"He wanted Art." This pithy dismissal of Shakespeare's claim to be an artist occurs in Ben Jonson's private Note-book, the Discoveries, where Shakespeare and many others are incisively characterized. Jonson also wrote the magnificent verse tribute to Shakespeare prefixed to the First Folio; and no one has ever said anything greater or more worthy about him than the line in which it culminates: 'He was not of an age but for all time.' He undoubtedly meant it; but he could also undoubtedly have described Shakespeare's infirmities, of which he was exceedingly well aware, had a public tribute been the occasion. So he reserved for his private note-book the concise negation I have quoted. Jonson was thinking, of course, of artistry in drama; and in the mouth of a dramatist whose own technique was as much less inspired than Shakespeare's as it was more studied and elaborate, his dictum is astonishing enough. But we can at least see what Jonson meant, and even in some degree justify his words. Shakespeare's art was, at any rate, not of that thoroughgoing exacting kind which makes a Flaubert or a Keats 'fill every rift with ore'; we can often see when, as Dr. Johnson said of the close of Measure for Measure, Shakespeare 'wanted to finish his play.' And though one kind of art does not always or very often go with another, it is worth while asking whether this aloofness from the artistic temperament in his proper art was or was not accompanied by a similar aloofness from it in his dealings with the other arts; and I propose to take Jonson's phrase as the starting point of a brief consideration of the question,
what Shakespeare made of those varied wonders which have, since the
days of paleolithic man, come about when men apply chisel or brush to
marble or bronze or canvas. I might have added, when they win a
‘concord of sweet sounds’ from viol, lyre, or voice. But music is
another, and a more familiar, inquiry, and I here leave it aside. Did
Shakespeare, then, show any vivid interest in the graphic and plastic
arts, or in architecture, any knowledge of their processes, any insight
into their laws? I am not asking whether he was one of those poets
of the studio who, like Théophile Gautier or Dante Rossetti, use verse
to compete with the chisel or the brush. Those attempts to capture
the effects of one art by the instruments of another, like the author of
_Lémaux et Camées_, belong to the age of Romanticism which
culminated in Wagner’s grandiose fusion of all the arts in the music-
drama of Bayreuth. I am merely asking whether he shows the kind
of interest in the arts which is betrayed by Homer when he turns
aside, through several hundred lines of the _Iliad_, to describe the forging
of the wonderful Shield of Achilles, with its inlaid intaglios of scenes
from the daily lives of early Greece; or by Dante, when he tells us of
the bas-reliefs which lined the inner side of the path which wound up
the Mountain of Purgatory; or by Milton, when, with a curious blend
of Hellenic enthusiasm and Puritan animus he made his fallen Fiends
meet for debate in a Greek temple. In none of these cases need we
think of the poet’s unmistakeable interest in art as merely individual or
exceptional; each simply participated to the full in the artistic culture
of his day. The _Iliad_, we now know, was the product of an age rich
with the treasures of the brilliant civilization of Crete. The painter
and architect Giotto and the musician Casella were intimate friends of
Dante, and were both enshrined in his great poem. And Milton had
grown up in the London of the art-loving Charles, and could value the
noble façade of Whitehall, as the passage in question shows, on other
grounds than as the scene of that art-lover’s appropriate doom.

Did Shakespeare’s England offer in any similar degree the stimulus
of an artistic milieu? To a much larger extent than is commonly
thought, it did. If Shakespeare ‘wanted art,’ it was not because art
was by any means altogether wanting in England. Sixteenth-century

---

1 _Iliad_, Book XVIII.
2 Both were, as Milton says of Casella, ‘met in the milder shades of
Purgatory,’ _Purg._ II. 91, and XI. 95.
England was richer in art products than any previous age. Only in certain minor arts was she as yet creative herself. But she drew upon the art-wealth of the two most art-gifted peoples of Europe—Italy under the earlier Tudors, Flanders under the later. The Italian Renascence, in its art aspect, may be formulated as an attempt to make every part of life aesthetically beautiful to the senses. Ethical beauty was of less account, and was less uniformly pursued. But art was used to decorate and condone its infractions. The cloak which covered sins was finely embroidered. Murder, if not already a 'fine Art,' as De Quincey called it, was carried out with choice artistic accompaniments. Benvenuto Cellini, the typical rogue-genius of the age, was a gifted proficient in both branches of the profession. If he had occasion to stab an enemy, or even a friend, he did it with a dagger beautifully chased; if to poison them, he commended the liquor to their lips in a chalice of exquisite design.

II.

The tide of the Italian Renascence flowed north into France, and thence into England. But it underwent here, and among the Germanic peoples generally, notable modifications of character, partly explained by the swift acceptance, precisely among these peoples, of the Protestant Reformation. It is impossible here to deal with this complex historical evolution except in the broadest diagrammatic formulas. But it is roughly true to say that in England each of the two movements modified the other, producing, as the result, a main current of compromise and accommodation, with eddies of extreme opinion on either side. The main current was the scholarly Anglicanism of Elizabethan society, which might be defined as the Renascence minus Paganism and Protestantism minus Puritanism; the extremes on either side were, the atheists, like Marlowe and Raleigh, and the far more formidable and vocal Calvinist party in the Church.

The bearing of this close alliance of Protestant with Renascence sentiment upon the fortunes of art in Tudor England was not inconsiderable. The dissolution of the monasteries, though undertaken in the interest of the political, not of the religious, Reformation, released vast treasures of artistic wealth for the benefit of Protestant mansions. Under the settled Tudor government these abodes were at the same time growing rapidly in amenity and beauty; and all over the land,
country houses, nobly and largely planned and adorned, were replacing
the feudal strongholds of the past. We know from Harrison’s
*Description of England*, published during Shakespeare’s boyhood
(1578), how enormous had been the growth in the luxurious equip-
ment of English homes during the previous generation. The London
of some ten years later, in which he settled, was primitive enough in
many of what we think prime necessities of civilized life; but it
enjoyed many luxuries beyond the reach of persons of the same social
rank to-day.¹ Silver plate, for instance, decorated the sideboard
of the farm-house, and was by no means strange in the cottage.
Tapestries (arras), elaborately worked with stories from legend or the
bible, abounded; Lazarus and the prodigal son were favourite subjects.
As early as 1558, the year of Elizabeth’s accession, a French visitor
wrote: ‘you will find few houses without them.’ Later they began
to be replaced by the cheaper painted cloth; both play an indispens-
able part in the drama; they provide a hiding-place for the eavesdropper,
a refuge for persons ‘wanted’ by the law. Polonius and the king
listen ‘behind the arras’—‘licensed espials’—to Hamlet’s talk with
Ophelia, Polonius, unluckily for himself, to Hamlet’s talk with the queen;
Falstaff hides there from the sheriff and his men. And not all the
‘arras’ was imported from the town of that name. English weavers
were cunning in this art no less than in that of song; all through the
sixteenth century there was a tapestry factory at Barchester, in
Shakespeare’s own county. While Elizabethan talk, intrigue, and
feasting thus went on, as upon a stage, with a storied background of
woven or painted scenery, actual pictures were rather less common.
But Henry VIII. had set a splendid fashion by inviting the great
painter Hans Holbein to leave to posterity, counterfeit presentments
of the men and women about his court; and the fashion by the end
of the century had spread from the palace and country house to the
well-to-do citizen’s house. The pictures of the late and present king
of Denmark which Hamlet so trenchantly contrasted were not confined
to the palace of Elsinore, and as to miniatures, we are told that the new
king’s portrait in little fetched a hundred ducats among his obsequious
subjects.

In this, as in all questions of custom and manners, Shakespeare’s

¹ Many of the following details on the English cultivation of the arts are
derived from the chapters on the arts in *Shakespeare’s England*. 
Denmark is England. Shakespeare's own portrait we know was repeatedly painted, and several of his fellow dramatists are visibly known to us in this way. Collections of pictures were to be found in many noble houses, and the Spanish tyranny in the Netherlands brought Flemish pictures and painters here, in increasing numbers. The palaces of Cecil, and of Shakespeare's friends the earls of Southampton and Essex, were notable for such collections; while Kenilworth, a few miles from Stratford, was a home of artistic display. London had also its picture-shops, especially the famous one of R. Peake in Holborn. And if England did not yet, or for long afterwards, produce a painter of her own, she was already famed for the ancillary art of engraving. Shakespeare's portrait, painted by a Dutch artist, was engraved by an Englishman. And if we turn from the daily life of the Elizabethans and Jacobeansto their entertainments, we find, in the Masque, something like an anticipation of that union of all the arts which Wagner with far more genius carried out in our day. Dress and scenery and dancing and music and poetry were wrought into those allegorical court shows which we owe chiefly to Ben Jonson and the architect Inigo Jones, master of all the arts that beautify life, and an even greater master of the art of getting his own way.

III.

We may now turn to consider the question which is the proper theme of this essay: How did Shakespeare react to all this? In the first place we must not simplify too much. 'Shakespeare' was not a homogeneous personality, uniform throughout his career, whose reaction to a particular kind of stimulus can be defined in a single formula. His life embraced all the range of experience and character which divides the country schoolboy from the famous playwright and poet, friend of courtiers and squire of New Place. And if we propose to interpret his attitude to the arts by his utterances about them, or his literary use of them, we have to consider that his utterances are mostly the utterances of imaginary persons, whose thoughts and opinions he provides, and only occasionally, in the narrative poems and sonnets, his own; while with this distinction goes another, still more important, between the class of persons for whom these two kind of utterances were respectively designed. In other words there is a sharp cleavage between Shakespeare the playwright, who is writing for a miscellaneous
audience of Londoner playgoers, and the poet, who is addressing a noble patron, with a tolerably manifest design to win the ear and favour of the court. It is certain that these two classes of Shakespeare's work by no means differ only in virtue of the difference between dramatic and narrative or lyric poetry. There are pronounced differences of topic, tone, and ethos, only to be explained by the different character and tastes of the two audiences addressed. The subjects of both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* are of a kind for which, in the plays, Shakespeare shows unmistakeable repugnance. The entire subject of the *Venus and Adonis* is a woman's attempt, through several hundred lines of brilliant pleading, to win the favours of an unresponsive man; the entire subject of the *Lucrece* is a criminal outrage inflicted upon the person of a noble lady, his hostess, by her husband's friend; the dominant subject of the Sonnets is an older man's idolatrous love for a youth. There is no approach to such situations in the plays. Shakespeare is no doubt peculiarly fond of the kind of fun which lies in a woman's courtship of another woman, in man's disguise; Olivia courting Viola, or Phoebe Rosalind are instinct with the capricious and elusive spirit of romantic comedy; but the motive of such scenes is simply the humour of their mistake. The outrage suffered by Lucrece has no parallel but in *Titus Andronicus*, which is not now regarded as Shakespeare's work at all. While the most eloquent glowing expression of friendship between men, in the dramas, Hamlet's lines to Horatio, has, with all its warmth, a masculine strength and reticence which distinguishes them from the exquisitely phrased sentimentality of the Sonnets. And if the narrative poems now hold their place chiefly because Shakespeare wrote them, while the Sonnets, till the dawn of the nineteenth century suffered neglect and even disdain at the hands of Shakespearean scholarship, it is certain that they entirely succeeded with the aristocratic and cultured audience for which they were meant. The young gentleman at Cambridge who always slept with *Venus and Adonis* under his pillow, was not a solitary eccentric. It is not surprising, then, that the poems differ from the plays also in their more definite appeal to the cultured taste for art. We find, for instance, more detailed and insistent allusion to the paintings (not cheap painted cloth!) with which Elizabethan palaces were adorned, and the poet even lingers over the description while the action stands still. Thus at the very crisis of
the Lucrece, the injured lady in her despair bethinks her of a painting on her palace walls of the tragic scenes at the fall of Troy (R. of L. 1361, f.), and the poet proceeds to paint it again for our imagination through more than a hundred lines; very brilliantly and movingly, no doubt, but Lucrece meantime is standing by, impatient to hurry out, tell her story, and end her life. Here, it can hardly be denied, Shakespeare injures the economy of his work in order to flatter a pictorial interest, a young noble's taste for pictures. As we shall see, there is nothing like that in the Plays. One of the most curious examples of the use and misuse of painting in the Poems is the imagery in Sonnet XXIV. This is far from being among the finest of the sonnets; it has some claims to be the very worst. The poet compares himself to a portrait-painter and his beloved to the sitter. The canvas is his heart, on which he has painted his lady's image; his bosom is the 'shop' in which the picture hangs; and his lady's eyes the windows of the shop which she looks through. A highly complex, if not confused, situation is thus indicated. We are not concerned here to discuss or elucidate that situation; merely to suggest that this use of the art of portraiture is not of the kind we should expect from a poet who loved and understood that art, but indicates, on the contrary, one whose concern with it is external and unintelligent, who merely wants material for an ingenious expression of his love, and chooses it in a region likely to appeal to a courtly hearer's tastes.

If we now turn to the Plays, we find, I think, the following three propositions true. First, the use made of the arts is infrequent and on the whole slight; second, it invariably betrays naïve and unreflective ideas about the nature and purpose of art; third, it is occasioned and justified by a dramatic purpose, and has a necessary function in the economy of the play. This last point, which only affirms that Shakespeare knew his business as a dramatic poet, would not of course imply that he did not understand or care about art. Great poet as he was, he never, like Goethe in Tasso, made a poet the hero of a play; and if he does introduce a poet, it is not to allow him to expatiate at large upon the principles of poetry as Hamlet is allowed to do upon the principles of play-acting; on the contrary 'Cinna the poet' comes on only to perform the hapless part of being mistaken by the infuriated mob for the other Cinna, and to be torn in pieces in spite of his desperate cry 'I am Cinna the poet; I am not Cinna the
conspirator.' But in *Timon of Athens*, both a poet and a painter are really introduced, in their professional quality, bringing specimens of their art to their munificent patron, and even describing them in the language of the connoisseur. I think we are conscious of something un-Shakespearean in an incident of this kind; and in fact *Timon* is held to be a play to which Shakespeare contributed only certain scenes and these the grander and most crucial. Still, even if this scene be his, it complies with the above propositions, for the criterion of excellence in painting recognized by both painter and poet is only the elementary one (invariable in Shakespeare) of being *like*: ‘It is a pretty mocking of the life,’ says the painter; ‘livelier than life,’ adds the poet; while these interested offerings of the two artists are intrinsic elements of the plot, as part of the web of flattery, the sudden rupture of which turns Timon into a misanthrope.

But there is another scene, undoubtedly genuine, which stands in far more striking contrast with the tenor of Shakespearean drama, showing a resort to art in drama so astonishing in its daring and beauty as to suggest, at first sight, if it stood alone, that Shakespeare was, after all, of the breed of the studio-poets, of the fraternity of Rossetti and Gautier. The great closing scene of the *Winter's Tale* was moreover deliberately invented by Shakespeare; his original, Greene's novel *Pandosto and Faunia*, had nothing of the sort; the slandered queen had there died long ago heart-broken, there could be no question of her restoration to the lost daughter and the repentant husband. But Shakespeare would not allow the tragic story to end thus in unavailing regrets; the tragedy had to be resolved in romantic reunion and reconciliation; and the way he took to secure this consummation, we remember, is to keep Hermione secretly alive, for the sixteen years during which Perdita is growing up, in the recesses of the palace, under the care of the devoted Paulina; and then to disclose to the expectant husband and daughter what purports to be a statue of her, moulded and coloured by a renowned Italian artist to the very life. Such a motive might suggest a Shakespeare who actually moved, like Rossetti, in a studio-world between painting and poetry, and had his head full of legends like Don Juan and Pygmalion of statues that come to life and speak. But closer scrutiny dispels, if it ever arose, the notion of a studio-Shakespeare. Not only is the mention here of the famous Italian artist, Giulio Romano, the solitary
mention, in all Shakespeare, of the name of any artist whatever; but he seems to know exceedingly little either of him or of his art. Giulio Romano is only known as a painter; not as a sculptor; Shakespeare makes him author of what was with the Italians a rare monstrosity, a painted statue, and seems to regard this achievement as the height of art. No one then knew that the Greeks were apparently of the same opinion! But his reason, at least, is non-Greek. It is, as always, the naive belief that the height of art is reached by a copy of nature exactly like the original. If any artist could surpass this painted statue, it would be one who could make it still more like, could make it breathe and move, fill the veins already blue, with pulsing blood, and in fine, make the imaged queen descend, a living woman from her pedestal; and the illusion is not at once broken even when, at Paulina’s cry—

‘Tis time, descend; be stone no more; approach,—' she in fact descends, and her husband tremblingly embraces what he still thinks a magical apparition. But it is clear, just from this naiveté on the side of art, that Shakespeare’s interest in the art-side of the matter is of the slightest; art is merely the raw material for a scene of moving drama, just as the painted statue is itself a fiction. The Shakespeare of the studio is like that feigned statue of Hermione; he turns, when we approach, into the Shakespeare of nature and breathing life we know.

Very rarely, again, are we allowed to see the splendours of artistry which adorned the chambers of Elizabethan palaces. But, once, such a chamber is described to us in startlingly vivid detail,—the ceiling fretted with golden cherubims, the fireplace flanked by winking cupids of silver. But who describes all this? Not a showman, or a proud host, bent on provoking our admiration or our envy. No, but Iachimo, meaning to convince Postumo that he has won the love of Imogen, by describing to him in the utmost detail the equipment of her bedchamber. Here, as before, as everywhere in the plays, in contrast with the poems, dramatic need, not artistic interest, determines the course he takes. So with the pictures in a yet more famous bedchamber, the portraits of the late and of the present king, impartially hang side by side in Queen Gertrude’s chamber at Elsinore. The form and feature of the dead king live in Hamlet’s magical phrases:—
‘Hyperion’s curls; the front of Jove himself,
   An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
A station like the herald Mercury,
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill’—

Yet the whole significance of it lies in the contrast with the companion portrait of one
   ‘like a mildewed ear
Blasting his wholesome brother,—

and the ‘dagger’ of Hamlet’s
   Ha! have you eyes!
Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
   And batten on this moor?’

One of the most gorgeous descriptions of material splendour in Shakespeare is Enobarbus’s account of Cleopatra’s barge on her way to present herself and her charms to Antony.

   The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne
   Burn’d on the water, etc.

But all this splendour is a part of the plot of the drama, as it was a part of the rare Egyptian’s plot to capture the heart of the great triumvir, who never yet said No to any woman. Shakespeare had perhaps seen, as a boy, the splendid show of Kenilworth, in 1575, which expressed with scarcely more disguise the Earl of Leicester’s plot to capture the heart of the great queen.

Perhaps we may remember another courtship, in which gold and silver play a significant part, and in which a great lady’s hand is the prize. The three caskets among which the suitors of Portia, at Belmont, had to choose, were evidently objects of art, and we must suppose that those of gold and silver were encharged and otherwise made as alluring to ‘worldly chusers’ as the artist knew how. Each, too, contained a portrait,—a death’s head, a blinking idiot, and finally, ‘fair Portia’s counterfeit.’ As elsewhere, the portrait is valued purely by the criteria of realism. ‘What demi-god hath come so near creation?’ It is full of alluring magic, and yet ‘this shadow doth limp behind the substances.’ But if Bassanio has made the right choice, he can hardly be held to have chosen like an artist. Nor, clearly, was he meant so to choose. Portia’s father, the author of this singular mode of securing his daughter’s happiness, was apparently a

1 Ant. and Cleop. II., 2.
sour moralist, bent on teaching the world, at her expense, that all is not gold that glitters; and the moral of the whole, if it has any, is that 'if you are good and wise, you will prefer the base to the precious, the ugly to the beautiful;' hardly a motto that you would put up over the entrance of a studio, even in these days when ugliness has largely got the better of its old taboo. The favoured Bassanio finds the portrait, and does full justice to its charms; but he has succeeded 'because he flouted whatever sense of beauty he possessed; because he 'chose not by the view.'

As little is there any sign of artistic appreciation of metal-work in general, of the goldsmith’s cunning in rings and plate, or the metal-worker’s in chased weapons and armour. Gold rings are, it is true, even extravagantly valued by all the leading personages of this very play. The doctor and his clerk will accept absolutely nothing but rings as reward for the pleading which has saved Antonio’s life; Bassanio and Gratiano come near to losing their ladies because they have lost the rings; and Shylock would not have sold the ring that Leah gave him ‘for a wilderness of monkeys.’ But here, once more, dramatic and human values are alone concerned. We know too that daggers and coats of mail were often elaborately ornamented. But Shakespeare’s daggers are not, like Benvenuto Cellini’s, delightful to the eye as well as efficient instruments of the other ‘fine art;’ they are glorious only with the golden intaglio of Shakespeare’s poetry,—the searing eloquence of the daggers that Hamlet ‘speaks’ but does not use; the gouts of blood on the blade of the airy dagger which marshals Macbeth the way that he was going, the handle towards his hand. As for suits of armour, they were almost out of use when Shakespeare wrote, but were still to be seen, as they may be to-day, hanging in old halls, like the ‘rusty mail in monumental mockery,’ to which Ulysses compared Achilles. Benedick ‘would go ten miles to see a good armour,’ and a young Italian gallant may be suspected of some relish for the artistic aspects of these accoutrements. But Beatrice swears she will eat all the men he kills, and the ‘goodness’ of the armour which drew him so far may have lain in its efficiency as a shelter from the enemy. What Shakespeare himself rejoiced in, when his verse leaps exultantly, as it sometimes does, in describing armoured men, is not the armour but the men inside it,—

‘Their eyes of fire sparkling through sights of steel,’
—a splendid line, repeated elsewhere, which might stand for a symbolic assurance that, for Shakespeare, the human soul, and the eye, its shining gate, meant more than all the fabled wonders of material and graphic artistry. We feel this even in the dazzling picture of young Harry, which Vernon, before Shrewsbury, flashes on the envious eyes of Hotspur. It is dawn, and Hal is freshly armed for battle, the sordid purlieus of Eastcheap are a thousand miles away:

‘I saw young Harry, with his beaver on,
His cuisses on his thighs, gallantly armed,
Rise from the ground like feather’d Mercury.’

His men too have golden coats of mail, and Shakespeare lets us have a glimpse of its splendour as it catches the morning sun. But what really concerns him is the morning freshness and ardour of that band of young soldiers

‘Bated like eagles having lately bathed.’

IV.

What, then, shall we say by way of final word? Shakespeare, if we look to intimate understanding, did not stand much nearer to Art than he stood to Puritanism; and even in the Poems, where he is writing for noble persons, adapting himself to the artistic culture of the court, he does not show more than an external knowledge of it.

He stood further, both from Art and from Puritanism, than Milton. Milton gloried in the storied Gothic windows of King’s College Chapel, whereas Shakespeare was apparently just as indifferent to the glories of Old St. Paul’s and Westminster and the score of wonderful cathedrals scattered over the country, as he was to the theology of Calvin.

But did not Shakespeare, notwithstanding, touch both Art and Puritanism in their ultimate aims?

Art, we may roughly say, seeks to express soul through colour and form, and rules out the things which are too rudimentary or too abstract to become thus expressive.

Puritanism, to put it no less roughly, sought to make life expressive of soul, and ruled out the feasting senses which, in its view, frustrate that expression.
Shakespeare took the common fictions and stage-shows of his time, and made them so expressive of soul that Dryden, who knew only his writings, not the man, ascribed to him the most universal soul among the sons of men. And if his dealings with Art, as with Puritanism, as we have seen, were few and external, it is no mean part of his lasting glory, and of his lasting service to humanity, to have so enlarged and deepened our apprehension both of goodness and of beauty as both to enrich and to emancipate the Artist, and the Puritan, in us all.