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Author(s)	Alfred Harbage
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The Bard as Mankind

SHAKESPEARE: Time and Conscience. By Grigori Kozintsev. Translated from the Russian by Joyce Vining. Illustrated. 276 pp. New York: Hill & Wang. $5.95.

By ALFRED HARBAGE

GRIGORI KOZINTSEV directed the prize-winning Soviet film "Hamlet," but his book was not made to ride upon the film's success; most of it was written before the filming. Although published in Russia as "Our Contemporary: William Shakespeare," it bears no resemblance to the similarly titled work by Jan Kott, the self-indulgently despairing Pole. Kott shrinks Shakespeare to the size of Samuel Beckett; Kozintsev expands him to the size of Mankind. His book is a moving tribute to Shakespeare, poetry, the art of the stage and the dignity of man.

It is fabulously well-informed. No Shakespearean director since Granville-Barker has displayed a fraction of this man's general knowledge of literature and stage history. Although he uses a few subdivisional tags, such as "Dame Avarice," "Mother Folly," and the like, the structural pattern of his criticism is simple. Himself an artist, he feels no compulsive fascination for the ingredients of art as something alien to him. He says little of "archetypal myths" because he lives too intimately with myth to exploit it; he says little about "images" as such because he thinks in images. His graphic style makes the term "poet of the camera" seem more than a cliche. The translation is good; at least it is wonderfully readable.

The book opens with "Landscapes," a charming sketch of a pilgrimage to the Shakespeare country. Mr. Kozintsev was kindly treated, and his kindly and witty reminiscences will amply repay his hosts. He was allowed to handle a Shakespeare first folio in the British Museum, and to stroll in peace through the birthplace house in Stratford. The quietly happy reverence of his tone makes us remember another loving seeker of Shakespearean landscapes, John Keats.

The body of the book is devoted to criticism of "King Lear," "Hamlet" and the "Henry IV" plays. An appendix supplies a collection of notes on the staging and filming of "Hamlet." The present title derives from a theme recurrent in the criticism, with "Time" signifying the "times" or the historical process, and "Conscience" signifying the role of the good man in combating the evil of the times. Arthur Sewell's "Character and Society in Shakespeare" (1951) is equivalently titled and similarly informed with a fervent humanism.

IT may seem odd that an obviously loyal Communist should see damnation in the state, salvation in the human individual. It must be quickly noted that illustration is drawn not from Soviet history but from that of Shakespeare's England. It is the one thing badly done. Mr. Kozintsev is honest; he is not trying to ingratiate himself with Soviet officialdom; in fact he reveals clearly his hatred for "secret police" and contempt for toadying artists and critics: Pasternak is his man. He simply happens to believe the economic history he was taught.

His description (happily short) of 16th-century England in the time of "the initial accumulation of capital" shows "hordes of vagabonds, terrible caravans of human grief" roaming roofless, while "executioners fired iron to white heat and ground their knives . . . ," etc. The century was not quite like that. Land-enclosing, rack-renting, price inflation, etc., were present, as Mr. Kozintsev has heard, but there was also much new wealth, a considerable portion of it trickling down to "hordes" who never before had been proffered more than the shelter and sustenance of work-beasts.

It was the century when poor relief became a matter of public law instead of private whim, when education was made available to the sons of plain people even though not destined for the church, and when thousands of such people first had pennies to spend on plays. In fact the first theatres appeared because of an "initial accumulation of capital."

A new day had dawned for certain families tucked in the Midland landscape; a tenant farmer of Snitterfield could see his son become a burgess of Stratford, and the latter could see *his* son become an artist in London—and participant in a thriving business. Mr. Kozintsev sees Edmund in "King Lear" as a "businessman." The representative 16th-century "captalist" was not an Edmund but a William Shakespeare, landlord, investor in tithes and engrosser of malt.

Still Mr. Kozintsev is essentially right about Edmund. Unlike Iago, he is uninterested in cruelty for its own sake but is simply a consistent materialist, willing to trade all human values for property. He might even languidly prefer his father not to be blinded, so long as he himself could still get rich. Mr. Kozintsev is right about "King Lear" as a whole. He abandons the idea of "Avarice" as a 16th-century invention, and concedes that the tragedy might have occurred in a "peasant's hovel" — wherever there are parents and children.

Pseudo-history soon gives place to the folktale of the father who is betrayed by daughters offering sweets and finery, and saved by the daughter offering despised salt. Cordelia is the "heiress of the values earned by humanity," and Lear baffles evil by the "energy of human indignation." He learns the needs of others and the value of salt through the "taste of his own tears." These "magnificent human beings" love each other, and in Shakespeare "love is a martial concept, a challenge addressed to ideas of the iron age." "This man remains in our memory lit by bursts of lightning, a sere rebel who accuses injustice and demands that the world change or cease." Few Western critics now write in this way, for fear of seeming "square."

The "Hamlet" criticism is too rich for brief analysis. Its one fault is that its seriousness is more sustained than Shakespeare's. The critic's sympathies cannot embrace a Polonius. Similarly, in the "Henry IV" criticism, his praise of the "external beauty" of Hotspur's chivalric code seems wrung from him. "Hotspur has property: his violent temperament is shown not only in single combat but also in the division of lands.

Two scenes from the Russian film of "Hamlet," which Kozintsev directed. Above, Laertes listens to the demented Ophelia. Right, Horatio and Hamlet watch Ophelia's funeral procession.

Right, illustration from "Shakespeare: Time and Conscience."

MR. HARBAGE, Cabot Professor of English at Harvard, is the author of "Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions" and "Conceptions of Shakespeare."

Grigori Kozintsev.

The property gains of the rebels depend upon the success of the rebellion." And even his laughter at Falstaff is a trifle grave. "Everyday life enters the chronicle with Falstaff. Thanks to his participation in the action, the full-dress history of kings and courtiers is jostled by, and gradually begins to yield to, popular history and the scenes of the work-a-day world in which craftsmen, soldiers, vagabonds, and tavern waiters act out their parts." Shakespeare was not repelled by senile age, mindless youth or uninstructive frivolity in taverns; his disgust was reserved for trolls.

I do not wish to sink Mr. Kozintsev's book by implying that it is ponderously "moral." It offers more "stimulus," "insights," "brilliance," and other things customarily praised in critical books than any I have recently read, besides being a lot more lively. For this critic "Hamlet" is the play *par excellence* about conscience. When asked how long he was occupied with filming it, he says 10 years, but long before we have finished his book, we know the truth of his final avowal: " 'Hamlet' is for me a work that includes everything I have loved throughout my life, everything to which I have aspired since childhood."

The only significance of the Communist bias of the book is the critic's triumph over it. Except when it is the mere shadow of a tyrant, any political or economic system is a mixture of good and bad like the human beings who created it. The right business of conscience is to make the good in our own system prevail, not to spot the bad in our neighbor's. Mr. Kozintsev need not be told this; he is putting the principle in practice. He learned it partly from Shakespeare. This great poet and human being can walk unbruised through an iron curtain — if the curtain is still really there. Mr. Kozintsev's book makes us doubt it, and gives a lift to our hopes. One like it may someday be written in China.