

“Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high”: Martin Lings, Shakespeare, and The Secret of *Richard II*

By Adib Faiz

“They say best men are moulded out of faults,
And for the most become much more the better
For being a little bad”¹

- Measure for Measure -

In his books and lectures, the late Dr. Martin Lings uncovered the spiritual meaning of Shakespeare, analysing his plays “in the light of sacred art”.² Though Lings mostly restricts his analysis to the plays that followed *Hamlet*, he also states that “many of the earlier plays trace out symbolically the way of the Mysteries”, paving the way for Shakespeare’s mature outlook.³ With the exception of *Henry IV* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Lings does not explore this idea much further for practical reasons. However, it is possible to see this higher meaning contained in one of Shakespeare’s other early plays: *Richard II*.

In this article, I examine the spiritual meaning of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, applying Lings’ analytical framework and perspective to my reading of the play. I begin by considering Lings’ theoretical framework, specifically his use of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and Spencer’s *The Faerie Queene* as a language for analysing character development. I then trace the development of Richard’s character, breaking his journey into three stages: the descent into Hell (Inferno), the ascent up Mount Purgatory (Purgatorio), and the attainment of perfection and Paradise (Paradiso). However, most of my attention will be focused on Richard’s purification,

¹ As quoted in Martin Lings, *The Secret of Shakespeare* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1984), 51.

² Lings, *Secret*, back cover.

³ Lings, *Secret*, 14-15.

which involves the elements of intelligence, will and soul. Throughout the essay, I make use of Lings' motif of slaying of the dragon, and draw upon his insights concerning Shakespeare, symbolism and spirituality.

The Secret of Shakespeare: Martin Lings and Shakespeare's Spirituality

Before attempting to examine the higher meaning of *Richard II*, we should consider some of the basic components of Lings' perspective. For Lings, each of Shakespeare's "great plays" concerns the purification of the soul, as it moves from a state of imperfection to that of sanctity. Characters are "developed to a state of virtue", with Shakespeare pushing them "to the very limits of human nature" toward a state of "human perfection".⁴ While some might restrict such development to the moral or psychological plane, Lings sees this process as taking place on the "anagogical" level. Using Dante's definition of sacred art, Lings regards each play as having four levels of meaning: literal, moral, allegorical and anagogical. While "allegory" merely implies a meaning "other than the literal meaning", "anagogy" allows the drama to "[lead] up to a higher meaning", one that exceeds ordinary didactic teaching.⁵ Many of these ideas are bound up with Lings' understanding of sacred art and symbolism, a topic that exceeds the scope of this article. For the purpose of this topic, it is enough to remember that Lings did not regard Shakespeare's spirituality as a strictly theological or didactic matter. Rather, Lings saw the plays on a mystical level, as works concerned with "the most universal aspect of religion ... rather than with any particular mode of worship."⁶ The plays are not seen as being exoteric works concerned with the "salvation" of souls from Hell, but esoteric works concerned with the "sanctification" of souls for Paradise.⁷

Rather than expressing his ideas in purely metaphysical terms, Lings draws upon two non-Shakespearean texts as a framework for analysis. The first text is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, regarded by Lings as "[a] supreme example of an esoteric work".⁸ In Dante's poem, the main

⁴ Lings, *Secret*, 21.

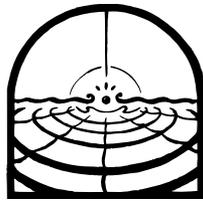
⁵ Martin Lings, *To Take Us Upon the Mystery of Things: The Shakespeare Lectures of Martin Lings*, ed. Ira B. Zinman (London: Matheson Trust, 2014), 78.

⁶ Lings, *Secret*, 18.

⁷ Lings, *Secret*, 20.

⁸ Lings, *Secret*, 19.

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