*John Donne Journal*
Vol. 25 (2006)

# "By Season Season'd": Shakespeare and Vaughan Williams

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Nothing better illustrates Ralph Vaughan Williams's deep love of Shakespeare than the following anecdote from the fall of 1951, related in Ursula Vaughan Williams's biography of her husband:

> We came home by Stratford, as the Clarion Singers from Birmingham were giving performances there of *Sir John In Love*. Anthony Quayle, the director of the Festival Theatre, also gave us tickets for *Henry IV, Part I* for the following night. This production of *Henry* had one amusing consequence for us, for we disagreed about the character of Hotspur, played by Michael Redgrave. Ralph said that the only thing to do was to re-read the play. He started on it directly we got back to Dorking and when he finished both parts of *Henry IV* he suggested that we read all the plays. We had both read them at one time or another, but never straight off—and it turned out to be an extraordinary experience. . . . We both came to the conclusion, perhaps an obvious one, that the popular plays were the best, though we had other favorites—of these Ralph's was *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.[1]

A testament to the seventy-nine year old composer's determination and powers of concentration, this story also reveals the seriousness with which Vaughan Williams returned to the works of Shakespeare throughout his life. Earlier the same year, Vaughan Williams had

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[1]Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 312-13.

completed his *Three Shakespeare Songs* for unaccompanied mixed chorus, in which he set texts drawn from *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. Immersion of both husband and wife in Shakespeare may well have revived both their interest in writing for the stage, the dawning impulse for their sadly uncompleted opera, *Thomas the Rhymer*.

A study of Vaughan Williams's relationship to Shakespeare not only illuminates a composer's engagement with a seminal author over the course of a long career, it clarifies as well aspects of Vaughan Williams's aesthetic philosophy. Shakespeare is a notoriously protean figure, of course: a consummate playwright and inspired poet; an uncomfortably androgynous artist, forever shuttling between masculine and feminine points of view; at once a keen observer of life and English life and folk customs and a seer of deep and universal archetypes; at once popular and exalted, tragic and comic, and, with Tyndale and others, one of the casual inventors of the modern English language. The way in which Vaughan Williams, himself a formidably protean figure, grappled with the legacy bequeathed to succeeding generations of English artists by Shakespeare and the way he incorporated that legacy into his own work provide insights into the development of the composer's creative process, his treatment of literature, and his convictions as a cultural nationalist.

Although Vaughan Williams set Shakespearean texts throughout his life, Shakespeare is rarely mentioned by scholars in discussions of the composer's literary predilections. Poets commonly associated with Vaughan Williams are those who employed language highly charged with symbolic and mystical associations such as Whitman, Herbert and Blake. However, if the libretto for *Sir John in Love*—arranged by the composer himself from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*—is taken into account, Vaughan Williams set more of Shakespeare's own words than any of the authors mentioned above. Indeed, even if we exclude the libretto of *Sir John in Love* from consideration, we find more settings of Shakespeare (twenty-five works in all, including two distinct settings of *Orpheus with His Lute* [*Henry VIII*, Act 3, Scene 1]) than settings of either Blake (ten, and all from one late song cycle) or Herbert (seven). Only Walt Whitman and texts from the Bible exceed the number of Shakespeare texts, and only John Bunyan, whose *The Pilgrim's Progress* intermittently occupied Vaughan Williams over forty-six years (from 1906 until 1952), rivals Shakespeare as the author with the longest hold over the composer's interest. The longevity of Vaughan Williams's

fascination with Shakespeare surpasses even that of his involvement with Bunyan, for his first setting of a Shakespearean text dates from around 1891 and his last dates from 1951, a period of some sixty years.

Vaughan Williams first set poetry by Shakespeare sometime between the years 1890 and 1892, when he was a student of Sir Hubert Parry at the Royal College of Music, and perhaps Parry himself assigned the texts as an exercise. In his *Musical Autobiography* Vaughan Williams writes that "Parry's criticism was constructive. He was not merely content to point out faults, but would prescribe the remedy. The last two bars of my early part song *The Willow Song* were almost certainly composed by Parry."[2] Parry may well have had a hand in revisions of the young composer's other Shakespearean part-songs from this early period, settings of two of Feste's songs in *Twelfth Night*: the nimble and amorous *O Mistress Mine* (Act 2, Scene 3), and the rather droopy *Come Away Death* (2.4). All three of these part-songs, while possessing stylistic features that hint of the mature Vaughan Williams, also clearly derive from Parry's own style of writing for unaccompanied voices, with its emphasis on blended choral textures and suave part-writing.

Apart from the first setting of *Orpheus with His Lute*, which dates from 1903,[3] Vaughan Williams did not select any more Shakespeare from the next decade, turning instead to contemporary poets such as Robert Louis Stevenson, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, A.E. Housman and, above all, Walt Whitman. In 1913, however, Vaughan Williams's fascination with Shakespeare was reanimated when he accepted the position of musical director for Sir Frank Benson's Shakespearean season at Stratford-Upon-Avon. Of this episode, Ursula Vaughan Williams writes:

> It was his first introduction to the world of the theater and he was delighted with it. He and Adeline had rooms in Stratford, and the friendliness of the company, the glamour of being part of two worlds, Shakespeare's and the players', was as constant a pleasure as Benson's utter disregard for music—except as something that had to be there—was an irritation.

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[2]Quoted in Hubert Foss, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 24.

[3]The second setting of *Orpheus with His Lute* is the last of the *Three Songs from Shakespeare* written for Steuart Wilson in 1925.

> He became deeply interested in production, in lighting, in the whole process of illusion, and the magic worked for him at each performance in spite of all shortcomings.[4]

During his tenure as music director at Stratford, Vaughan Williams provided incidental music for *Richard II*, *Richard III*, *Henry IV: Part 2*, *Henry V* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The scores for these productions consisted of arrangements of folksongs and dances, including the lusty dance tune *Half Hannikin* (later used in *Sir John in Love*), and adaptations of music by other composers, such as Dowland's *Lachrimae* pavan. One of the inevitable results of supplying incidental music for a production and supervising the music through the run of a play is that the composer memorizes large portions of the text. Entire monologues, musical cues and, indeed, whole scenes can stay lodged forever in the composer's memory. Thus it is not surprising that Vaughan Williams should have begun his 1934 *Overture for Brass Band: Henry the Fifth* with the Agincourt Song that he had earlier used in the incidental music for the 1913 Stratford production of that play, or that he later recalled lines from *Henry V* to shattering effect in his *Song of Thanksgiving* of 1945. His intimate knowledge of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, gleaned from attending repeated rehearsals and performances at Stratford in 1913, prepared him to extract an enchanting libretto from this play for his opera *Sir John in Love*. Sadly, Michael Kennedy reports that only a single page survives for *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.[5] Ursula Vaughan Williams, relying on information that came directly from her husband, provides some fascinating insights about the lost music and its connection with *Sir John in Love*:

> When it came to the summer season *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was one of the new plays. Taking Falstaff's words "Let the sky rain potatoes, let it thunder to the tune of Greensleeves, hail hissing comfits and eringoes" as his cue, he invented entr'acte music based on this tune—well known in Elizabethan days, and used for a dance tune, for a hymn, and for political ballads in later years—in its original form

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[4] *R.V.W.*, p. 104.

[5] Michael Kennedy, *A Catalogue of the Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 78.

> belonging traditionally to the great army of gold-diggers. In the middle section of the entr'acte he used *Lovely Joan* (which he had collected in Norfolk in 1908), both tunes that summed up the allurements used by the merry wives to entangle Falstaff. It was a play that he had not known before and it captivated him: so much so that he began thinking of it in terms of an opera.[6]

Over a decade passed before Vaughan Williams began work on an opera based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a tumultuous decade for the composer that included five years of service during the First World War. In the years after his demobilization in 1919, Vaughan Williams completed *The Shepherds of the Delectable Mountains*, a "pastoral episode" in one act after Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which was premiered on 11 July 1922 at the Royal College, and he finished the initial revision of his first full-length opera, *Hugh the Drover*, which was given its first performance two years to the day after the production of the "pastoral episode." By the time Vaughan Williams began work on *Sir John in Love*, he was a composer with a detailed knowledge of the theater who had the invaluable experience of having two of his operatic scores produced within the space of two years.

In a letter to Harold Child, the hapless librettist of *Hugh the Drover*, Vaughan Williams declared that he wanted to write a "musical" about "English country life (real as far as possible—not sham) . . . for I have the idea for an opera written to real English words, with a certain amount of real English music and also a real English subject might just hit the nail right on the head."[7] As Michael Kennedy has ruefully pointed out: "It is apparent that Harold Child was the wrong man for the job."[8] Given the amount of revision that Vaughan Williams undertook to improve *Hugh the Drover* (including extensive changes to both words and music made as late as 1956), he was clearly dissatisfied with the limitations of Child's text. After wrestling with the libretto of *Hugh the Drover*, Vaughan Williams may well have reasoned that one way to avoid similar problems and find a "real English subject" was to adapt the work of a real English

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[6] *R.V.W.*, p. 104.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 402.

[8] Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams*, second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 179.

author such as Shakespeare. The subject he chose was the amorous machinations of Sir John Falstaff as found in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*; the resulting opera, *Sir John in Love*, occupied Vaughan Williams from 1924 to 1928.

What Vaughan Williams found in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was precisely the sort of atmosphere that he had wanted for *Hugh the Drover*: an authentically English subject that allowed for the introduction of "real English music." Vaughan Williams's choice of this play is particularly consonant with the cultural nationalism that he espoused throughout his career, for it is the only one of Shakespeare's comedies actually set in England.

The characters and milieu of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* doubtless appealed to Vaughan Williams's passionate egalitarian social and political convictions. As Stanley Wells writes in his *Shakespeare: A Life in Drama*: "It is a small town comedy rather than a romantic one, peopled by members of the middle and lower classes, with no aristocrats in the cast list; it is full of the details of ordinary life that would have been familiar to Elizabethan Londoners. . . . [I]ts language is colloquial and up-to-date."[9] Despite a few glancing references to the reign of Henry IV, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* seems to be filled with affectionate reminiscences by Shakespeare of his own childhood, suggested by the scene, unfortunately omitted by Vaughan Williams, in which a boy named William is comically tutored in Latin grammar by Sir Hugh Evans and Mistress Quickly.[10] The lively English bourgeoisie who laugh, gossip, and scheme throughout *The Merry Wives of Windsor* elicited a sympathetic response from Vaughan Williams, who once wrote that "A young exquisite once said to me, 'I don't like Bach, he is so bourgeois,' to which I probably answered that being bourgeois myself I considered Bach the greatest of all composers."[11]

Vaughan Williams was further attracted to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* by its frequent and matter-of-fact references to music; the number of musical allusions made by the denizens of Windsor is high

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[9]Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare: A Life in Drama* (New York: Norton, 1995), p. 185.

[10]4.1.

[11]Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 171.

even by Shakespearean standards. Thus the play allowed Vaughan Williams to bring together two of his greatest loves: English folksong and music of the Tudor period. As is well known, Vaughan Williams was an active and successful collector of some 800 folksongs; he was also an historian who encouraged musicologists such as E. H. Fellowes as they prepared modern editions of Tudor madrigals, anthems, and masses. Both folksong and Tudor music had an equally profound influence upon the development of Vaughan Williams's mature style: in *Sir John in Love*, folksongs such as *Greensleeves* and *Lovely Joan* are woven into a musical fabric that owes a great debt to the contrapuntal vivacity and immaculate prosody of Elizabethan madrigals. In an essay from 1948 entitled "A Minim's Rest," which, by the way, begins with a quotation from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*,[12] Vaughan Williams gives an eloquent tribute to the Elizabethan age: "Under Elizabeth, music was a living thing to old and young, rich and poor. At one end of the scale comes Morley's pupil who was ashamed because he could not take his part in a madrigal after supper, at the other end the "groundlings" who did not misunderstand when Shakespeare called one of his most beautiful songs silly sooth, old and plain, sung by the spinsters and knitters in the sun.[13] They knew that Shakespeare realized the beauty of their 'old plain' ballads; is he not always quoting them?"[14]

Despite his obvious conviction, Vaughan Williams's romantic and idealized view of the Elizabethan era was molded as much by a particular political and cultural agenda as it was by musical or historical insight. As the sun began to set inexorably over the British Empire, a process that began in Vaughan Williams's youth with the disgrace and disaster of the Second Boer War (1899-1902) and accelerated after the First World War, anxiety over the erosion of imperial influence was assuaged in part by a profound nostalgia for the Elizabethan period, an era that saw the beginning of British naval superiority and colonial influence. The reign

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[12]"Falstaff: His filching was like an unskillful singer,—he kept not time. / Nym: The good humor is to steal at a minim's rest" (1.3). Vaughan Williams set these lines in the episode that was part of the *Prologue, Episode and Interlude* composed for a production of *Sir John in Love* in 1933. Only the *Interlude* found a permanent place in the opera as the first scene of Act 3.

[13]Vaughan Williams alludes here to Duke Orsino's description of "Come Away, Death" in *Twelfth Night* 2.4.

[14]Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, p. 166.

of the Virgin Queen was considered a golden age of art, music, literature and expanding political influence; historians in the 1920s cited the Elizabethan period as the crucible in which the modern English national character was forged after the Anglican reformation. In his *History of England*, first published in 1926, G. M. Trevelyan, who became one of Vaughan Williams's close friends in 1893 when they both matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and who, like the composer, was eventually invested with the Order of Merit, wrote glowingly of this epoch, and of what he imagined to be Shakespeare's place within it:

> Outside the politico-religious sphere, intellectual and poetic freedom had already reached had already reached their fullest expansion by the end of Elizabeth's reign. The Renaissance . . . bloomed afresh in England, tended by poets who grafted it on English trees in the forest of Arden. There the imagination was free indeed,—freer than in our own day, when it is burdened by too great a weight of knowledge, and hemmed in by the harsh realism of an age of machinery. Shakespeare and his friends, standing as they did outside the dangerous world of religious and political controversy, enjoyed in their own spacious domains a freedom of spirit perhaps irrecoverable.[15]

A particularly potent aspect of this nostalgia for what was supposed to be a time when, as F.R. Leavis wrote, national culture was "rooted in the soil"[16] and madrigals were expertly sung after every meal, was an adulation of Shakespeare that bordered on idolatry. Dating from David Garrick's Stratford Jubilee of 1769, the literal canonization of Shakespeare was made an integral part of national culture by the 1920s.[17] In 1921, the Newbolt Report decreed that "Shakespeare is an inevitable and necessary part of school activity . . . as he is our greatest English writer." The report further characterizes the Elizabethan era in terms

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[15]G. M. Trevelyan, *The History of England*, third ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), p. 366.

[16]F. R. Leavis, *For Continuity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 216.

[17]For a fascinating and extended exegesis of the manner in which Shakespeare entered the canon as the greatest of English national writers, see Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

that echo Trevelyan, Leavis and Vaughan Williams: "It was no inglorious time in our history that Englishmen delighted altogether in dance and song and drama, nor were these pleasures the privilege of a few or a class."[18] As Peter J. Smith notes with some asperity, "that this was the period in which subversive dramatists could find themselves thrown into prison (as happened to Ben Jonson), the period in which capital punishment could take the form of public disemboweling, is glossed over in this image of public merriemaking."[19] (So much for Trevelyan's quaint contention, quoted above, that Shakespeare and his friends stood "outside the dangerous world of religious and political controversy."[20])

Like all artists, composers, even those who seek to develop a seemingly abstract and non-referential aesthetic, cannot elude the implications of their place in time and in history; inescapably, their work holds up a mirror to the social, cultural and political assumptions and prejudices of their day. But, as Proust points out in a telling passage in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, successful artists also mirror their own personal histories: the circumstances of their upbringing; their particular tastes; and their unique and individual psychologies.[21] Vaughan Williams was no exception in this regard, but it is important to recognize that his cultural nationalism was not an *a priori* ideology from which he then created his music, but a way of uniting his own individual predilections into an aesthetic creed.

As previously noted, Vaughan Williams's love of Shakespeare and, indeed, his romantic view of the Elizabethan age in general, enabled him

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[18]The Newbolt Report, p. 151, quoted in Peter J. Smith, *Social Shakespeare* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), p. 229.

[19]*Ibid.*

[20]Trevelyan, p. 366.

[21]Marcel Proust, *The Search For Lost Time: Within a Budding Grove*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 597. Proust describes the development of the character Bergotte, a distinguished author: "Similarly, the men who produce works of genius are not those who live in the most delicate atmosphere, whose conversation is the most brilliant or their culture the most extensive, but those who have had the power, ceasing suddenly to live only for themselves, to transform their personality into a sort of mirror, in such a way that their life, however mediocre it may be socially and even, in a sense, intellectually, is reflected by it, genius consisting in reflecting power and not in the intrinsic quality of their scene reflected."

to make crucial connections between his preoccupations as a cultural nationalist and his tastes as a composer. Oddly enough, Vaughan Williams's study of the music of two French composers, Debussy and Ravel,[22] provided the purely musical techniques that he needed to make a stylistic synthesis between Modernism, the music of the Tudor composers, such contemporaries of Shakespeare as Tallis, Byrd and Morley, and the folksongs that he collected over the length and breadth of England. Shakespeare, and, indeed Elizabethan and Jacobean culture as a whole, provided Vaughan Williams with a nexus for his ambition to effect an aesthetic synthesis that would incorporate elements of a golden past, represented by the reign of Elizabeth I, within a musical language at once self-consciously national and yet relevant to the less glamorous realities of post-Victorian industrial Britain.

Vaughan Williams's cultural nationalism rests not solely upon nostalgia, then, but upon an almost mystical paradox: to become authentically national is to achieve simultaneously universal significance. In a 1957 lecture on the music of his teachers Parry and Stanford, the octogenarian composer declared: "The great universal figures of every art, such as Shakespeare, Bach and Velasquez have also been the most intensely national. Shakespeare's clowns, even when they have Italian names and are nominally living in Italy, are purely English countrymen."[23] Note that Vaughan Williams singled out Shakespeare's rustics in this regard, for this potent phrase united his leftist political convictions—he does not identify Richard II, for instance, as an exemplar of the English national character—with his cultural nationalism, as exemplified by his unswerving allegiance to folksong and Tudor music. Furthermore, Vaughan Williams purposely cited a class of Shakespeare's characters whose origins in the lower strata of Elizabethan

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[22]Vaughan Williams studied with Ravel for three months beginning in the winter of 1907. See Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, pp. 79-82. Ravel himself echoed some of his English pupil's nationalist aesthetic when he proclaimed that Vaughan Williams "only learned his richness when he learned to be English." Quoted in Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover, 1991), p. 125.

[23]Ursula Vaughan Williams and Imogen Holst, eds. *Heirs and Rebels: Letters Written to Each Other and Occasional Writings on Music by Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 99.

society give their language a potent, lively and, in his opinion, uniquely English flavor.

Vaughan Williams reveled in the racy language of the middle and lower class characters in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and considered Shakespeare as much a part of the English cultural tradition as the Authorized Version of the Bible. He revered the English language itself as a living treasury of cultural history and tradition. In the 1948 essay previously quoted, the composer alluded to a passage in Trevelyan's *History of England* "in which he describes the submergence of the Anglo-Saxon tongue unwritten and unspoken except by the villein through three centuries till it emerged in Tudor times as the vehicle of the poetry of Shakespeare and Milton."[24]

At the same time, however, Vaughan Williams did not let his reverence for Shakespeare deter him from the ruthless decisions required for the condensation of a talky play into a succinct libretto. With his innate grasp of the swift action required for a sung comedy, Vaughan Williams realized that the straightforward story of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was apt for opera, unlike, say, the convoluted plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Just as he did with Whitman or the Bible,[25] Vaughan Williams did not scruple to make extensive cuts in Shakespeare's text or modify the import of certain lines by removing them from their original context. In order to expand and emphasize the

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[24]Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, p. 168. The passage to which the composer refers is found in Trevelyan's *History* on pp. 131-32. Trevelyan ends his speculations on the early development of his native tongue with this heartfelt peroration: "Thus improved, our native tongue reentered polite and learned society as the English of Chaucer's Tales and Wycliffe's Bible, to be still further enriched into the English of Shakespeare and of Milton. There is not more romantic episode in the history of man than this underground growth and unconscious self-preparation of the despised island *patois*, destined ere long to 'burst forth into a sudden blaze,' to be spoken in every quarter of the globe, and to produce a literature with which only that of ancient Hellas is comparable. It is symbolic of the fate of the English race itself after Hastings, fallen to rise nobler, trodden under foot only to be trodden into shape."

[25]For a detailed investigation of Vaughan Williams's treatment of Whitman and biblical texts, see Byron Adams, "Scripture, Church and Culture: biblical texts in the works of Ralph Vaughan Williams," in *Vaughan Williams Studies*, ed. Alain Frogley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 103-05.

romantic elements of the plot, he introduced poetry selected from other plays by Shakespeare as well as poems by several of Shakespeare's contemporaries such as Marlowe and Jonson.[26] In his preface to the opera, Vaughan Williams writes: "With regard to Shakespeare, my only excuse is that he is fair game, like the Bible, and may be made use of nowadays even for advertisements of soap and razors. . . . My chief object in *Sir John in Love* has been to fit this wonderful comedy with, I trust, not unpleasant music." In light of the extensive alterations made to Shakespeare's text, Vaughan Williams's sly conclusion to this preface is more than a little ingenuous: "The text is taken almost entirely from the *Merry Wives*, with the addition of lyrics from Elizabethan poets. A few unimportant remarks (e.g. 'Here comes Master Ford') are my own."[27]

One important speech from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* that Vaughan Williams retained in full for *Sir John in Love* is Mistress Page's narration of the legend of Herne the Hunter, a story which, in Mistress Page's words, "the superstitious, idle-headed eld / Received and did deliver to our age."[28] Her tale has its origin in folk customs that existed hundreds of years before Shakespeare's birth, such as the Horn Dance, which took place annually at Abbotts Bromley from the minority of Henry III until the Second World War (and still takes place to this day).[29] The archetypal folk belief that resonates through the tale of the ghostly huntsman of Windsor forest touched a deep chord in Vaughan Williams's imagination. He adorns Mistress Page's recitation of the old story—which she is in the act of passing on to a new generation, just as if she was transmitting a folksong—with some of the most uncanny and poetic music in the score.

After the premiere of *Sir John in Love* in 1929, Vaughan Williams completed two more Shakespearean projects, both connected with the opera: *In Windsor Forest* of 1931, a choral suite of extracts from *Sir John in Love*; and an expansion of the opera for a production in 1933. Vaughan Williams set no further Shakespeare until 1938, when he

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[26]Simona Packenham, *Ralph Vaughan Williams: A Discovery of His Music* (London: Macmillan, 1957), pp. 87-91.

[27]Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.*, pp. 174-75.

[28]4.4.

[29]F. J. Drake-Carnell, *Old English Customs and Ceremonies* (London: Batsford, 1938), p. 68.

composed the incomparably beautiful *Serenade to Music* for sixteen solo singers and orchestra. Written as a gift for Sir Henry Wood, the *Serenade to Music* is a setting of lines selected by the composer himself from the first scene of the last act of *The Merchant of Venice.* Vaughan Williams does not worry much about the context of these lines in the play: he cares little which character is speaking at a given time. What he does instead is to create a new, touching and self-sufficient literary entity that perfectly serves his expressive purpose. Though the original context is obscured, the moonlit atmosphere evoked in this scene is faithfully expressed by Vaughan Williams's ravishing music.

But the influence of Shakespeare upon Vaughan Williams's music is not limited to vocal works using Shakespearean texts. Vaughan Williams makes direct connections to Shakespeare in three of his nine symphonies. The first instance of Shakespearean inspiration for symphonic composition is found in the earthy third movement of the "Pastoral" Symphony (Third Symphony, 1922). This rambunctious movement, which contains the only extroverted music in the entire score, may have had its origin in sketches for a setting of the scene of Falstaff and the "oufs and fairies" that predates the composition of a similar scene in *Sir John in Love.*[30] Simona Packenham, who knew the composer well and interviewed him extensively while writing her charming book about his music, associated the third movement of the Pastoral Symphony with the rustics and fairies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well.[31]

In a letter sent in 1937 defending his violent and dissonant Fourth Symphony (1934) against the strictures of his friend R.G. Longman, Vaughan Williams wrote: "I agree with you that all music must have beauty—the problem being what is beauty—so when you say you do not think my F mi.[nor] symph.[ony] beautiful my answer must be that I do think it beautiful—nor that I did not mean it to be beautiful because it reflects unbeautiful times—because we know that beauty can come from unbeautiful things (e.g. King Lear, Rembrandt's School of Anatomy, Wagner's Niebelungs, etc.)."[32] Years later, in a letter to Michael Kennedy

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[30]K. D. Mitchell, "Letter to the Editor: VW & Shakespeare," *Journal of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Society* 11 (February 1998): 8. See also Michael Kennedy, *Works*, p. 171.

[31]Packenham, *Ralph Vaughan Williams*, p. 63.

[32]Kennedy, *Works,* p. 247.

dated 22 January 1956, he invokes lines from *The Tempest* in connection with the finale of the Sixth Symphony (1948): "I do NOT BELIEVE IN meanings and mottoes, as you know, but I think we can get in words nearest to the substance of my last movement in "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded by a sleep."[33] Vaughan Williams made this connection explicit musically, for he quoted the final cadence of the symphony when he set the following lines from *The Tempest* (Act 4, Scene 1) as the second of his *Three Shakespeare Songs* for unaccompanied chorus of 1951:[34]

> The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind: we are such stuff
> As dreams are made on; and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

Shakespeare and Vaughan Williams: have two artists ever been more essentially English? Both were engaged with the earthy life that surged around them, and both were immensely practical artists. Had they been merely English or merely practical, however, no one would attend Shakespeare's plays today, nor listen to Vaughan Williams's music. Vaughan Williams's paradox—that an artist must first be national to attain universal significance—is certainly born out by the achievement of these two quintessentially English creators. But their enduring universal appeal rests in a combination of genius with supreme courage that gives their work its lasting significance, for they looked without flinching at the ineluctable tragedy of human destiny, the implacable progress of Time and the evanescence of all earthly things.

And in doing so both men trusted in the power of art to transform and ennoble our precarious existence here on this earth. Vaughan Williams believed that "A work of art is like a theophany which takes different forms to different beholders."[35] Shakespeare invokes such a theophany for the healing of the sleepless and anguished Prince Pericles:

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[33]Kennedy, *Works*, p. 302.

[34]*Three Shakespeare Songs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), pp. 10-12.

[35]Vaughan Williams, *National Music*, p. 3.

"But hark, what music? . . . The music of the spheres! . . . Rarest sounds! Do ye not hear? . . . Most heavenly music! / It nips me unto list'ning, and thick slumber / Hangs upon mine eyes. Let me rest."[36] By reaching beyond the boundaries of sense and knowledge into an imperishable realm of the spirit, these two great Englishmen clasp hands across the centuries, inspiring, entertaining, and consoling: they were not of their ages, but for all time.

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[36] *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, 5.1.223-35; *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 1557.