty of both works was that the crucial points of Shakespeare's dramas were claimed to be found in the sphere of his poetry. Spurgeon systematically assembled, sorted and examined all the images of Shakespeare's works to see if they could really add something new to our knowledge of the man and his plays. The surprising result she arrived at is elaborated in her book: Shakespeare's Imagery.

In this she contrasts Shakespeare with other dramatists of his time /e.g. Marlowe, Bacon, Ben Jonson, Dekker, etc./ to show that his images were not just the everyday paraphernalid of Elizabethan writers but in themselves very unique. Differences exist both in the theme, in the amount and proportion of the images. Even those based on the same subject have certain personal characteristics. /For instance, Shakespeare's images come mostly from nature, animals, everyday and domestic life while Marlowe's are drawn from books, especially the classics./

Thus showing the peculiarity of Shakespeare's vision, she goes on to claim that a study of the imagery not only throws new light on the dramas but reveals the writer's personality as well. The first part of the book, The Revelation of the Man deals with this topic. She classifies the images according to their subject matter, and then tries to analyse

Shakespeare's senses, tastes and interests /both in outdoor and indoor life/, his temperament, etc. This leads to a summary of his personality in a distinct chapter: Shakespeare the Man. These pages are certainly interesting but I would question the importance of investigating Shakespeare's character in such depth /should we really know that he was fair and flushed easily?/ and I doubt whether one can draw such far reaching conclusions merely from the images. If we are ready to accept Spurgeon's arguments we have to picture Shakespeare as a Christ-like figure who is not only "gentle, honest, brave and true, with ... quick sympathy for all living things" /p.207/, but also as an extraordinarily well co-ordinated, well-built, nimble and many-sided person with "abnormally acute senses" /p.202/.

More valuable parts of the first study are the passages on Shakespeare's thoughts and associations. The ideas examined here are relevant from the aspect of the tragedies as well. Thus the concepts of Evil, Time, Death, Love, etc. are shown in the fresh light of his images.

What I consider perhaps her most important achievement is the second part of the book: The Function of Imagery as Background and Undertone in Shakespeare's Art. Spurgeon has found that there are certain groups of images in each play which are peculiar either in subject, or quantity or indeed both. These recurrent images were probably continuously on Shakespeare's mind during the writing of his plays so they show us important aspects of the dramas. Thus we must be aware of the persistantly occuring image of growth and decay as seen in a garden, or the sun - king image in the early histiries. Let me just mention the leading motives of the best known tragedies: sickness,

disease and rottennes in Hamlet; contrast of light and darkness in Romeo and Juliet; bodily torture in King Lear; Macbeth's ill-fitting garments, etc.

No doubt the statistical analysis of Shakespeare's imagery helps us to a deeper understanding of his dramas, their atmosphere and their characters. But at some points Spurgeon tends slightly to overestimate this aspect. /For instance, Hamlet's tragedy is claimed to be merely the "sickness" which annihilates him./

The main significance of her book lies in the fact that Spurgeon has uncovered a new method of approach to Shakespeare which throws light on his dramas from a new angle. Through years of work she collected an immense quantity of data which may serve as a starting-point for further research of various kinds. Being an important step in Shakespeare-criticism, Spurgeon's book must be read by everyone interested in this field.

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