ANDREW CECIL BRADLEY

SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY: LECTURES ON HAMLET, OTHELLO, KING LEAR, MACBETH

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Bradley A.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

These lectures are based on a selection from materials used in teaching at Liverpool, Glasgow, and Oxford; and I have for the most part preserved the lecture form. The point of view taken in them is explained in the Introduction. I should, of course, wish them to be read in their order, and a knowledge of the first two is assumed in the remainder; but readers who may prefer to enter at once on the discussion of the several plays can do so by beginning at page 89.

Any one who writes on Shakespeare must owe much to his predecessors. Where I was conscious of a particular obligation, I have acknowledged it; but most of my reading of Shakespearean criticism was done many years ago, and I can only hope that I have not often reproduced as my own what belongs to another.

Many of the Notes will be of interest only to scholars, who may find, I hope, something new in them.

I have quoted, as a rule, from the Globe edition, and have referred always to its numeration of acts, scenes, and lines.

November, 1904.

NOTE TO SECOND AND SUBSEQUENT IMPRESSIONS

In these impressions I have confined myself to making some formal improvements, correcting indubitable mistakes, and indicating here and there my desire to modify or develop at some future time statements which seem to me doubtful or open to misunderstanding. The changes, where it seemed desirable, are shown by the inclusion of sentences in square brackets.

INTRODUCTION

In these lectures I propose to consider the four principal tragedies of Shakespeare from a single point of view. Nothing will be said of Shakespeare's place in the history either of English literature or of the drama in general. No attempt will be made to compare him with other writers. I shall leave untouched, or merely glanced at, questions regarding his life and character, the development of his genius and art, the genuineness, sources, texts, inter-relations of his various works. Even what may be called, in a restricted sense, the 'poetry' of the four tragedies—the beauties of style, diction, versification—I shall pass by in silence. Our one object will be what, again in a restricted sense, may be called dramatic appreciation; to increase our understanding and enjoyment of these works as dramas; to learn to apprehend the action and some of the personages of each with a somewhat greater truth and intensity, so that they may assume in our imaginations a shape a little less unlike the shape they wore in the imagination of their creator. For this end all those studies that were mentioned just now, of literary history and the like, are useful and even in various degrees necessary. But an overt pursuit of them is not necessary here, nor is any one of them so indispensable to our object as that close familiarity with the plays, that native strength and justice of perception, and that habit of reading with an eager mind, which make many an unscholarly lover of Shakespeare a far better critic than many a Shakespeare scholar.

Such lovers read a play more or less as if they were actors who had to study all the parts. They do not need, of course, to imagine whereabouts the persons are to stand, or what gestures they ought to use; but they want to realise fully and exactly the inner movements which produced these words and no other, these deeds and no other, at each particular moment. This, carried through a drama, is the right way to read the dramatist Shakespeare; and the prime requisite here is therefore a vivid and intent imagination. But this alone will hardly suffice. It is necessary also, especially to a true conception of the whole, to compare, to analyse, to dissect. And such readers often shrink from this task, which seems to them prosaic or even a desecration. They misunderstand, I believe. They would not shrink if they remembered two things. In the first place, in this process of comparison and analysis, it is not requisite, it is on the contrary ruinous, to set imagination aside and to substitute some supposed 'cold reason'; and it is only want of practice that makes the concurrent use of analysis and of poetic perception difficult or irksome. And, in the second place, these dissecting processes, though they are also imaginative, are still, and are meant to be, nothing but means to an end. When they have finished their work (it can only be finished for the time) they give place to the end, which is that same imaginative reading or re-creation of the drama from which they set out, but a reading now enriched by the products of analysis, and therefore far more adequate and enjoyable.

This, at any rate, is the faith in the strength of which I venture, with merely personal misgivings, on the path of analytic interpretation. And so, before coming to the first of the four tragedies, I propose to discuss some preliminary matters which concern them all. Though each is individual through and through, they have, in a sense, one and the same substance; for in all of them Shakespeare represents the tragic aspect of life, the tragic fact. They have, again, up to a certain point, a common form or structure. This substance and this structure, which would be found to distinguish them, for example, from Greek tragedies, may, to diminish repetition, be considered once for all; and in considering them we shall also be able to observe characteristic differences among the four plays. And to this may be added the little that it seems necessary to premise on the position of these dramas in Shakespeare's literary career.

Much that is said on our main preliminary subjects will naturally hold good, within certain limits, of other dramas of Shakespeare beside *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. But it will often apply to these other works only in part, and to some of them more fully than to others. *Romeo and Juliet*, for instance, is a pure tragedy, but it is an early work, and in some respects an immature

one. *Richard III.* and *Richard II.*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus* are tragic histories or historical tragedies, in which Shakespeare acknowledged in practice a certain obligation to follow his authority, even when that authority offered him an undramatic material. Probably he himself would have met some criticisms to which these plays are open by appealing to their historical character, and by denying that such works are to be judged by the standard of pure tragedy. In any case, most of these plays, perhaps all, do show, as a matter of fact, considerable deviations from that standard; and, therefore, what is said of the pure tragedies must be applied to them with qualifications which I shall often take for granted without mention. There remain *Titus Andronicus* and *Timon of Athens*. The former I shall leave out of account, because, even if Shakespeare wrote the whole of it, he did so before he had either a style of his own or any characteristic tragic conception. *Timon* stands on a different footing. Parts of it are unquestionably Shakespeare's, and they will be referred to in one of the later lectures. But much of the writing is evidently not his, and as it seems probable that the conception and construction of the whole tragedy should also be attributed to some other writer, I shall omit this work too from our preliminary discussions.

LECTURE I

THE SUBSTANCE OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

The question we are to consider in this lecture may be stated in a variety of ways. We may put it thus: What is the substance of a Shakespearean tragedy, taken in abstraction both from its form and from the differences in point of substance between one tragedy and another? Or thus: What is the nature of the tragic aspect of life as represented by Shakespeare? What is the general fact shown now in this tragedy and now in that? And we are putting the same question when we ask: What is Shakespeare's tragic conception, or conception of tragedy?

These expressions, it should be observed, do not imply that Shakespeare himself ever asked or answered such a question; that he set himself to reflect on the tragic aspects of life, that he framed a tragic conception, and still less that, like Aristotle or Corneille, he had a theory of the kind of poetry called tragedy. These things are all possible; how far any one of them is probable we need not discuss; but none of them is presupposed by the question we are going to consider. This question implies only that, as a matter of fact, Shakespeare in writing tragedy did represent a certain aspect of life in a certain way, and that through examination of his writings we ought to be able, to some extent, to describe this aspect and way in terms addressed to the understanding. Such a description, so far as it is true and adequate, may, after these explanations, be called indifferently an account of the substance of Shakespearean tragedy, or an account of Shakespeare's conception of tragedy or view of the tragic fact.

Two further warnings may be required. In the first place, we must remember that the tragic aspect of life is only one aspect. We cannot arrive at Shakespeare's whole dramatic way of looking at the world from his tragedies alone, as we can arrive at Milton's way of regarding things, or at Wordsworth's or at Shelley's, by examining almost any one of their important works. Speaking very broadly, one may say that these poets at their best always look at things in one light; but *Hamlet* and *Henry IV.* and *Cymbeline* reflect things from quite distinct positions, and Shakespeare's whole dramatic view is not to be identified with any one of these reflections. And, in the second place, I may repeat that in these lectures, at any rate for the most part, we are to be content with his *dramatic* view, and are not to ask whether it corresponded exactly with his opinions or creed outside his poetry —the opinions or creed of the being whom we sometimes oddly call 'Shakespeare the man.' It does not seem likely that outside his poetry he was a very simple-minded Catholic or Protestant or Atheist, as some have maintained; but we cannot be sure, as with those other poets we can, that in his works he expressed his deepest and most cherished convictions on ultimate questions, or even that he had any. And in his dramatic conceptions there is enough to occupy us.

1

In approaching our subject it will be best, without attempting to shorten the path by referring to famous theories of the drama, to start directly from the facts, and to collect from them gradually an idea of Shakespearean Tragedy. And first, to begin from the outside, such a tragedy brings before us a considerable number of persons (many more than the persons in a Greek play, unless the members of the Chorus are reckoned among them); but it is pre-eminently the story of one person, the 'hero,'[1] or at most of two, the 'hero' and 'heroine.' Moreover, it is only in the love-tragedies, *Romeo and*

[1] *Julius Caesar* is not an exception to this rule. Caesar, whose murder comes in the Third Act, is in a sense the dominating figure in the story, but Brutus is the 'hero.'

Juliet and *Antony and Cleopatra*, that the heroine is as much the centre of the action as the hero. The rest, including *Macbeth*, are single stars. So that, having noticed the peculiarity of these two dramas, we may henceforth, for the sake of brevity, ignore it, and may speak of the tragic story as being concerned primarily with one person.

The story, next, leads up to, and includes, the *death* of the hero. On the one hand (whatever may be true of tragedy elsewhere), no play at the end of which the hero remains alive is, in the full Shakespearean sense, a tragedy; and we no longer class *Troilus and Cressida* or *Cymbeline* as such, as did the editors of the Folio. On the other hand, the story depicts also the troubled part of the hero's life which precedes and leads up to his death; and an instantaneous death occurring by 'accident' in the midst of prosperity would not suffice for it. It is, in fact, essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death.

The suffering and calamity are, moreover, exceptional. They befall a conspicuous person. They are themselves of some striking kind. They are also, as a rule, unexpected, and contrasted with previous happiness or glory. A tale, for example, of a man slowly worn to death by disease, poverty, little cares, sordid vices, petty persecutions, however piteous or dreadful it might be, would not be tragic in the Shakespearean sense.

Such exceptional suffering and calamity, then, affecting the hero, and—we must now add—generally extending far and wide beyond him, so as to make the whole scene a scene of woe, are an essential ingredient in tragedy and a chief source of the tragic emotions, and especially of pity. But the proportions of this ingredient, and the direction taken by tragic pity, will naturally vary greatly. Pity, for example, has a much larger part in *King Lear* than in *Macbeth*, and is directed in the one case chiefly to the hero, in the other chiefly to minor characters.

Let us now pause for a moment on the ideas we have so far reached. They would more than suffice to describe the whole tragic fact as it presented itself to the mediaeval mind. To the mediaeval mind a tragedy meant a narrative rather than a play, and its notion of the matter of this narrative may readily be gathered from Dante or, still better, from Chaucer. Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* is a series of what he calls 'tragedies'; and this means in fact a series of tales *de Casibus Illustrium Virorum*,—stories of the Falls of Illustrious Men, such as Lucifer, Adam, Hercules and Nebuchadnezzar. And the Monk ends the tale of Croesus thus:

> Anhanged was Cresus, the proudè kyng;
> His roial tronè myghte hym nat availle.
> Tragédie is noon oother maner thyng,
> Ne kan in syngyng criè ne biwaille
> But for that Fortune alwey wole assaile
> With unwar strook the regnès that been proude;
> For whan men trusteth hire, thanne wol she faille,
> And covere hire brighte facè with a clowde.

A total reverse of fortune, coming unawares upon a man who 'stood in high degree,' happy and apparently secure,—such was the tragic fact to the mediaeval mind. It appealed strongly to common human sympathy and pity; it startled also another feeling, that of fear. It frightened men and awed them. It made them feel that man is blind and helpless, the plaything of an inscrutable power, called by the name of Fortune or some other name,—a power which appears to smile on him for a little, and then on a sudden strikes him down in his pride.

Shakespeare's idea of the tragic fact is larger than this idea and goes beyond it; but it includes it, and it is worth while to observe the identity of the two in a certain point which is often ignored. Tragedy with Shakespeare is concerned always with persons of 'high degree'; often with kings or princes; if not, with leaders in the state like Coriolanus, Brutus, Antony; at the least, as in *Romeo*

and Juliet, with members of great houses, whose quarrels are of public moment. There is a decided difference here between *Othello* and our three other tragedies, but it is not a difference of kind. Othello himself is no mere private person; he is the General of the Republic. At the beginning we see him in the Council-Chamber of the Senate. The consciousness of his high position never leaves him. At the end, when he is determined to live no longer, he is as anxious as Hamlet not to be misjudged by the great world, and his last speech begins,

> Soft you; a word or two before you go.
> I have done the state some service, and they know it.[2]

And this characteristic of Shakespeare's tragedies, though not the most vital, is neither external nor unimportant. The saying that every death-bed is the scene of the fifth act of a tragedy has its meaning, but it would not be true if the word 'tragedy' bore its dramatic sense. The pangs of despised love and the anguish of remorse, we say, are the same in a peasant and a prince; but, not to insist that they cannot be so when the prince is really a prince, the story of the prince, the triumvir, or the general, has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence—perhaps the caprice—of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival.

Such feelings are constantly evoked by Shakespeare's tragedies,—again in varying degrees. Perhaps they are the very strongest of the emotions awakened by the early tragedy of *Richard II.*, where they receive a concentrated expression in Richard's famous speech about the antic Death, who sits in the hollow crown

> That rounds the mortal temples of a king,

grinning at his pomp, watching till his vanity and his fancied security have wholly encased him round, and then coming and boring with a little pin through his castle wall. And these feelings, though their predominance is subdued in the mightiest tragedies, remain powerful there. In the figure of the maddened Lear we see

> A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,
> Past speaking of in a king;

and if we would realise the truth in this matter we cannot do better than compare with the effect of *King Lear* the effect of Tourgénief's parallel and remarkable tale of peasant life, *A King Lear of the Steppes*.

2

A Shakespearean tragedy as so far considered may be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate. But it is clearly much more than this, and we have now to regard it from another side. No amount of calamity which merely befell a man, descending from the clouds like lightning, or stealing from the darkness like pestilence, could alone provide the substance of its story. Job was the greatest of all the children of the east, and his afflictions were well-nigh more

[2] *Timon of Athens*, we have seen, was probably not designed by Shakespeare, but even *Timon* is no exception to the rule. The sub-plot is concerned with Alcibiades and his army, and Timon himself is treated by the Senate as a man of great importance. *Arden of Feversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* would certainly be exceptions to the rule; but I assume that neither of them is Shakespeare's; and if either is, it belongs to a different species from his admitted tragedies. See, on this species, Symonds, *Shakspere's Predecessors*, ch. xi.

than he could bear; but even if we imagined them wearing him to death, that would not make his story tragic. Nor yet would it become so, in the Shakespearean sense, if the fire, and the great wind from the wilderness, and the torments of his flesh were conceived as sent by a supernatural power, whether just or malignant. The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent; they proceed mainly from actions, and those the actions of men.

We see a number of human beings placed in certain circumstances; and we see, arising from the co-operation of their characters in these circumstances, certain actions. These actions beget others, and these others beget others again, until this series of inter-connected deeds leads by an apparently inevitable sequence to a catastrophe. The effect of such a series on imagination is to make us regard the sufferings which accompany it, and the catastrophe in which it ends, not only or chiefly as something which happens to the persons concerned, but equally as something which is caused by them. This at least may be said of the principal persons, and, among them, of the hero, who always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes.

This second aspect of tragedy evidently differs greatly from the first. Men, from this point of view, appear to us primarily as agents, 'themselves the authors of their proper woe'; and our fear and pity, though they will not cease or diminish, will be modified accordingly. We are now to consider this second aspect, remembering that it too is only one aspect, and additional to the first, not a substitute for it.

The 'story' or 'action' of a Shakespearean tragedy does not consist, of course, solely of human actions or deeds; but the deeds are the predominant factor. And these deeds are, for the most part, actions in the full sense of the word; not things done "tween asleep and wake,' but acts or omissions thoroughly expressive of the doer,—characteristic deeds. The centre of the tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action.

Shakespeare's main interest lay here. To say that it lay in *mere* character, or was a psychological interest, would be a great mistake, for he was dramatic to the tips of his fingers. It is possible to find places where he has given a certain indulgence to his love of poetry, and even to his turn for general reflections; but it would be very difficult, and in his later tragedies perhaps impossible, to detect passages where he has allowed such freedom to the interest in character apart from action. But for the opposite extreme, for the abstraction of mere 'plot' (which is a very different thing from the tragic 'action'), for the kind of interest which predominates in a novel like *The Woman in White*, it is clear that he cared even less. I do not mean that this interest is absent from his dramas; but it is subordinate to others, and is so interwoven with them that we are rarely conscious of it apart, and rarely feel in any great strength the half-intellectual, half-nervous excitement of following an ingenious complication. What we do feel strongly, as a tragedy advances to its close, is that the calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men, and that the main source of these deeds is character. The dictum that, with Shakespeare, 'character is destiny' is no doubt an exaggeration, and one that may mislead (for many of his tragic personages, if they had not met with peculiar circumstances, would have escaped a tragic end, and might even have lived fairly untroubled lives); but it is the exaggeration of a vital truth.

This truth, with some of its qualifications, will appear more clearly if we now go on to ask what elements are to be found in the 'story' or 'action,' occasionally or frequently, beside the characteristic deeds, and the sufferings and circumstances, of the persons. I will refer to three of these additional factors.

(*a*) Shakespeare, occasionally and for reasons which need not be discussed here, represents abnormal conditions of mind; insanity, for example, somnambulism, hallucinations. And deeds issuing from these are certainly not what we called deeds in the fullest sense, deeds expressive of character. No; but these abnormal conditions are never introduced as the origin of deeds of any dramatic moment. Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking has no influence whatever on the events that follow it. Macbeth did not murder Duncan because he saw a dagger in the air: he saw the dagger because

he was about to murder Duncan. Lear's insanity is not the cause of a tragic conflict any more than Ophelia's; it is, like Ophelia's, the result of a conflict; and in both cases the effect is mainly pathetic. If Lear were really mad when he divided his kingdom, if Hamlet were really mad at any time in the story, they would cease to be tragic characters.

(*b*) Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural into some of his tragedies; he introduces ghosts, and witches who have supernatural knowledge. This supernatural element certainly cannot in most cases, if in any, be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters. And further, it does contribute to the action, and is in more than one instance an indispensable part of it: so that to describe human character, with circumstances, as always the *sole* motive force in this action would be a serious error. But the supernatural is always placed in the closest relation with character. It gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence; to the sense of failure in Brutus, to the stifled workings of conscience in Richard, to the half-formed thought or the horrified memory of guilt in Macbeth, to suspicion in Hamlet. Moreover, its influence is never of a compulsive kind. It forms no more than an element, however important, in the problem which the hero has to face; and we are never allowed to feel that it has removed his capacity or responsibility for dealing with this problem. So far indeed are we from feeling this, that many readers run to the opposite extreme, and openly or privately regard the supernatural as having nothing to do with the real interest of the play.

(*c*) Shakespeare, lastly, in most of his tragedies allows to 'chance' or 'accident' an appreciable influence at some point in the action. Chance or accident here will be found, I think, to mean any occurrence (not supernatural, of course) which enters the dramatic sequence neither from the agency of a character, nor from the obvious surrounding circumstances.[3] It may be called an accident, in this sense, that Romeo never got the Friar's message about the potion, and that Juliet did not awake from her long sleep a minute sooner; an accident that Edgar arrived at the prison just too late to save Cordelia's life; an accident that Desdemona dropped her handkerchief at the most fatal of moments; an accident that the pirate ship attacked Hamlet's ship, so that he was able to return forthwith to Denmark. Now this operation of accident is a fact, and a prominent fact, of human life. To exclude it *wholly* from tragedy, therefore, would be, we may say, to fail in truth. And, besides, it is not merely a fact. That men may start a course of events but can neither calculate nor control it, is a *tragic* fact. The dramatist may use accident so as to make us feel this; and there are also other dramatic uses to which it may be put. Shakespeare accordingly admits it. On the other hand, any *large* admission of chance into the tragic sequence[4] would certainly weaken, and might destroy, the sense of the causal connection of character, deed, and catastrophe. And Shakespeare really uses it very sparingly. We seldom find ourselves exclaiming, 'What an unlucky accident!' I believe most readers would have to search painfully for instances. It is, further, frequently easy to see the dramatic intention of an accident; and some things which look like accidents have really a connection with character, and are therefore not in the full sense accidents. Finally, I believe it will be found that almost all the prominent accidents occur when the action is well advanced and the impression of the causal sequence is too firmly fixed to be impaired.

Thus it appears that these three elements in the 'action' are subordinate, while the dominant factor consists in deeds which issue from character. So that, by way of summary, we may now alter our first statement, 'A tragedy is a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate,' and we may say instead (what in its turn is one-sided, though less so), that the story is one of human actions producing exceptional calamity and ending in the death of such a man.[5]

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[3] Even a deed would, I think, be counted an 'accident,' if it were the deed of a very minor person whose character had not been indicated; because such a deed would not issue from the little world to which the dramatist had confined our attention.

[4] Comedy stands in a different position. The tricks played by chance often form a principal part of the comic action.

[5] It may be observed that the influence of the three elements just considered is to strengthen the tendency, produced by the sufferings considered first, to regard the tragic persons as passive rather than as agents.

Before we leave the 'action,' however, there is another question that may usefully be asked. Can we define this 'action' further by describing it as a conflict?

The frequent use of this idea in discussions on tragedy is ultimately due, I suppose, to the influence of Hegel's theory on the subject, certainly the most important theory since Aristotle's. But Hegel's view of the tragic conflict is not only unfamiliar to English readers and difficult to expound shortly, but it had its origin in reflections on Greek tragedy and, as Hegel was well aware, applies only imperfectly to the works of Shakespeare.[6] I shall, therefore, confine myself to the idea of conflict in its more general form. In this form it is obviously suitable to Shakespearean tragedy; but it is vague, and I will try to make it more precise by putting the question, Who are the combatants in this conflict?

Not seldom the conflict may quite naturally be conceived as lying between two persons, of whom the hero is one; or, more fully, as lying between two parties or groups, in one of which the hero is the leading figure. Or if we prefer to speak (as we may quite well do if we know what we are about) of the passions, tendencies, ideas, principles, forces, which animate these persons or groups, we may say that two of such passions or ideas, regarded as animating two persons or groups, are the combatants. The love of Romeo and Juliet is in conflict with the hatred of their houses, represented by various other characters. The cause of Brutus and Cassius struggles with that of Julius, Octavius and Antony. In *Richard II.* the King stands on one side, Bolingbroke and his party on the other. In *Macbeth* the hero and heroine are opposed to the representatives of Duncan. In all these cases the great majority of the *dramatis personae* fall without difficulty into antagonistic groups, and the conflict between these groups ends with the defeat of the hero.

Yet one cannot help feeling that in at least one of these cases, *Macbeth*, there is something a little external in this way of looking at the action. And when we come to some other plays this feeling increases. No doubt most of the characters in *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, or *Antony and Cleopatra* can be arranged in opposed groups;[7] and no doubt there is a conflict; and yet it seems misleading to describe this conflict as one *between these groups*. It cannot be simply this. For though Hamlet and the King are mortal foes, yet that which engrosses our interest and dwells in our memory at least as much as the conflict between them, is the conflict *within* one of them. And so it is, though not in the same degree, with *Antony and Cleopatra* and even with *Othello*; and, in fact, in a certain measure, it is so with nearly all the tragedies. There is an outward conflict of persons and groups, there is also a conflict of forces in the hero's soul; and even in *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* the interest of the former can hardly be said to exceed that of the latter.

The truth is, that the type of tragedy in which the hero opposes to a hostile force an undivided soul, is not the Shakespearean type. The souls of those who contend with the hero may be thus undivided; they generally are; but, as a rule, the hero, though he pursues his fated way, is, at least at some point in the action, and sometimes at many, torn by an inward struggle; and it is frequently at such points that Shakespeare shows his most extraordinary power. If further we compare the earlier tragedies with the later, we find that it is in the latter, the maturest works, that this inward struggle is most emphasised. In the last of them, *Coriolanus*, its interest completely eclipses towards the close of the play that of the outward conflict. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III.*, *Richard II.*, where the hero contends with an outward force, but comparatively little with himself, are all early plays.

If we are to include the outer and the inner struggle in a conception more definite than that of conflict in general, we must employ some such phrase as 'spiritual force.' This will mean whatever forces act in the human spirit, whether good or evil, whether personal passion or impersonal principle;

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[6] An account of Hegel's view may be found in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*.

[7] The reader, however, will find considerable difficulty in placing some very important characters in these and other plays. I will give only two or three illustrations. Edgar is clearly not on the same side as Edmund, and yet it seems awkward to range him on Gloster's side when Gloster wishes to put him to death. Ophelia is in love with Hamlet, but how can she be said to be of Hamlet's party against the King and Polonius, or of their party against Hamlet? Desdemona worships Othello, yet it sounds odd to say that Othello is on the same side with a person whom he insults, strikes and murders.

doubts, desires, scruples, ideas—whatever can animate, shake, possess, and drive a man's soul. In a Shakespearean tragedy some such forces are shown in conflict. They are shown acting in men and generating strife between them. They are also shown, less universally, but quite as characteristically, generating disturbance and even conflict in the soul of the hero. Treasonous ambition in Macbeth collides with loyalty and patriotism in Macduff and Malcolm: here is the outward conflict. But these powers or principles equally collide in the soul of Macbeth himself: here is the inner. And neither by itself could make the tragedy.[8]

We shall see later the importance of this idea. Here we need only observe that the notion of tragedy as a conflict emphasises the fact that action is the centre of the story, while the concentration of interest, in the greater plays, on the inward struggle emphasises the fact that this action is essentially the expression of character.

3

Let us turn now from the 'action' to the central figure in it; and, ignoring the characteristics which distinguish the heroes from one another, let us ask whether they have any common qualities which appear to be essential to the tragic effect.

One they certainly have. They are exceptional beings. We have seen already that the hero, with Shakespeare, is a person of high degree or of public importance, and that his actions or sufferings are of an unusual kind. But this is not all. His nature also is exceptional, and generally raises him in some respect much above the average level of humanity. This does not mean that he is an eccentric or a paragon. Shakespeare never drew monstrosities of virtue; some of his heroes are far from being 'good'; and if he drew eccentrics he gave them a subordinate position in the plot. His tragic characters are made of the stuff we find within ourselves and within the persons who surround them. But, by an intensification of the life which they share with others, they are raised above them; and the greatest are raised so far that, if we fully realise all that is implied in their words and actions, we become conscious that in real life we have known scarcely any one resembling them. Some, like Hamlet and Cleopatra, have genius. Others, like Othello, Lear, Macbeth, Coriolanus, are built on the grand scale; and desire, passion, or will attains in them a terrible force. In almost all we observe a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction; a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind. This, it would seem, is, for Shakespeare, the fundamental tragic trait. It is present in his early heroes, Romeo and Richard II., infatuated men, who otherwise rise comparatively little above the ordinary level. It is a fatal gift, but it carries with it a touch of greatness; and when there is joined to it nobility of mind, or genius, or immense force, we realise the full power and reach of the soul, and the conflict in which it engages acquires that magnitude which stirs not only sympathy and pity, but admiration, terror, and awe.

The easiest way to bring home to oneself the nature of the tragic character is to compare it with a character of another kind. Dramas like *Cymbeline* and the *Winter's Tale*, which might seem destined to end tragically, but actually end otherwise, owe their happy ending largely to the fact that the principal characters fail to reach tragic dimensions. And, conversely, if these persons were put in the place of the tragic heroes, the dramas in which they appeared would cease to be tragedies. Posthumus would never have acted as Othello did; Othello, on his side, would have met Iachimo's challenge with something more than words. If, like Posthumus, he had remained convinced of his wife's infidelity, he would not have repented her execution; if, like Leontes, he had come to believe

[8] I have given names to the 'spiritual forces' in *Macbeth* merely to illustrate the idea, and without any pretension to adequacy. Perhaps, in view of some interpretations of Shakespeare's plays, it will be as well to add that I do not dream of suggesting that in any of his dramas Shakespeare imagined two abstract principles or passions conflicting, and incorporated them in persons; or that there is any necessity for a reader to define for himself the particular forces which conflict in a given case.

that by an unjust accusation he had caused her death, he would never have lived on, like Leontes. In the same way the villain Iachimo has no touch of tragic greatness. But Iago comes nearer to it, and if Iago had slandered Imogen and had supposed his slanders to have led to her death, he certainly would not have turned melancholy and wished to die. One reason why the end of the *Merchant of Venice* fails to satisfy us is that Shylock is a tragic character, and that we cannot believe in his accepting his defeat and the conditions imposed on him. This was a case where Shakespeare's imagination ran away with him, so that he drew a figure with which the destined pleasant ending would not harmonise.

In the circumstances where we see the hero placed, his tragic trait, which is also his greatness, is fatal to him. To meet these circumstances something is required which a smaller man might have given, but which the hero cannot give. He errs, by action or omission; and his error, joining with other causes, brings on him ruin. This is always so with Shakespeare. As we have seen, the idea of the tragic hero as a being destroyed simply and solely by external forces is quite alien to him; and not less so is the idea of the hero as contributing to his destruction only by acts in which we see no flaw. But the fatal imperfection or error, which is never absent, is of different kinds and degrees. At one extreme stands the excess and precipitancy of Romeo, which scarcely, if at all, diminish our regard for him; at the other the murderous ambition of Richard III. In most cases the tragic error involves no conscious breach of right; in some (*e.g.* that of Brutus or Othello) it is accompanied by a full conviction of right. In Hamlet there is a painful consciousness that duty is being neglected; in Antony a clear knowledge that the worse of two courses is being pursued; but Richard and Macbeth are the only heroes who do what they themselves recognise to be villainous. It is important to observe that Shakespeare does admit such heroes,[9] and also that he appears to feel, and exerts himself to meet, the difficulty that arises from their admission. The difficulty is that the spectator must desire their defeat and even their destruction; and yet this desire, and the satisfaction of it, are not tragic feelings. Shakespeare gives to Richard therefore a power which excites astonishment, and a courage which extorts admiration. He gives to Macbeth a similar, though less extraordinary, greatness, and adds to it a conscience so terrifying in its warnings and so maddening in its reproaches that the spectacle of inward torment compels a horrified sympathy and awe which balance, at the least, the desire for the hero's ruin.

The tragic hero with Shakespeare, then, need not be 'good,' though generally he is 'good' and therefore at once wins sympathy in his error. But it is necessary that he should have so much of greatness that in his error and fall we may be vividly conscious of the possibilities of human nature.[10] Hence, in the first place, a Shakespearean tragedy is never, like some miscalled tragedies, depressing. No one ever closes the book with the feeling that man is a poor mean creature. He may be wretched and he may be awful, but he is not small. His lot may be heart-rending and mysterious, but it is not contemptible. The most confirmed of cynics ceases to be a cynic while he reads these plays. And with this greatness of the tragic hero (which is not always confined to him) is connected, secondly, what I venture to describe as the centre of the tragic impression. This central feeling is the impression of waste. With Shakespeare, at any rate, the pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with, and even to merge in, a profound sense of sadness and mystery, which is due to this impression of waste. 'What a piece of work is man,' we cry; 'so much more beautiful and so much more terrible than we knew! Why should he be so if this beauty and greatness only tortures itself and throws itself away?' We seem to have before us a type of the mystery of the whole world, the tragic fact which extends far beyond the limits of tragedy. Everywhere, from the crushed rocks beneath our feet to the soul of man, we see power, intelligence, life and glory, which astound us and seem to call for our worship. And everywhere we see them perishing, devouring one another and destroying themselves, often with dreadful pain, as though they came into being for no other end. Tragedy is the

[9] Aristotle apparently would exclude them.

[10] Richard II. is perhaps an exception, and I must confess that to me he is scarcely a tragic character, and that, if he is nevertheless a tragic figure, he is so only because his fall from prosperity to adversity is so great.

typical form of this mystery, because that greatness of soul which it exhibits oppressed, conflicting and destroyed, is the highest existence in our view. It forces the mystery upon us, and it makes us realise so vividly the worth of that which is wasted that we cannot possibly seek comfort in the reflection that all is vanity.

4

In this tragic world, then, where individuals, however great they may be and however decisive their actions may appear, are so evidently not the ultimate power, what is this power? What account can we give of it which will correspond with the imaginative impressions we receive? This will be our final question.

The variety of the answers given to this question shows how difficult it is. And the difficulty has many sources. Most people, even among those who know Shakespeare well and come into real contact with his mind, are inclined to isolate and exaggerate some one aspect of the tragic fact. Some are so much influenced by their own habitual beliefs that they import them more or less into their interpretation of every author who is 'sympathetic' to them. And even where neither of these causes of error appears to operate, another is present from which it is probably impossible wholly to escape. What I mean is this. Any answer we give to the question proposed ought to correspond with, or to represent in terms of the understanding, our imaginative and emotional experience in reading the tragedies. We have, of course, to do our best by study and effort to make this experience true to Shakespeare; but, that done to the best of our ability, the experience is the matter to be interpreted, and the test by which the interpretation must be tried. But it is extremely hard to make out exactly what this experience is, because, in the very effort to make it out, our reflecting mind, full of everyday ideas, is always tending to transform it by the application of these ideas, and so to elicit a result which, instead of representing the fact, conventionalises it. And the consequence is not only mistaken theories; it is that many a man will declare that he feels in reading a tragedy what he never really felt, while he fails to recognise what he actually did feel. It is not likely that we shall escape all these dangers in our effort to find an answer to the question regarding the tragic world and the ultimate power in it.

It will be agreed, however, first, that this question must not be answered in 'religious' language. For although this or that *dramatis persona* may speak of gods or of God, of evil spirits or of Satan, of heaven and of hell, and although the poet may show us ghosts from another world, these ideas do not materially influence his representation of life, nor are they used to throw light on the mystery of its tragedy. The Elizabethan drama was almost wholly secular; and while Shakespeare was writing he practically confined his view to the world of non-theological observation and thought, so that he represents it substantially in one and the same way whether the period of the story is pre-Christian or Christian.[11] He looked at this 'secular' world most intently and seriously; and he painted it, we cannot but conclude, with entire fidelity, without the wish to enforce an opinion of his own, and, in essentials, without regard to anyone's hopes, fears, or beliefs. His greatness is largely due to this fidelity in a mind of extraordinary power; and if, as a private person, he had a religious faith, his tragic view can hardly have been in contradiction with this faith, but must have been included in it, and supplemented, not abolished, by additional ideas.

Two statements, next, may at once be made regarding the tragic fact as he represents it: one, that it is and remains to us something piteous, fearful and mysterious; the other, that the representation of it does not leave us crushed, rebellious or desperate. These statements will be accepted, I believe, by any reader who is in touch with Shakespeare's mind and can observe his own. Indeed such a reader

[11] I say substantially; but the concluding remarks on *Hamlet* will modify a little the statements above.

is rather likely to complain that they are painfully obvious. But if they are true as well as obvious, something follows from them in regard to our present question.

From the first it follows that the ultimate power in the tragic world is not adequately described as a law or order which we can see to be just and benevolent,—as, in that sense, a 'moral order': for in that case the spectacle of suffering and waste could not seem to us so fearful and mysterious as it does. And from the second it follows that this ultimate power is not adequately described as a fate, whether malicious and cruel, or blind and indifferent to human happiness and goodness: for in that case the spectacle would leave us desperate or rebellious. Yet one or other of these two ideas will be found to govern most accounts of Shakespeare's tragic view or world. These accounts isolate and exaggerate single aspects, either the aspect of action or that of suffering; either the close and unbroken connection of character, will, deed and catastrophe, which, taken alone, shows the individual simply as sinning against, or failing to conform to, the moral order and drawing his just doom on his own head; or else that pressure of outward forces, that sway of accident, and those blind and agonised struggles, which, taken alone, show him as the mere victim of some power which cares neither for his sins nor for his pain. Such views contradict one another, and no third view can unite them; but the several aspects from whose isolation and exaggeration they spring are both present in the fact, and a view which would be true to the fact and to the whole of our imaginative experience must in some way combine these aspects.

Let us begin, then, with the idea of fatality and glance at some of the impressions which give rise to it, without asking at present whether this idea is their natural or fitting expression. There can be no doubt that they do arise and that they ought to arise. If we do not feel at times that the hero is, in some sense, a doomed man; that he and others drift struggling to destruction like helpless creatures borne on an irresistible flood towards a cataract; that, faulty as they may be, their fault is far from being the sole or sufficient cause of all they suffer; and that the power from which they cannot escape is relentless and immovable, we have failed to receive an essential part of the full tragic effect.

The sources of these impressions are various, and I will refer only to a few. One of them is put into words by Shakespeare himself when he makes the player-king in *Hamlet* say:

> Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own;

'their ends' are the issues or outcomes of our thoughts, and these, says the speaker, are not our own. The tragic world is a world of action, and action is the translation of thought into reality. We see men and women confidently attempting it. They strike into the existing order of things in pursuance of their ideas. But what they achieve is not what they intended; it is terribly unlike it. They understand nothing, we say to ourselves, of the world on which they operate. They fight blindly in the dark, and the power that works through them makes them the instrument of a design which is not theirs. They act freely, and yet their action binds them hand and foot. And it makes no difference whether they meant well or ill. No one could mean better than Brutus, but he contrives misery for his country and death for himself. No one could mean worse than Iago, and he too is caught in the web he spins for others. Hamlet, recoiling from the rough duty of revenge, is pushed into blood-guiltiness he never dreamed of, and forced at last on the revenge he could not will. His adversary's murders, and no less his adversary's remorse, bring about the opposite of what they sought. Lear follows an old man's whim, half generous, half selfish; and in a moment it looses all the powers of darkness upon him. Othello agonises over an empty fiction, and, meaning to execute solemn justice, butchers innocence and strangles love. They understand themselves no better than the world about them. Coriolanus thinks that his heart is iron, and it melts like snow before a fire. Lady Macbeth, who thought she could dash out her own child's brains, finds herself hounded to death by the smell of a stranger's blood. Her husband thinks that to gain a crown he would jump the life to come, and finds that the crown has brought him all the horrors of that life. Everywhere, in this tragic world, man's

thought, translated into act, is transformed into the opposite of itself. His act, the movement of a few ounces of matter in a moment of time, becomes a monstrous flood which spreads over a kingdom. And whatsoever he dreams of doing, he achieves that which he least dreamed of, his own destruction.

All this makes us feel the blindness and helplessness of man. Yet by itself it would hardly suggest the idea of fate, because it shows man as in some degree, however slight, the cause of his own undoing. But other impressions come to aid it. It is aided by everything which makes us feel that a man is, as we say, terribly unlucky; and of this there is, even in Shakespeare, not a little. Here come in some of the accidents already considered, Juliet's waking from her trance a minute too late, Desdemona's loss of her handkerchief at the only moment when the loss would have mattered, that insignificant delay which cost Cordelia's life. Again, men act, no doubt, in accordance with their characters; but what is it that brings them just the one problem which is fatal to them and would be easy to another, and sometimes brings it to them just when they are least fitted to face it? How is it that Othello comes to be the companion of the one man in the world who is at once able enough, brave enough, and vile enough to ensnare him? By what strange fatality does it happen that Lear has such daughters and Cordelia such sisters? Even character itself contributes to these feelings of fatality. How could men escape, we cry, such vehement propensities as drive Romeo, Antony, Coriolanus, to their doom? And why is it that a man's virtues help to destroy him, and that his weakness or defect is so intertwined with everything that is admirable in him that we can hardly separate them even in imagination?

If we find in Shakespeare's tragedies the source of impressions like these, it is important, on the other hand, to notice what we do *not* find there. We find practically no trace of fatalism in its more primitive, crude and obvious forms. Nothing, again, makes us think of the actions and sufferings of the persons as somehow arbitrarily fixed beforehand without regard to their feelings, thoughts and resolutions. Nor, I believe, are the facts ever so presented that it seems to us as if the supreme power, whatever it may be, had a special spite against a family or an individual. Neither, lastly, do we receive the impression (which, it must be observed, is not purely fatalistic) that a family, owing to some hideous crime or impiety in early days, is doomed in later days to continue a career of portentous calamities and sins. Shakespeare, indeed, does not appear to have taken much interest in heredity, or to have attached much importance to it. (See, however, 'heredity', 266, 303.)

What, then, is this 'fate' which the impressions already considered lead us to describe as the ultimate power in the tragic world? It appears to be a mythological expression for the whole system or order, of which the individual characters form an inconsiderable and feeble part; which seems to determine, far more than they, their native dispositions and their circumstances, and, through these, their action; which is so vast and complex that they can scarcely at all understand it or control its workings; and which has a nature so definite and fixed that whatever changes take place in it produce other changes inevitably and without regard to men's desires and regrets. And whether this system or order is best called by the name of fate or no,[12] it can hardly be denied that it does appear as the ultimate power in the tragic world, and that it has such characteristics as these. But the name 'fate' may be intended to imply something more—to imply that this order is a blank necessity, totally regardless alike of human weal and of the difference between good and evil or right and wrong. And such an implication many readers would at once reject. They would maintain, on the contrary, that this order shows characteristics of quite another kind from those which made us give it the name of fate, characteristics which certainly should not induce us to forget those others, but which would lead us to describe it as a moral order and its necessity as a moral necessity.

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[12] I have raised no objection to the use of the idea of fate, because it occurs so often both in conversation and in books about Shakespeare's tragedies that I must suppose it to be natural to many readers. Yet I doubt whether it would be so if Greek tragedy had never been written; and I must in candour confess that to me it does not often occur while I am reading, or when I have just read, a tragedy of Shakespeare. Wordsworth's lines, for example, aboutpoor humanity's afflicted willStruggling in vain with ruthless destinydo not represent the impression I receive; much less do images which compare man to a puny creature helpless in the claws of a bird of prey. The reader should examine himself closely on this matter.

5

Let us turn, then, to this idea. It brings into the light those aspects of the tragic fact which the idea of fate throws into the shade. And the argument which leads to it in its simplest form may be stated briefly thus: 'Whatever may be said of accidents, circumstances and the like, human action is, after all, presented to us as the central fact in tragedy, and also as the main cause of the catastrophe. That necessity which so much impresses us is, after all, chiefly the necessary connection of actions and consequences. For these actions we, without even raising a question on the subject, hold the agents responsible; and the tragedy would disappear for us if we did not. The critical action is, in greater or less degree, wrong or bad. The catastrophe is, in the main, the return of this action on the head of the agent. It is an example of justice; and that order which, present alike within the agents and outside them, infallibly brings it about, is therefore just. The rigour of its justice is terrible, no doubt, for a tragedy is a terrible story; but, in spite of fear and pity, we acquiesce, because our sense of justice is satisfied.'

Now, if this view is to hold good, the 'justice' of which it speaks must be at once distinguished from what is called 'poetic justice.' 'Poetic justice' means that prosperity and adversity are distributed in proportion to the merits of the agents. Such 'poetic justice' is in flagrant contradiction with the facts of life, and it is absent from Shakespeare's tragic picture of life; indeed, this very absence is a ground of constant complaint on the part of Dr. Johnson. Δράσαντι παθειν, 'the doer must suffer'– this we find in Shakespeare. We also find that villainy never remains victorious and prosperous at the last. But an assignment of amounts of happiness and misery, an assignment even of life and death, in proportion to merit, we do not find. No one who thinks of Desdemona and Cordelia; or who remembers that one end awaits Richard III. and Brutus, Macbeth and Hamlet; or who asks himself which suffered most, Othello or Iago; will ever accuse Shakespeare of representing the ultimate power as 'poetically' just.

And we must go further. I venture to say that it is a mistake to use at all these terms of justice and merit or desert. And this for two reasons. In the first place, essential as it is to recognise the connection between act and consequence, and natural as it may seem in some cases (*e.g.* Macbeth's) to say that the doer only gets what he deserves, yet in very many cases to say this would be quite unnatural. We might not object to the statement that Lear deserved to suffer for his folly, selfishness and tyranny; but to assert that he deserved to suffer what he did suffer is to do violence not merely to language but to any healthy moral sense. It is, moreover, to obscure the tragic fact that the consequences of action cannot be limited to that which would appear to us to follow 'justly' from them. And, this being so, when we call the order of the tragic world just, we are either using the word in some vague and unexplained sense, or we are going beyond what is shown us of this order, and are appealing to faith.

But, in the second place, the ideas of justice and desert are, it seems to me, in *all* cases—even those of Richard III. and of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—untrue to our imaginative experience. When we are immersed in a tragedy, we feel towards dispositions, actions, and persons such emotions as attraction and repulsion, pity, wonder, fear, horror, perhaps hatred; but we do not *judge*. This is a point of view which emerges only when, in reading a play, we slip, by our own fault or the dramatist's, from the tragic position, or when, in thinking about the play afterwards, we fall back on our everyday legal and moral notions. But tragedy does not belong, any more than religion belongs, to the sphere of these notions; neither does the imaginative attitude in presence of it. While we are in its world we watch what is, seeing that so it happened and must have happened, feeling that it is piteous, dreadful, awful, mysterious, but neither passing sentence on the agents, nor asking whether the behaviour of the

ultimate power towards them is just. And, therefore, the use of such language in attempts to render our imaginative experience in terms of the understanding is, to say the least, full of danger.[13]

Let us attempt then to re-state the idea that the ultimate power in the tragic world is a moral order. Let us put aside the ideas of justice and merit, and speak simply of good and evil. Let us understand by these words, primarily, moral good and evil, but also everything else in human beings which we take to be excellent or the reverse. Let us understand the statement that the ultimate power or order is 'moral' to mean that it does not show itself indifferent to good and evil, or equally favourable or unfavourable to both, but shows itself akin to good and alien from evil. And, understanding the statement thus, let us ask what grounds it has in the tragic fact as presented by Shakespeare.

Here, as in dealing with the grounds on which the idea of fate rests, I choose only two or three out of many. And the most important is this. In Shakespearean tragedy the main source of the convulsion which produces suffering and death is never good: good contributes to this convulsion only from its tragic implication with its opposite in one and the same character. The main source, on the contrary, is in every case evil; and, what is more (though this seems to have been little noticed), it is in almost every case evil in the fullest sense, not mere imperfection but plain moral evil. The love of Romeo and Juliet conducts them to death only because of the senseless hatred of their houses. Guilty ambition, seconded by diabolic malice and issuing in murder, opens the action in *Macbeth*. Iago is the main source of the convulsion in *Othello*; Goneril, Regan and Edmund in *King Lear*. Even when this plain moral evil is not the obviously prime source within the play, it lies behind it: the situation with which Hamlet has to deal has been formed by adultery and murder. *Julius Caesar* is the only tragedy in which one is even tempted to find an exception to this rule. And the inference is obvious. If it is chiefly evil that violently disturbs the order of the world, this order cannot be friendly to evil or indifferent between evil and good, any more than a body which is convulsed by poison is friendly to it or indifferent to the distinction between poison and food.

Again, if we confine our attention to the hero, and to those cases where the gross and palpable evil is not in him but elsewhere, we find that the comparatively innocent hero still shows some marked imperfection or defect,—irresolution, precipitancy, pride, credulousness, excessive simplicity, excessive susceptibility to sexual emotions, and the like. These defects or imperfections are certainly, in the wide sense of the word, evil, and they contribute decisively to the conflict and catastrophe. And the inference is again obvious. The ultimate power which shows itself disturbed by this evil and reacts against it, must have a nature alien to it. Indeed its reaction is so vehement and 'relentless' that it would seem to be bent on nothing short of good in perfection, and to be ruthless in its demand for it.

To this must be added another fact, or another aspect of the same fact. Evil exhibits itself everywhere as something negative, barren, weakening, destructive, a principle of death. It isolates, disunites, and tends to annihilate not only its opposite but itself. That which keeps the evil man[14] prosperous, makes him succeed, even permits him to exist, is the good in him (I do not mean only the obviously 'moral' good). When the evil in him masters the good and has its way, it destroys other people through him, but it also destroys *him*. At the close of the struggle he has vanished, and has left behind him nothing that can stand. What remains is a family, a city, a country, exhausted, pale and feeble, but alive through the principle of good which animates it; and, within it, individuals who,

[13] It is dangerous, I think, in reference to all really good tragedies, but I am dealing here only with Shakespeare's. In not a few Greek tragedies it is almost inevitable that we should think of justice and retribution, not only because the *dramatis personae* often speak of them, but also because there is something casuistical about the tragic problem itself. The poet treats the story in such a way that the question, Is the hero doing right or wrong? is almost forced upon us. But this is not so with Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar* is probably the only one of his tragedies in which the question suggests itself to us, and this is one of the reasons why that play has something of a classic air. Even here, if we ask the question, we have no doubt at all about the answer.

[14] It is most essential to remember that an evil man is much more than the evil in him. I may add that in this paragraph I have, for the sake of clearness, considered evil in its most pronounced form; but what is said would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to evil as imperfection, etc.

if they have not the brilliance or greatness of the tragic character, still have won our respect and confidence. And the inference would seem clear. If existence in an order depends on good, and if the presence of evil is hostile to such existence, the inner being or soul of this order must be akin to good.

These are aspects of the tragic world at least as clearly marked as those which, taken alone, suggest the idea of fate. And the idea which they in their turn, when taken alone, may suggest, is that of an order which does not indeed award 'poetic justice,' but which reacts through the necessity of its own 'moral' nature both against attacks made upon it and against failure to conform to it. Tragedy, on this view, is the exhibition of that convulsive reaction; and the fact that the spectacle does not leave us rebellious or desperate is due to a more or less distinct perception that the tragic suffering and death arise from collision, not with a fate or blank power, but with a moral power, a power akin to all that we admire and revere in the characters themselves. This perception produces something like a feeling of acquiescence in the catastrophe, though it neither leads us to pass judgment on the characters nor diminishes the pity, the fear, and the sense of waste, which their struggle, suffering and fall evoke. And, finally, this view seems quite able to do justice to those aspects of the tragic fact which give rise to the idea of fate. They would appear as various expressions of the fact that the moral order acts not capriciously or like a human being, but from the necessity of its nature, or, if we prefer the phrase, by general laws,—a necessity or law which of course knows no exception and is as 'ruthless' as fate.

It is impossible to deny to this view a large measure of truth. And yet without some amendment it can hardly satisfy. For it does not include the whole of the facts, and therefore does not wholly correspond with the impressions they produce. Let it be granted that the system or order which shows itself omnipotent against individuals is, in the sense explained, moral. Still—at any rate for the eye of sight—the evil against which it asserts itself, and the persons whom this evil inhabits, are not really something outside the order, so that they can attack it or fail to conform to it; they are within it and a part of it. It itself produces them,—produces Iago as well as Desdemona, Iago's cruelty as well as Iago's courage. It is not poisoned, it poisons itself. Doubtless it shows by its violent reaction that the poison *is* poison, and that its health lies in good. But one significant fact cannot remove another, and the spectacle we witness scarcely warrants the assertion that the order is responsible for the good in Desdemona, but Iago for the evil in Iago. If we make this assertion we make it on grounds other than the facts as presented in Shakespeare's tragedies.

Nor does the idea of a moral order asserting itself against attack or want of conformity answer in full to our feelings regarding the tragic character. We do not think of Hamlet merely as failing to meet its demand, of Antony as merely sinning against it, or even of Macbeth as simply attacking it. What we feel corresponds quite as much to the idea that they are *its* parts, expressions, products; that in their defect or evil *it* is untrue to its soul of goodness, and falls into conflict and collision with itself; that, in making them suffer and waste themselves, *it* suffers and wastes itself; and that when, to save its life and regain peace from this intestinal struggle, it casts them out, it has lost a part of its own substance,—a part more dangerous and unquiet, but far more valuable and nearer to its heart, than that which remains,—a Fortinbras, a Malcolm, an Octavius. There is no tragedy in its expulsion of evil: the tragedy is that this involves the waste of good.

Thus we are left at last with an idea showing two sides or aspects which we can neither separate nor reconcile. The whole or order against which the individual part shows itself powerless seems to be animated by a passion for perfection: we cannot otherwise explain its behaviour towards evil. Yet it appears to engender this evil within itself, and in its effort to overcome and expel it it is agonised with pain, and driven to mutilate its own substance and to lose not only evil but priceless good. That this idea, though very different from the idea of a blank fate, is no solution of the riddle of life is obvious; but why should we expect it to be such a solution? Shakespeare was not attempting to justify the ways of God to men, or to show the universe as a Divine Comedy. He was writing tragedy, and tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery. Nor can he be said even to point distinctly, like some writers of tragedy, in any direction where a solution might lie. We find a few references

to gods or God, to the influence of the stars, to another life: some of them certainly, all of them perhaps, merely dramatic—appropriate to the person from whose lips they fall. A ghost comes from Purgatory to impart a secret out of the reach of its hearer—who presently meditates on the question whether the sleep of death is dreamless. Accidents once or twice remind us strangely of the words, 'There's a divinity that shapes our ends.' More important are other impressions. Sometimes from the very furnace of affliction a conviction seems borne to us that somehow, if we could see it, this agony counts as nothing against the heroism and love which appear in it and thrill our hearts. Sometimes we are driven to cry out that these mighty or heavenly spirits who perish are too great for the little space in which they move, and that they vanish not into nothingness but into freedom. Sometimes from these sources and from others comes a presentiment, formless but haunting and even profound, that all the fury of conflict, with its waste and woe, is less than half the truth, even an illusion, 'such stuff as dreams are made on.' But these faint and scattered intimations that the tragic world, being but a fragment of a whole beyond our vision, must needs be a contradiction and no ultimate truth, avail nothing to interpret the mystery. We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact, or the no less inexplicable appearance, of a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste. And this fact or appearance is tragedy.[15]

[15] Partly in order not to anticipate later passages, I abstained from treating fully here the question why we feel, at the death of the tragic hero, not only pain but also reconciliation and sometimes even exultation. As I cannot at present make good this defect, I would ask the reader to refer to the word Reconciliation (feeling of, in tragedy, 31, 36, 84, 147-8, 174, 198, 242, 322-6). See also, in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, *Hegel's Theory of Tragedy*, especially pp. 90, 91.

LECTURE II

CONSTRUCTION IN SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

Having discussed the substance of a Shakespearean tragedy, we should naturally go on to examine the form. And under this head many things might be included; for example, Shakespeare's methods of characterisation, his language, his versification, the construction of his plots. I intend, however, to speak only of the last of these subjects, which has been somewhat neglected;[16] and, as construction is a more or less technical matter, I shall add some general remarks on Shakespeare as an artist.

1

As a Shakespearean tragedy represents a conflict which terminates in a catastrophe, any such tragedy may roughly be divided into three parts. The first of these sets forth or expounds the situation,[17] or state of affairs, out of which the conflict arises; and it may, therefore, be called the Exposition. The second deals with the definite beginning, the growth and the vicissitudes of the conflict. It forms accordingly the bulk of the play, comprising the Second, Third and Fourth Acts, and usually a part of the First and a part of the Fifth. The final section of the tragedy shows the issue of the conflict in a catastrophe.[18]

The application of this scheme of division is naturally more or less arbitrary. The first part glides into the second, and the second into the third, and there may often be difficulty in drawing the lines between them. But it is still harder to divide spring from summer, and summer from autumn; and yet spring is spring, and summer summer.

The main business of the Exposition, which we will consider first, is to introduce us into a little world of persons; to show us their positions in life, their circumstances, their relations to one another, and perhaps something of their characters; and to leave us keenly interested in the question what will come out of this condition of things. We are left thus expectant, not merely because some of the persons interest us at once, but also because their situation in regard to one another points to difficulties in the future. This situation is not one of conflict,[19] but it threatens conflict. For example, we see first the hatred of the Montagues and Capulets; and then we see Romeo ready to fall violently in love; and then we hear talk of a marriage between Juliet and Paris; but the exposition is not complete, and the conflict has not definitely begun to arise, till, in the last scene of the First Act, Romeo the Montague sees Juliet the Capulet and becomes her slave.

The dramatist's chief difficulty in the exposition is obvious, and it is illustrated clearly enough in the plays of unpractised writers; for example, in *Remorse*, and even in *The Cenci*. He has to impart

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[16] The famous critics of the Romantic Revival seem to have paid very little attention to this subject. Mr. R.G. Moulton has written an interesting book on *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* (1885). In parts of my analysis I am much indebted to Gustav Freytag's *Technik des Dramas*, a book which deserves to be much better known than it appears to be to Englishmen interested in the drama. I may add, for the benefit of classical scholars, that Freytag has a chapter on Sophocles. The reader of his book will easily distinguish, if he cares to, the places where I follow Freytag, those where I differ from him, and those where I write in independence of him. I may add that in speaking of construction I have thought it best to assume in my hearers no previous knowledge of the subject; that I have not attempted to discuss how much of what is said of Shakespeare would apply also to other dramatists; and that I have illustrated from the tragedies generally, not only from the chosen four.

[17] This word throughout the lecture bears the sense it has here, which, of course, is not its usual dramatic sense.

[18] In the same way a comedy will consist of three parts, showing the 'situation,' the 'complication' or 'entanglement,' and the *dénouement* or 'solution.'

[19] It is possible, of course, to open the tragedy with the conflict already begun, but Shakespeare never does so.

to the audience a quantity of information about matters of which they generally know nothing and never know all that is necessary for his purpose.[20] But the process of merely acquiring information is unpleasant, and the direct imparting of it is undramatic. Unless he uses a prologue, therefore, he must conceal from his auditors the fact that they are being informed, and must tell them what he wants them to know by means which are interesting on their own account. These means, with Shakespeare, are not only speeches but actions and events. From the very beginning of the play, though the conflict has not arisen, things are happening and being done which in some degree arrest, startle, and excite; and in a few scenes we have mastered the situation of affairs without perceiving the dramatist's designs upon us. Not that this is always so with Shakespeare. In the opening scene of his early *Comedy of Errors*, and in the opening speech of *Richard III.*, we feel that the speakers are addressing us; and in the second scene of the *Tempest* (for Shakespeare grew at last rather negligent of technique) the purpose of Prospero's long explanation to Miranda is palpable. But in general Shakespeare's expositions are masterpieces.[21]

His usual plan in tragedy is to begin with a short scene, or part of a scene, either full of life and stir, or in some other way arresting. Then, having secured a hearing, he proceeds to conversations at a lower pitch, accompanied by little action but conveying much information. For example, *Romeo and Juliet* opens with a street-fight, *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* with a crowd in commotion; and when this excitement has had its effect on the audience, there follow quiet speeches, in which the cause of the excitement, and so a great part of the situation, are disclosed. In *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* this scheme is employed with great boldness. In *Hamlet* the first appearance of the Ghost occurs at the fortieth line, and with such effect that Shakespeare can afford to introduce at once a conversation which explains part of the state of affairs at Elsinore; and the second appearance, having again increased the tension, is followed by a long scene, which contains no action but introduces almost all the *dramatis personae* and adds the information left wanting. The opening of *Macbeth* is even more remarkable, for there is probably no parallel to its first scene, where the senses and imagination are assaulted by a storm of thunder and supernatural alarm. This scene is only eleven lines long, but its influence is so great that the next can safely be occupied with a mere report of Macbeth's battles,—a narrative which would have won much less attention if it had opened the play.

When Shakespeare begins his exposition thus he generally at first makes people talk about the hero, but keeps the hero himself for some time out of sight, so that we await his entrance with curiosity, and sometimes with anxiety. On the other hand, if the play opens with a quiet conversation, this is usually brief, and then at once the hero enters and takes action of some decided kind. Nothing, for example, can be less like the beginning of *Macbeth* than that of *King Lear*. The tone is pitched so low that the conversation between Kent, Gloster, and Edmund is written in prose. But at the thirty-fourth line it is broken off by the entrance of Lear and his court, and without delay the King proceeds to his fatal division of the kingdom.

This tragedy illustrates another practice of Shakespeare's. *King Lear* has a secondary plot, that which concerns Gloster and his two sons. To make the beginning of this plot quite clear, and to mark it off from the main action, Shakespeare gives it a separate exposition. The great scene of the division of Britain and the rejection of Cordelia and Kent is followed by the second scene, in which Gloster and his two sons appear alone, and the beginning of Edmund's design is disclosed. In *Hamlet*, though the plot is single, there is a little group of characters possessing a certain independent interest,—Polonius,

[20] When the subject comes from English history, and especially when the play forms one of a series, some knowledge may be assumed. So in *Richard III.* Even in *Richard II.* not a little knowledge seems to be assumed, and this fact points to the existence of a popular play on the earlier part of Richard's reign. Such a play exists, though it is not clear that it is a genuine Elizabethan work. See the *Jahrbuch d. deutschen Sh.-gesellschaft* for 1899.

[21] This is one of several reasons why many people enjoy reading him, who, on the whole, dislike reading plays. A main cause of this very general dislike is that the reader has not a lively enough imagination to carry him with pleasure through the exposition, though in the theatre, where his imagination is helped, he would experience little difficulty.

his son, and his daughter; and so the third scene is devoted wholly to them. And again, in *Othello*, since Roderigo is to occupy a peculiar position almost throughout the action, he is introduced at once, alone with Iago, and his position is explained before the other characters are allowed to appear.

But why should Iago open the play? Or, if this seems too presumptuous a question, let us put it in the form, What is the effect of his opening the play? It is that we receive at the very outset a strong impression of the force which is to prove fatal to the hero's happiness, so that, when we see the hero himself, the shadow of fate already rests upon him. And an effect of this kind is to be noticed in other tragedies. We are made conscious at once of some power which is to influence the whole action to the hero's undoing. In *Macbeth* we see and hear the Witches, in *Hamlet* the Ghost. In the first scene of *Julius Caesar* and of *Coriolanus* those qualities of the crowd are vividly shown which render hopeless the enterprise of the one hero and wreck the ambition of the other. It is the same with the hatred between the rival houses in *Romeo and Juliet*, and with Antony's infatuated passion. We realise them at the end of the first page, and are almost ready to regard the hero as doomed. Often, again, at one or more points during the exposition this feeling is reinforced by some expression that has an ominous effect. The first words we hear from Macbeth, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen,' echo, though he knows it not, the last words we heard from the Witches, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair.' Romeo, on his way with his friends to the banquet, where he is to see Juliet for the first time, tells Mercutio that he has had a dream. What the dream was we never learn, for Mercutio does not care to know, and breaks into his speech about Queen Mab; but we can guess its nature from Romeo's last speech in the scene:

> My mind misgives
> Some consequence yet hanging in the stars
> Shall bitterly begin his fearful date
> With this night's revels.

When Brabantio, forced to acquiesce in his daughter's stolen marriage, turns, as he leaves the council-chamber, to Othello, with the warning,

> Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see;
> She has deceived her father, and may thee,

this warning, and no less Othello's answer, 'My life upon her faith,' make our hearts sink. The whole of the coming story seems to be prefigured in Antony's muttered words (i. ii. 120):

> These strong Egyptian fetters I must break,
> Or lose myself in dotage;

and, again, in Hamlet's weary sigh, following so soon on the passionate resolution stirred by the message of the Ghost:

> The time is out of joint. Oh cursed spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right.

These words occur at a point (the end of the First Act) which may be held to fall either within the exposition or beyond it. I should take the former view, though such questions, as we saw at starting, can hardly be decided with certainty. The dimensions of this first section of a tragedy depend on a variety of causes, of which the chief seems to be the comparative simplicity or complexity of the situation from which the conflict arises. Where this is simple the exposition is short, as in *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Where it is complicated the exposition requires more space, as in *Romeo and*

Juliet, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*. Its completion is generally marked in the mind of the reader by a feeling that the action it contains is for the moment complete but has left a problem. The lovers have met, but their families are at deadly enmity; the hero seems at the height of success, but has admitted the thought of murdering his sovereign; the old king has divided his kingdom between two hypocritical daughters, and has rejected his true child; the hero has acknowledged a sacred duty of revenge, but is weary of life: and we ask, What will come of this? Sometimes, I may add, a certain time is supposed to elapse before the events which answer our question make their appearance and the conflict begins; in *King Lear*, for instance, about a fortnight; in *Hamlet* about two months.

2

We come now to the conflict itself. And here one or two preliminary remarks are necessary. In the first place, it must be remembered that our point of view in examining the construction of a play will not always coincide with that which we occupy in thinking of its whole dramatic effect. For example, that struggle in the hero's soul which sometimes accompanies the outward struggle is of the highest importance for the total effect of a tragedy; but it is not always necessary or desirable to consider it when the question is merely one of construction. And this is natural. The play is meant primarily for the theatre; and theatrically the outward conflict, with its influence on the fortunes of the hero, is the aspect which first catches, if it does not engross, attention. For the average play-goer of every period the main interest of *Hamlet* has probably lain in the vicissitudes of his long duel with the King; and the question, one may almost say, has been which will first kill the other. And so, from the point of view of construction, the fact that Hamlet spares the King when he finds him praying, is, from its effect on the hero's fortunes, of great moment; but the cause of the fact, which lies within Hamlet's character, is not so.

In the second place we must be prepared to find that, as the plays vary so much, no single way of regarding the conflict will answer precisely to the construction of all; that it sometimes appears possible to look at the construction of a tragedy in two quite different ways, and that it is material to find the best of the two; and that thus, in any given instance, it is necessary first to define the opposing sides in the conflict. I will give one or two examples. In some tragedies, as we saw in our first lecture, the opposing forces can, for practical purposes, be identified with opposing persons or groups. So it is in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*. But it is not always so. The love of Othello may be said to contend with another force, as the love of Romeo does; but Othello cannot be said to contend with Iago as Romeo contends with the representatives of the hatred of the houses, or as Macbeth contends with Malcolm and Macduff. Again, in *Macbeth* the hero, however much influenced by others, supplies the main driving power of the action; but in *King Lear* he does not. Possibly, therefore, the conflict, and with it the construction, may best be regarded from different points of view in these two plays, in spite of the fact that the hero is the central figure in each. But if we do not observe this we shall attempt to find the same scheme in both, and shall either be driven to some unnatural view or to a sceptical despair of perceiving any principle of construction at all.

With these warnings, I turn to the question whether we can trace any distinct method or methods by which Shakespeare represents the rise and development of the conflict.

(1) One at least is obvious, and indeed it is followed not merely during the conflict but from beginning to end of the play. There are, of course, in the action certain places where the tension in the minds of the audience becomes extreme. We shall consider these presently. But, in addition, there is, all through the tragedy, a constant alternation of rises and falls in this tension or in the emotional pitch of the work, a regular sequence of more exciting and less exciting sections. Some kind of variation of pitch is to be found, of course, in all drama, for it rests on the elementary facts that relief must be given after emotional strain, and that contrast is required to bring out the full force of an effect. But a good drama of our own time shows nothing approaching to the *regularity* with which in the

plays of Shakespeare and of his contemporaries the principle is applied. And the main cause of this difference lies simply in a change of theatrical arrangements. In Shakespeare's theatre, as there was no scenery, scene followed scene with scarcely any pause; and so the readiest, though not the only, way to vary the emotional pitch was to interpose a whole scene where the tension was low between scenes where it was high. In our theatres there is a great deal of scenery, which takes a long time to set and change; and therefore the number of scenes is small, and the variations of tension have to be provided within the scenes, and still more by the pauses between them. With Shakespeare there are, of course, in any long scene variations of tension, but the scenes are numerous and, compared with ours, usually short, and variety is given principally by their difference in pitch.

It may further be observed that, in a portion of the play which is relatively unexciting, the scenes of lower tension may be as long as those of higher; while in a portion of the play which is specially exciting the scenes of low tension are shorter, often much shorter, than the others. The reader may verify this statement by comparing the First or the Fourth Act in most of the tragedies with the Third; for, speaking very roughly, we may say that the First and Fourth are relatively quiet acts, the Third highly critical. A good example is the Third Act of *King Lear*, where the scenes of high tension (ii., iv., vi.) are respectively 95, 186 and 122 lines in length, while those of low tension (i., iii., v.) are respectively 55, 26 and 26 lines long. Scene vii., the last of the Act, is, I may add, a very exciting scene, though it follows scene vi., and therefore the tone of scene vi. is greatly lowered during its final thirty lines.

(2) If we turn now from the differences of tension to the sequence of events within the conflict, we shall find the principle of alternation at work again in another and a quite independent way. Let us for the sake of brevity call the two sides in the conflict A and B. Now, usually, as we shall see presently, through a considerable part of the play, perhaps the first half, the cause of A is, on the whole, advancing; and through the remaining part it is retiring, while that of B advances in turn. But, underlying this broad movement, all through the conflict we shall find a regular alternation of smaller advances and retirals; first A seeming to win some ground, and then the counter-action of B being shown. And since we always more or less decidedly prefer A to B or B to A, the result of this oscillating movement is a constant alternation of hope and fear, or rather of a mixed state predominantly hopeful and a mixed state predominantly apprehensive. An example will make the point clear. In *Hamlet* the conflict begins with the hero's feigning to be insane from disappointment in love, and we are shown his immediate success in convincing Polonius. Let us call this an advance of A. The next scene shows the King's great uneasiness about Hamlet's melancholy, and his scepticism as to Polonius's explanation of its cause: advance of B. Hamlet completely baffles Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who have been sent to discover his secret, and he arranges for the test of the play-scene: advance of A. But immediately before the play-scene his soliloquy on suicide fills us with misgiving; and his words to Ophelia, overheard, so convince the King that love is *not* the cause of his nephew's strange behaviour, that he determines to get rid of him by sending him to England: advance of B. The play-scene proves a complete success: decided advance of A. Directly after it Hamlet spares the King at prayer, and in an interview with his mother unwittingly kills Polonius, and so gives his enemy a perfect excuse for sending him away (to be executed): decided advance of B. I need not pursue the illustration further. This oscillating movement can be traced without difficulty in any of the tragedies, though less distinctly in one or two of the earliest.

(3) Though this movement continues right up to the catastrophe, its effect does not disguise that much broader effect to which I have already alluded, and which we have now to study. In all the tragedies, though more clearly in some than in others, one side is distinctly felt to be on the whole advancing up to a certain point in the conflict, and then to be on the whole declining before the reaction of the other. There is therefore felt to be a critical point in the action, which proves also to be a turning point. It is critical sometimes in the sense that, until it is reached, the conflict is not, so to speak, clenched; one of the two sets of forces might subside, or a reconciliation might somehow

be effected; while, as soon as it is reached, we feel this can no longer be. It is critical also because the advancing force has apparently asserted itself victoriously, gaining, if not all it could wish, still a very substantial advantage; whereas really it is on the point of turning downward towards its fall. This Crisis, as a rule, comes somewhere near the middle of the play; and where it is well marked it has the effect, as to construction, of dividing the play into five parts instead of three; these parts showing (1) a situation not yet one of conflict, (2) the rise and development of the conflict, in which A or B advances on the whole till it reaches (3) the Crisis, on which follows (4) the decline of A or B towards (5) the Catastrophe. And it will be seen that the fourth and fifth parts repeat, though with a reversal of direction as regards A or B, the movement of the second and third, working towards the catastrophe as the second and third worked towards the crisis.

In developing, illustrating and qualifying this statement, it will be best to begin with the tragedies in which the movement is most clear and simple. These are *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. In the former the fortunes of the conspiracy rise with vicissitudes up to the crisis of the assassination (iii. i.); they then sink with vicissitudes to the catastrophe, where Brutus and Cassius perish. In the latter, Macbeth, hurrying, in spite of much inward resistance, to the murder of Duncan, attains the crown, the upward movement being extraordinarily rapid, and the crisis arriving early: his cause then turns slowly downward, and soon hastens to ruin. In both these tragedies the simplicity of the constructional effect, it should be noticed, depends in part on the fact that the contending forces may quite naturally be identified with certain persons, and partly again on the fact that the defeat of one side is the victory of the other. Octavius and Antony, Malcolm and Macduff, are left standing over the bodies of their foes.

This is not so in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, because here, although the hero perishes, the side opposed to him, being the more faulty or evil, cannot be allowed to triumph when he falls. Otherwise the type of construction is the same. The fortunes of Romeo and Juliet rise and culminate in their marriage (ii. vi.), and then begin to decline before the opposition of their houses, which, aided by accidents, produces a catastrophe, but is thereupon converted into a remorseful reconciliation. Hamlet's cause reaches its zenith in the success of the play-scene (iii. ii.). Thereafter the reaction makes way, and he perishes through the plot of the King and Laertes. But they are not allowed to survive their success.

The construction in the remaining Roman plays follows the same plan, but in both plays (as in *Richard II.* and *Richard III.*) it suffers from the intractable nature of the historical material, and is also influenced by other causes. In *Coriolanus* the hero reaches the topmost point of success when he is named consul (ii. iii.), and the rest of the play shows his decline and fall; but in this decline he attains again for a time extraordinary power, and triumphs, in a sense, over his original adversary, though he succumbs to another. In *Antony and Cleopatra* the advance of the hero's cause depends on his freeing himself from the heroine, and he appears to have succeeded when he becomes reconciled to Octavius and marries Octavia (iii. ii.); but he returns to Egypt and is gradually driven to his death, which involves that of the heroine.

There remain two of the greatest of the tragedies, and in both of them a certain difficulty will be felt. *King Lear* alone among these plays has a distinct double action. Besides this, it is impossible, I think, from the point of view of construction, to regard the hero as the leading figure. If we attempt to do so, we must either find the crisis in the First Act (for after it Lear's course is downward), and this is absurd; or else we must say that the usual movement is present but its direction is reversed, the hero's cause first sinking to the lowest point (in the Storm-scenes) and then rising again. But this also will not do; for though his fortunes may be said to rise again for a time, they rise only to fall once more to a catastrophe. The truth is, that after the First Act, which is really filled by the exposition, Lear suffers but hardly initiates action at all; and the right way to look at the matter, *from the point of view of construction*, is to regard Goneril, Regan and Edmund as the leading characters. It is they who, in the conflict, initiate action. Their fortune mounts to the crisis, where the old King is driven

out into the storm and loses his reason, and where Gloster is blinded and expelled from his home (iii. vi. and vii.). Then the counter-action begins to gather force, and their cause to decline; and, although they win the battle, they are involved in the catastrophe which they bring on Cordelia and Lear. Thus we may still find in *King Lear* the usual scheme of an ascending and a descending movement of one side in the conflict.

The case of *Othello* is more peculiar. In its whole constructional effect *Othello* differs from the other tragedies, and the cause of this difference is not hard to find, and will be mentioned presently. But how, after it is found, are we to define the principle of the construction? On the one hand the usual method seems to show itself. Othello's fortune certainly advances in the early part of the play, and it may be considered to reach its topmost point in the exquisite joy of his reunion with Desdemona in Cyprus; while soon afterwards it begins to turn, and then falls to the catastrophe. But the topmost point thus comes very early (ii. i.), and, moreover, is but faintly marked; indeed, it is scarcely felt as a crisis at all. And, what is still more significant, though reached by conflict, it is not reached by conflict with the force which afterwards destroys it. Iago, in the early scenes, is indeed shown to cherish a design against Othello, but it is not Iago against whom he has at first to assert himself, but Brabantio; and Iago does not even begin to poison his mind until the third scene of the Third Act.

Can we then, on the other hand, following the precedent of *King Lear*, and remembering the probable chronological juxtaposition of the two plays, regard Iago as the leading figure from the point of view of construction? This might at first seem the right view; for it is the case that *Othello* resembles *King Lear* in having a hero more acted upon than acting, or rather a hero driven to act by being acted upon. But then, if Iago is taken as the leading figure, the usual mode of construction is plainly abandoned, for there will nowhere be a crisis followed by a descending movement. Iago's cause advances, at first slowly and quietly, then rapidly, but it does nothing but advance until the catastrophe swallows his dupe and him together. And this way of regarding the action does positive violence, I think, to our natural impressions of the earlier part of the play.

I think, therefore, that the usual scheme is so far followed that the drama represents first the rise of the hero, and then his fall. But, however this question may be decided, one striking peculiarity remains, and is the cause of the unique effect of *Othello*. In the first half of the play the main conflict is merely incubating; then it bursts into life, and goes storming, without intermission or change of direction, to its close. Now, in this peculiarity *Othello* is quite unlike the other tragedies; and in the consequent effect, which is that the second half of the drama is immeasurably more exciting than the first, it is approached only by *Antony and Cleopatra*. I shall therefore reserve it for separate consideration, though in proceeding to speak further of Shakespeare's treatment of the tragic conflict I shall have to mention some devices which are used in *Othello* as well as in the other tragedies.

3

Shakespeare's general plan, we have seen, is to show one set of forces advancing, in secret or open opposition to the other, to some decisive success, and then driven downward to defeat by the reaction it provokes. And the advantages of this plan, as seen in such a typical instance as *Julius Caesar*, are manifest. It conveys the movement of the conflict to the mind with great clearness and force. It helps to produce the impression that in his decline and fall the doer's act is returning on his own head. And, finally, as used by Shakespeare, it makes the first half of the play intensely interesting and dramatic. Action which effects a striking change in an existing situation is naturally watched with keen interest; and this we find in some of these tragedies. And the spectacle, which others exhibit, of a purpose forming itself and, in spite of outward obstacles and often of inward resistance, forcing its way onward to a happy consummation or a terrible deed, not only gives scope to that psychological subtlety in which Shakespeare is scarcely rivalled, but is also dramatic in the highest degree.

But when the crisis has been reached there come difficulties and dangers, which, if we put Shakespeare for the moment out of mind, are easily seen. An immediate and crushing counter-action would, no doubt, sustain the interest, but it would precipitate the catastrophe, and leave a feeling that there has been too long a preparation for a final effect so brief. What seems necessary is a momentary pause, followed by a counter-action which mounts at first slowly, and afterwards, as it gathers force, with quickening speed. And yet the result of this arrangement, it would seem, must be, for a time, a decided slackening of tension. Nor is this the only difficulty. The persons who represent the counter-action and now take the lead, are likely to be comparatively unfamiliar, and therefore unwelcome, to the audience; and, even if familiar, they are almost sure to be at first, if not permanently, less interesting than those who figured in the ascending movement, and on whom attention has been fixed. Possibly, too, their necessary prominence may crowd the hero into the back-ground. Hence the point of danger in this method of construction seems to lie in that section of the play which follows the crisis and has not yet approached the catastrophe. And this section will usually comprise the Fourth Act, together, in some cases, with a part of the Third and a part of the Fifth.

Shakespeare was so masterly a playwright, and had so wonderful a power of giving life to unpromising subjects, that to a large extent he was able to surmount this difficulty. But illustrations of it are easily to be found in his tragedies, and it is not always surmounted. In almost all of them we are conscious of that momentary pause in the action, though, as we shall see, it does not generally occur *immediately* after the crisis. Sometimes he allows himself to be driven to keep the hero off the stage for a long time while the counter-action is rising; Macbeth, Hamlet and Coriolanus during about 450 lines, Lear for nearly 500, Romeo for about 550 (it matters less here, because Juliet is quite as important as Romeo). How can a drama in which this happens compete, in its latter part, with *Othello*? And again, how can deliberations between Octavius, Antony and Lepidus, between Malcolm and Macduff, between the Capulets, between Laertes and the King, keep us at the pitch, I do not say of the crisis, but even of the action which led up to it? Good critics—writers who have criticised Shakespeare's dramas from within, instead of applying to them some standard ready-made by themselves or derived from dramas and a theatre of quite other kinds than his—have held that some of his greatest tragedies fall off in the Fourth Act, and that one or two never wholly recover themselves. And I believe most readers would find, if they examined their impressions, that to their minds *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* have all a tendency to 'drag' in this section of the play, and that the first and perhaps also the last of these four fail even in the catastrophe to reach the height of the greatest scenes that have preceded the Fourth Act. I will not ask how far these impressions are justified. The difficulties in question will become clearer and will gain in interest if we look rather at the means which have been employed to meet them, and which certainly have in part, at least, overcome them.

(*a*) The first of these is always strikingly effective, sometimes marvellously so. The crisis in which the ascending force reaches its zenith is followed quickly, or even without the slightest pause, by a reverse or counter-blow not less emphatic and in some cases even more exciting. And the effect is to make us feel a sudden and tragic change in the direction of the movement, which, after ascending more or less gradually, now turns sharply downward. To the assassination of Caesar (iii. i.) succeeds the scene in the Forum (iii. ii.), where Antony carries the people away in a storm of sympathy with the dead man and of fury against the conspirators. We have hardly realised their victory before we are forced to anticipate their ultimate defeat and to take the liveliest interest in their chief antagonist. In *Hamlet* the thrilling success of the play-scene (iii. ii.) is met and undone at once by the counter-stroke of Hamlet's failure to take vengeance (iii. iii.) and his misfortune in killing Polonius (iii. iv.). Coriolanus has no sooner gained the consulship than he is excited to frenzy by the tribunes and driven into exile. On the marriage of Romeo follows immediately the brawl which leads to Mercutio's death and the banishment of the hero (ii. vi. and iii. i.). In all of these instances excepting that of *Hamlet* the scene of the counter-stroke is at least as exciting as that of the crisis, perhaps more so. Most

people, if asked to mention the scene that occupies the *centre* of the action in *Julius Caesar* and in *Coriolanus*, would mention the scenes of Antony's speech and Coriolanus' banishment. Thus that apparently necessary pause in the action does not, in any of these dramas, come directly after the crisis. It is deferred; and in several cases it is by various devices deferred for some little time; *e.g.* in *Romeo and Juliet* till the hero has left Verona, and Juliet is told that her marriage with Paris is to take place 'next Thursday morn' (end of Act iii.); in *Macbeth* till the murder of Duncan has been followed by that of Banquo, and this by the banquet-scene. Hence the point where this pause occurs is very rarely reached before the end of the Third Act.

(*b*) Either at this point, or in the scene of the counter-stroke which precedes it, we sometimes find a peculiar effect. We are reminded of the state of affairs in which the conflict began. The opening of *Julius Caesar* warned us that, among a people so unstable and so easily led this way or that, the enterprise of Brutus is hopeless; the days of the Republic are done. In the scene of Antony's speech we see this same people again. At the beginning of *Antony and Cleopatra* the hero is about to leave Cleopatra for Rome. Where the play takes, as it were, a fresh start after the crisis, he leaves Octavia for Egypt. In *Hamlet*, when the counter-stroke succeeds to the crisis, the Ghost, who had appeared in the opening scenes, reappears. Macbeth's action in the first part of the tragedy followed on the prediction of the Witches who promised him the throne. When the action moves forward again after the banquet-scene the Witches appear once more, and make those fresh promises which again drive him forward. This repetition of a first effect produces a fateful feeling. It generally also stimulates expectation as to the new movement about to begin. In *Macbeth* the scene is, in addition, of the greatest consequence from the purely theatrical point of view.

(*c*) It has yet another function. It shows, in Macbeth's furious irritability and purposeless savagery, the internal reaction which accompanies the outward decline of his fortunes. And in other plays also the exhibition of such inner changes forms a means by which interest is sustained in this difficult section of a tragedy. There is no point in *Hamlet* where we feel more hopeless than that where the hero, having missed his chance, moralises over his irresolution and determines to cherish now only thoughts of blood, and then departs without an effort for England. One purpose, again, of the quarrel-scene between Brutus and Cassius (iv. iii), as also of the appearance of Caesar's ghost just afterwards, is to indicate the inward changes. Otherwise the introduction of this famous and wonderful scene can hardly be defended on strictly dramatic grounds. No one would consent to part with it, and it is invaluable in sustaining interest during the progress of the reaction, but it is an episode, the removal of which would not affect the actual sequence of events (unless we may hold that, but for the emotion caused by the quarrel and reconciliation, Cassius would not have allowed Brutus to overcome his objection to the fatal policy of offering battle at Philippi).

(*d*) The quarrel-scene illustrates yet another favourite expedient. In this section of a tragedy Shakespeare often appeals to an emotion different from any of those excited in the first half of the play, and so provides novelty and generally also relief. As a rule this new emotion is pathetic; and the pathos is not terrible or lacerating, but, even if painful, is accompanied by the sense of beauty and by an outflow of admiration or affection, which come with an inexpressible sweetness after the tension of the crisis and the first counter-stroke. So it is with the reconciliation of Brutus and Cassius, and the arrival of the news of Portia's death. The most famous instance of this effect is the scene (iv. vii.) where Lear wakes from sleep and finds Cordelia bending over him, perhaps the most tear-compelling passage in literature. Another is the short scene (iv. ii.) in which the talk of Lady Macduff and her little boy is interrupted by the entrance of the murderers, a passage of touching beauty and heroism. Another is the introduction of Ophelia in her madness (twice in different parts of iv. v.), where the effect, though intensely pathetic, is beautiful and moving rather than harrowing; and this effect is repeated in a softer tone in the description of Ophelia's death (end of Act iv.). And in *Othello* the passage where pathos of *this* kind reaches its height is certainly that where Desdemona and Emilia converse, and the willow-song is sung, on the eve of the catastrophe (iv. iii.).

(*e*) Sometimes, again, in this section of a tragedy we find humorous or semi-humorous passages. On the whole such passages occur most frequently in the early or middle part of the play, which naturally grows more sombre as it nears the close; but their occasional introduction in the Fourth Act, and even later, affords variety and relief, and also heightens by contrast the tragic feelings. For example, there is a touch of comedy in the conversation of Lady Macduff with her little boy. Purely and delightfully humorous are the talk and behaviour of the servants in that admirable scene where Coriolanus comes disguised in mean apparel to the house of Aufidius (iv. v.); of a more mingled kind is the effect of the discussion between Menenius and the sentinels in v. ii.; and in the very middle of the supreme scene between the hero, Volumnia and Virgilia, little Marcius makes us burst out laughing (v. iii.) A little before the catastrophe in *Hamlet* comes the grave-digger passage, a passage ever welcome, but of a length which could hardly be defended on purely dramatic grounds; and still later, occupying some hundred and twenty lines of the very last scene, we have the chatter of Osric with Hamlet's mockery of it. But the acme of audacity is reached in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where, quite close to the end, the old countryman who brings the asps to Cleopatra discourses on the virtues and vices of the worm, and where his last words, 'Yes, forsooth: I wish you joy o' the worm,' are followed, without the intervention of a line, by the glorious speech,

> Give me my robe; put on my crown; I have
> Immortal longings in me....

In some of the instances of pathos or humour just mentioned we have been brought to that part of the play which immediately precedes, or even contains, the catastrophe. And I will add at once three remarks which refer specially to this final section of a tragedy.

(*f*) In several plays Shakespeare makes here an appeal which in his own time was evidently powerful: he introduces scenes of battle. This is the case in *Richard III.*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Richard, Brutus and Cassius, and Macbeth die on the battlefield. Even if his use of this expedient were not enough to show that battle-scenes were extremely popular in the Elizabethan theatre, we know it from other sources. It is a curious comment on the futility of our spectacular effects that in our theatre these scenes, in which we strive after an 'illusion' of which the Elizabethans never dreamt, produce comparatively little excitement, and to many spectators are even somewhat distasteful.[22] And although some of them thrill the imagination of the reader, they rarely, I think, quite satisfy the *dramatic* sense. Perhaps this is partly because a battle is not the most favourable place for the exhibition of tragic character; and it is worth notice that Brutus, Cassius and Antony do not die fighting, but commit suicide after defeat. The actual battle, however, does make us feel the greatness of Antony, and still more does it help us to regard Richard and Macbeth in their day of doom as heroes, and to mingle sympathy and enthusiastic admiration with desire for their defeat.

(*g*) In some of the tragedies, again, an expedient is used, which Freytag has pointed out (though he sometimes finds it, I think, where it is not really employed). Shakespeare very rarely makes the least attempt to surprise by his catastrophes. They are felt to be inevitable, though the precise way in which they will be brought about is not, of course, foreseen. Occasionally, however, where we dread the catastrophe because we love the hero, a moment occurs, just before it, in which a gleam of false hope lights up the darkening scene; and, though we know it is false, it affects us. Far the most remarkable example is to be found in the final Act of *King Lear*. Here the victory of Edgar and the deaths of Edmund and the two sisters have almost made us forget the design on the lives of Lear and Cordelia. Even when we are reminded of it there is still room for hope that Edgar, who rushes away to the prison, will be in time to save them; and, however familiar we are with the play, the sudden entrance of Lear, with Cordelia dead in his arms, comes on us with a shock. Much slighter, but quite

[22] The end of *Richard III.* is perhaps an exception.

perceptible, is the effect of Antony's victory on land, and of the last outburst of pride and joy as he and Cleopatra meet (iv. viii.). The frank apology of Hamlet to Laertes, their reconciliation, and a delusive appearance of quiet and even confident firmness in the tone of the hero's conversation with Horatio, almost blind us to our better knowledge, and give to the catastrophe an added pain. Those in the audience who are ignorant of *Macbeth*, and who take more simply than most readers now can do the mysterious prophecies concerning Birnam Wood and the man not born of woman, feel, I imagine, just before the catastrophe, a false fear that the hero may yet escape.

(*h*) I will mention only one point more. In some cases Shakespeare spreads the catastrophe out, so to speak, over a considerable space, and thus shortens that difficult section which has to show the development of the counter-action. This is possible only where there is, besides the hero, some character who engages our interest in the highest degree, and with whose fate his own is bound up. Thus the murder of Desdemona is separated by some distance from the death of Othello. The most impressive scene in *Macbeth*, after that of Duncan's murder, is the sleep-walking scene; and it may truly, if not literally, be said to show the catastrophe of Lady Macbeth. Yet it is the opening scene of the Fifth Act, and a number of scenes in which Macbeth's fate is still approaching intervene before the close. Finally, in *Antony and Cleopatra* the heroine equals the hero in importance, and here the death of Antony actually occurs in the Fourth Act, and the whole of the Fifth is devoted to Cleopatra.

Let us now turn to *Othello* and consider briefly its exceptional scheme of construction. The advantage of this scheme is obvious. In the second half of the tragedy there is no danger of 'dragging,' of any awkward pause, any undue lowering of pitch, any need of scenes which, however fine, are more or less episodic. The tension is extreme, and it is relaxed only for brief intervals to permit of some slight relief. From the moment when Iago begins to poison Othello's mind we hold our breath. *Othello* from this point onwards is certainly the most exciting of Shakespeare's plays, unless possibly *Macbeth* in its first part may be held to rival it. And *Othello* is such a masterpiece that we are scarcely conscious of any disadvantage attending its method of construction, and may even wonder why Shakespeare employed this method—at any rate in its purity—in this tragedy alone. Nor is it any answer to say that it would not elsewhere have suited his material. Even if this be granted, how was it that he only once chose a story to which this method was appropriate? To his eyes, or for his instinct, there must have been some disadvantage in it. And dangers in it are in fact not hard to see.

In the first place, where the conflict develops very slowly, or, as in *Othello*, remains in a state of incubation during the first part of a tragedy, that part cannot produce the tension proper to the corresponding part of a tragedy like *Macbeth*, and may even run the risk of being somewhat flat. This seems obvious, and it is none the less true because in *Othello* the difficulty is overcome. We may even see that in *Othello* a difficulty was felt. The First Act is full of stir, but it is so because Shakespeare has filled it with a kind of preliminary conflict between the hero and Brabantio,—a personage who then vanishes from the stage. The long first scene of the Second Act is largely occupied with mere conversations, artfully drawn out to dimensions which can scarcely be considered essential to the plot. These expedients are fully justified by their success, and nothing more consummate in their way is to be found in Shakespeare than Othello's speech to the Senate and Iago's two talks with Roderigo. But the fact that Shakespeare can make a plan succeed does not show that the plan is, abstractedly considered, a good plan; and if the scheme of construction in *Othello* were placed, in the shape of a mere outline, before a play-wright ignorant of the actual drama, he would certainly, I believe, feel grave misgivings about the first half of the play.

There is a second difficulty in the scheme. When the middle of the tragedy is reached, the audience is not what it was at the beginning. It has been attending for some time, and has been through a certain amount of agitation. The extreme tension which now arises may therefore easily tire and displease it, all the more if the matter which produces the tension is very painful, if the catastrophe is not less so, and if the limits of the remainder of the play (not to speak of any other consideration) permit of very little relief. It is one thing to watch the scene of Duncan's assassination at the beginning

of the Second Act, and another thing to watch the murder of Desdemona at the beginning of the Fifth. If Shakespeare has wholly avoided this difficulty in *Othello*, it is by treating the first part of the play in such a manner that the sympathies excited are predominantly pleasant and therefore not exhausting. The scene in the Council Chamber, and the scene of the reunion at Cyprus, give almost unmixed happiness to the audience; however repulsive Iago may be, the humour of his gulling of Roderigo is agreeable; even the scene of Cassio's intoxication is not, on the whole, painful. Hence we come to the great temptation-scene, where the conflict emerges into life (iii. iii.), with nerves unshaken and feelings much fresher than those with which we greet the banquet-scene in *Macbeth* (iii. iv.), or the first of the storm-scenes in *King Lear* (iii. i.). The same skill may be observed in *Antony and Cleopatra*, where, as we saw, the second half of the tragedy is the more exciting. But, again, the success due to Shakespeare's skill does not show that the scheme of construction is free from a characteristic danger; and on the whole it would appear to be best fitted for a plot which, though it may cause painful agitation as it nears the end, actually ends with a solution instead of a catastrophe.

But for Shakespeare's scanty use of this method there may have been a deeper, though probably an unconscious, reason. The method suits a plot based on intrigue. It may produce intense suspense. It may stir most powerfully the tragic feelings of pity and fear. And it throws into relief that aspect of tragedy in which great or beautiful lives seem caught in the net of fate. But it is apt to be less favourable to the exhibition of character, to show less clearly how an act returns upon the agent, and to produce less strongly the impression of an inexorable order working in the passions and actions of men, and labouring through their agony and waste towards good. Now, it seems clear from his tragedies that what appealed most to Shakespeare was this latter class of effects. I do not ask here whether *Othello* fails to produce, in the same degree as the other tragedies, these impressions; but Shakespeare's preference for them may have been one reason why he habitually chose a scheme of construction which produces in the final Acts but little of strained suspense, and presents the catastrophe as a thing foreseen and following with a psychological and moral necessity on the action exhibited in the first part of the tragedy.

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The more minute details of construction cannot well be examined here, and I will not pursue the subject further. But its discussion suggests a question which will have occurred to some of my hearers. They may have asked themselves whether I have not used the words 'art' and 'device' and 'expedient' and 'method' too boldly, as though Shakespeare were a conscious artist, and not rather a writer who constructed in obedience to an extraordinary dramatic instinct, as he composed mainly by inspiration. And a brief explanation on this head will enable me to allude to a few more points, chiefly of construction, which are not too technical for a lecture.

In speaking, for convenience, of devices and expedients, I did not intend to imply that Shakespeare always deliberately aimed at the effects which he produced. But *no* artist always does this, and I see no reason to doubt that Shakespeare often did it, or to suppose that his method of constructing and composing differed, except in degree, from that of the most 'conscious' of artists. The antithesis of art and inspiration, though not meaningless, is often most misleading. Inspiration is surely not incompatible with considerate workmanship. The two may be severed, but they need not be so, and where a genuinely poetic result is being produced they cannot be so. The glow of a first conception must in some measure survive or rekindle itself in the work of planning and executing; and what is called a technical expedient may 'come' to a man with as sudden a glory as a splendid image. Verse may be easy and unpremeditated, as Milton says his was, and yet many a word in it may be changed many a time, and the last change be more 'inspired' than the original. The difference between poets in these matters is no doubt considerable, and sometimes important, but it can only be a difference of less and more. It is probable that Shakespeare often wrote fluently, for Jonson (a

better authority than Heminge and Condell) says so; and for anything we can tell he may also have constructed with unusual readiness. But we know that he revised and re-wrote (for instance in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*); it is almost impossible that he can have worked out the plots of his best plays without much reflection and many experiments; and it appears to me scarcely more possible to mistake the signs of deliberate care in some of his famous speeches. If a 'conscious artist' means one who holds his work away from him, scrutinises and judges it, and, if need be, alters it and alters it till it comes as near satisfying him as he can make it, I am sure that Shakespeare frequently employed such conscious art. If it means, again, an artist who consciously aims at the effects he produces, what ground have we for doubting that he frequently employed such art, though probably less frequently than a good many other poets?

But perhaps the notion of a 'conscious artist' in drama is that of one who studies the theory of the art, and even writes with an eye to its 'rules.' And we know it was long a favourite idea that Shakespeare was totally ignorant of the 'rules.' Yet this is quite incredible. The rules referred to, such as they were, were not buried in Aristotle's Greek nor even hidden away in Italian treatises. He could find pretty well all of them in a book so current and famous as Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*. Even if we suppose that he refused to open this book (which is most unlikely), how could he possibly remain ignorant of the rules in a society of actors and dramatists and amateurs who must have been incessantly talking about plays and play-writing, and some of whom were ardent champions of the rules and full of contempt for the lawlessness of the popular drama? Who can doubt that at the Mermaid Shakespeare heard from Jonson's lips much more censure of his offences against 'art' than Jonson ever confided to Drummond or to paper? And is it not most probable that those battles between the two which Fuller imagines, were waged often on the field of dramatic criticism? If Shakespeare, then, broke some of the 'rules,' it was not from ignorance. Probably he refused, on grounds of art itself, to trouble himself with rules derived from forms of drama long extinct. And it is not unlikely that he was little interested in theory as such, and more than likely that he was impatient of pedantic distinctions between 'pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited.' But that would not prove that he never reflected on his art, or could not explain, if he cared to, what *he* thought would be good general rules for the drama of his own time. He could give advice about play-acting. Why should we suppose that he could not give advice about play-making?

Still Shakespeare, though in some considerable degree a 'conscious' artist, frequently sins against art; and if his sins were not due to ignorance or inspiration, they must be accounted for otherwise. Neither can there be much doubt about their causes (for they have more than one cause), as we shall see if we take some illustrations of the defects themselves.

Among these are not to be reckoned certain things which in dramas written at the present time would rightly be counted defects. There are, for example, in most Elizabethan plays peculiarities of construction which would injure a play written for our stage but were perfectly well-fitted for that very different stage,—a stage on which again some of the best-constructed plays of our time would appear absurdly faulty. Or take the charge of improbability. Shakespeare certainly has improbabilities which are defects. They are most frequent in the winding up of his comedies (and how many comedies are there in the world which end satisfactorily?). But his improbabilities are rarely psychological, and in some of his plays there occurs one kind of improbability which is no defect, but simply a characteristic which has lost in our day much of its former attraction. I mean that the story, in most of the comedies and many of the tragedies of the Elizabethans, was *intended* to be strange and wonderful. These plays were tales of romance dramatised, and they were meant in part to satisfy the same love of wonder to which the romances appealed. It is no defect in the Arthurian legends, or the old French romances, or many of the stories in the *Decameron*, that they are improbable: it is a virtue. To criticise them as though they were of the same species as a realistic novel, is, we should all say, merely stupid. Is it anything else to criticise in the same way *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*? And so, even when the difference between comedy and tragedy is allowed for, the improbability of the opening of *King Lear*,

so often censured, is no defect. It is not out of character, it is only extremely unusual and strange. But it was meant to be so; like the marriage of the black Othello with Desdemona, the Venetian senator's daughter.

To come then to real defects, (*a*) one may be found in places where Shakespeare strings together a number of scenes, some very short, in which the *dramatis personae* are frequently changed; as though a novelist were to tell his story in a succession of short chapters, in which he flitted from one group of his characters to another. This method shows itself here and there in the pure tragedies (*e.g.* in the last Act of *Macbeth*), but it appears most decidedly where the historical material was undramatic, as in the middle part of *Antony and Cleopatra*. It was made possible by the absence of scenery, and doubtless Shakespeare used it because it was the easiest way out of a difficulty. But, considered abstractedly, it is a defective method, and, even as used by Shakespeare, it sometimes reminds us of the merely narrative arrangement common in plays before his time.

(*b*) We may take next the introduction or excessive development of matter neither required by the plot nor essential to the exhibition of character: *e.g.* the references in *Hamlet* to theatre-quarrels of the day, and the length of the player's speech and also of Hamlet's directions to him respecting the delivery of the lines to be inserted in the 'Murder of Gonzago.' All this was probably of great interest at the time when *Hamlet* was first presented; most of it we should be very sorry to miss; some of it seems to bring us close to Shakespeare himself; but who can defend it from the point of view of constructive art?

(*c*) Again, we may look at Shakespeare's soliloquies. It will be agreed that in listening to a soliloquy we ought never to feel that we are being addressed. And in this respect, as in others, many of the soliloquies are master-pieces. But certainly in some the purpose of giving information lies bare, and in one or two the actor openly speaks to the audience. Such faults are found chiefly in the early plays, though there is a glaring instance at the end of Belarius's speech in *Cymbeline* (iii. iii. 99 ff.), and even in the mature tragedies something of this kind may be traced. Let anyone compare, for example, Edmund's soliloquy in *King Lear*, i. ii., 'This is the excellent foppery of the world,' with Edgar's in ii. iii., and he will be conscious that in the latter the purpose of giving information is imperfectly disguised.[23]

(*d*) It cannot be denied, further, that in many of Shakespeare's plays, if not in all, there are inconsistencies and contradictions, and also that questions are suggested to the reader which it is impossible for him to answer with certainty. For instance, some of the indications of the lapse of time between Othello's marriage and the events of the later Acts flatly contradict one another; and it is impossible to make out whether Hamlet was at Court or at the University when his father was murdered. But it should be noticed that often what seems a defect of this latter kind is not really a defect. For instance, the difficulty about Hamlet's age (even if it cannot be resolved by the text alone) did not exist for Shakespeare's audience. The moment Burbage entered it must have been clear whether the hero was twenty or thirty. And in like manner many questions of dramatic interpretation which trouble us could never have arisen when the plays were first produced, for the actor would be instructed by the author how to render any critical and possibly ambiguous passage. (I have heard it remarked, and the remark I believe is just, that Shakespeare seems to have relied on such instructions less than most of his contemporaries; one fact out of several which might be adduced to prove that he did not regard his plays as mere stage-dramas of the moment.)

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[23] I do not discuss the general question of the justification of soliloquy, for it concerns not Shakespeare only, but practically all dramatists down to quite recent times. I will only remark that neither soliloquy nor the use of verse can be condemned on the mere ground that they are 'unnatural.' No dramatic language is 'natural'; *all* dramatic language is idealised. So that the question as to soliloquy must be one as to the degree of idealisation and the balance of advantages and disadvantages. (Since this lecture was written I have read some remarks on Shakespeare's soliloquies to much the same effect by E. Kilian in the *Jahrbuch d. deutschen Shakespeare-Gesellschaft* for 1903.)

(*e*) To turn to another field, the early critics were no doubt often provokingly wrong when they censured the language of particular passages in Shakespeare as obscure, inflated, tasteless, or 'pestered with metaphors'; but they were surely right in the general statement that his language often shows these faults. And this is a subject which later criticism has never fairly faced and examined.

(*f*) Once more, to say that Shakespeare makes all his serious characters talk alike,[24] and that he constantly speaks through the mouths of his *dramatis personae* without regard to their individual natures, would be to exaggerate absurdly; but it is true that in his earlier plays these faults are traceable in some degree, and even in *Hamlet* there are striking passages where dramatic appropriateness is sacrificed to some other object. When Laertes speaks the lines beginning,

> For nature, crescent, does not grow alone
> In thews and bulk,

who can help feeling that Shakespeare is speaking rather than Laertes? Or when the player-king discourses for more than twenty lines on the instability of human purpose, and when King Claudius afterwards insists to Laertes on the same subject at almost equal length, who does not see that Shakespeare, thinking but little of dramatic fitness, wishes in part simply to write poetry, and partly to impress on the audience thoughts which will help them to understand, not the player-king nor yet King Claudius, but Hamlet himself, who, on his side,—and here quite in character—has already enlarged on the same topic in the most famous of his soliloquies?

(*g*) Lastly, like nearly all the dramatists of his day and of times much earlier, Shakespeare was fond of 'gnomic' passages, and introduces them probably not more freely than his readers like, but more freely than, I suppose, a good play-wright now would care to do. These passages, it may be observed, are frequently rhymed (*e.g. Othello*, i. iii. 201 ff., ii. i. 149 ff.). Sometimes they were printed in early editions with inverted commas round them, as are in the First Quarto Polonius's 'few precepts' to Laertes.

If now we ask whence defects like these arose, we shall observe that some of them are shared by the majority of Shakespeare's contemporaries, and abound in the dramas immediately preceding his time. They are characteristics of an art still undeveloped, and, no doubt, were not perceived to be defects. But though it is quite probable that in regard to one or two kinds of imperfection (such as the superabundance of 'gnomic' passages) Shakespeare himself erred thus ignorantly, it is very unlikely that in most cases he did so, unless in the first years of his career of authorship. And certainly he never can have thought it artistic to leave inconsistencies, obscurities, or passages of bombast in his work. Most of the defects in his writings must be due to indifference or want of care.

I do not say that all were so. In regard, for example, to his occasional bombast and other errors of diction, it seems hardly doubtful that his perception was sometimes at fault, and that, though he used the English language like no one else, he had not that *sureness* of taste in words which has been shown by some much smaller writers. And it seems not unlikely that here he suffered from his comparative want of 'learning,'—that is, of familiarity with the great writers of antiquity. But nine-tenths of his defects are not, I believe, the errors of an inspired genius, ignorant of art, but the sins of a great but negligent artist. He was often, no doubt, over-worked and pressed for time. He knew that the immense majority of his audience were incapable of distinguishing between rough and finished work. He often felt the degradation of having to live by pleasing them. Probably in hours of depression he was quite indifferent to fame, and perhaps in another mood the whole business of play-writing seemed to him a little thing. None of these thoughts and feelings influenced him when his subject had caught hold of him. To imagine that *then* he 'winged his roving flight' for 'gain' or 'glory,'

[24] If by this we mean that these characters all speak what is recognisably Shakespeare's style, of course it is true; but it is no accusation. Nor does it follow that they all speak alike; and in fact they are far from doing so.

or wrote from any cause on earth but the necessity of expression, with all its pains and raptures, is mere folly. He was possessed: his mind must have been in a white heat: he worked, no doubt, with the *furia* of Michael Angelo. And if he did not succeed at once—and how can even he have always done so?—he returned to the matter again and again. Such things as the scenes of Duncan's murder or Othello's temptation, such speeches as those of the Duke to Claudio and of Claudio to his sister about death, were not composed in an hour and tossed aside; and if they have defects, they have not what Shakespeare thought defects. Nor is it possible that his astonishingly individual conceptions of character can have been struck out at a heat: prolonged and repeated thought must have gone to them. But of small inconsistencies in the plot he was often quite careless. He seems to have finished off some of his comedies with a hasty and even contemptuous indifference, as if it mattered nothing how the people got married, or even who married whom, so long as enough were married somehow. And often, when he came to parts of his scheme that were necessary but not interesting to him, he wrote with a slack hand, like a craftsman of genius who knows that his natural gift and acquired skill will turn out something more than good enough for his audience: wrote probably fluently but certainly negligently, sometimes only half saying what he meant, and sometimes saying the opposite, and now and then, when passion was required, lapsing into bombast because he knew he must heighten his style but would not take the trouble to inflame his imagination. It may truly be said that what injures such passages is not inspiration, but the want of it. But, as they are mostly passages where no poet could expect to be inspired, it is even more true to say that here Shakespeare lacked the conscience of the artist who is determined to make everything as good as he can. Such poets as Milton, Pope, Tennyson, habitually show this conscience. They left probably scarcely anything that they felt they could improve. No one could dream of saying that of Shakespeare.

Hence comes what is perhaps the chief difficulty in interpreting his works. Where his power or art is fully exerted it really does resemble that of nature. It organises and vitalises its product from the centre outward to the minutest markings on the surface, so that when you turn upon it the most searching light you can command, when you dissect it and apply to it the test of a microscope, still you find in it nothing formless, general or vague, but everywhere structure, character, individuality. In this his great things, which seem to come whenever they are wanted, have no companions in literature except the few greatest things in Dante; and it is a fatal error to allow his carelessness elsewhere to make one doubt whether here one is not seeking more than can be found. It is very possible to look for subtlety in the wrong places in Shakespeare, but in the right places it is not possible to find too much. But then this characteristic, which is one source of his endless attraction, is also a source of perplexity. For in those parts of his plays which show him neither in his most intense nor in his most negligent mood, we are often unable to decide whether something that seems inconsistent, indistinct, feeble, exaggerated, is really so, or whether it was definitely meant to be as it is, and has an intention which we ought to be able to divine; whether, for example, we have before us some unusual trait in character, some abnormal movement of mind, only surprising to us because we understand so very much less of human nature than Shakespeare did, or whether he wanted to get his work done and made a slip, or in using an old play adopted hastily something that would not square with his own conception, or even refused to trouble himself with minutiae which we notice only because we study him, but which nobody ever notices in a stage performance. We know well enough what Shakespeare is doing when at the end of *Measure for Measure* he marries Isabella to the Duke—and a scandalous proceeding it is; but who can ever feel sure that the doubts which vex him as to some not unimportant points in *Hamlet* are due to his own want of eyesight or to Shakespeare's want of care?

LECTURE III

SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC PERIOD—HAMLET

1

Before we come to-day to *Hamlet*, the first of our four tragedies, a few remarks must be made on their probable place in Shakespeare's literary career. But I shall say no more than seems necessary for our restricted purpose, and, therefore, for the most part shall merely be stating widely accepted results of investigation, without going into the evidence on which they rest.[25]

Shakespeare's tragedies fall into two distinct groups, and these groups are separated by a considerable interval. He wrote tragedy—pure, like *Romeo and Juliet*; historical, like *Richard III.*—in the early years of his career of authorship, when he was also writing such comedies as *Love's Labour's Lost* and the *Midsummer-Night's Dream*. Then came a time, lasting some half-dozen years, during which he composed the most mature and humorous of his English History plays (the plays with Falstaff in them), and the best of his romantic comedies (the plays with Beatrice and Jaques and Viola in them). There are no tragedies belonging to these half-dozen years, nor any dramas approaching tragedy. But now, from about 1601 to about 1608, comes tragedy after tragedy—*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*; and their companions are plays which cannot indeed be called tragedies, but certainly are not comedies in the same sense as *As You Like It* or the *Tempest*. These seven years, accordingly, might, without much risk of misunderstanding, be called Shakespeare's tragic period.[26] And after it he wrote no more tragedies, but chiefly romances more serious and less sunny than *As You Like It*, but not much less serene.

The existence of this distinct tragic period, of a time when the dramatist seems to have been occupied almost exclusively with deep and painful problems, has naturally helped to suggest the idea that the 'man' also, in these years of middle age, from thirty-seven to forty-four, was heavily burdened in spirit; that Shakespeare turned to tragedy not merely for change, or because he felt it to be the greatest form of drama and felt himself equal to it, but also because the world had come to look dark and terrible to him; and even that the railings of Thersites and the maledictions of Timon express his own contempt and hatred for mankind. Discussion of this large and difficult subject, however, is not

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[25] It may be convenient to some readers for the purposes of this book to have by them a list of Shakespeare's plays, arranged in periods. No such list, of course, can command general assent, but the following (which does not throughout represent my own views) would perhaps meet with as little objection from scholars as any other. For some purposes the Third and Fourth Periods are better considered to be one. Within each period the so-called Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies are respectively grouped together; and for this reason, as well as for others, the order within each period does not profess to be chronological (*e.g.* it is not implied that the *Comedy of Errors* preceded *1 Henry VI.* or *Titus Andronicus*). Where Shakespeare's authorship of any considerable part of a play is questioned, widely or by specially good authority, the name of the play is printed in italics.*First Period* (to 1595?).—Comedy of Errors, Love's Labour's Lost, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Midsummer-Night's Dream; *1 Henry VI.*, *2 Henry VI.*, *3 Henry VI.*, Richard III., Richard II.; *Titus Andronicus*, Romeo and Juliet.*Second Period* (to 1602?).—Merchant of Venice, All's Well (better in Third Period?), *Taming of the Shrew*, Much Ado, As You Like it, Merry Wives, Twelfth Night; King John, 1 Henry IV., 2 Henry IV., Henry V.; Julius Caesar, Hamlet.*Third Period* (to 1608?).—Troilus and Cressida, Measure for Measure; Othello, King Lear, *Timon of Athens*, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus.*Fourth Period.—Pericles*, Cymbeline, Winter's Tale, Tempest, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Henry VIII.*

[26] The reader will observe that this 'tragic period' would not exactly coincide with the 'Third Period' of the division given in the last note. For *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* fall in the Second Period, not the Third; and I may add that, as *Pericles* was entered at Stationers' Hall in 1608 and published in 1609, it ought strictly to be put in the Third Period—not the Fourth. The truth is that *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* are given to the Second Period mainly on the ground of style; while a Fourth Period is admitted, not mainly on that ground (for there is no great difference here between *Antony* and *Coriolanus* on the one side and *Cymbeline* and the *Tempest* on the other), but because of a difference in substance and spirit. If a Fourth Period were admitted on grounds of form, it ought to begin with *Antony and Cleopatra*.

necessary to the dramatic appreciation of any of his works, and I shall say nothing of it here, but shall pass on at once to draw attention to certain stages and changes which may be observed within the tragic period. For this purpose too it is needless to raise any question as to the respective chronological positions of *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. What is important is also generally admitted: that *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* precede these plays, and that *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* follow them.[27]

If we consider the tragedies first on the side of their substance, we find at once an obvious difference between the first two and the remainder. Both Brutus and Hamlet are highly intellectual by nature and reflective by habit. Both may even be called, in a popular sense, philosophic; Brutus may be called so in a stricter sense. Each, being also a 'good' man, shows accordingly, when placed in critical circumstances, a sensitive and almost painful anxiety to do right. And though they fail—of course in quite different ways—to deal successfully with these circumstances, the failure in each case is connected rather with their intellectual nature and reflective habit than with any yielding to passion. Hence the name 'tragedy of thought,' which Schlegel gave to *Hamlet*, may be given also, as in effect it has been by Professor Dowden, to *Julius Caesar*. The later heroes, on the other hand, Othello, Lear, Timon, Macbeth, Antony, Coriolanus, have, one and all, passionate natures, and, speaking roughly, we may attribute the tragic failure in each of these cases to passion. Partly for this reason, the later plays are wilder and stormier than the first two. We see a greater mass of human nature in commotion, and we see Shakespeare's own powers exhibited on a larger scale. Finally, examination would show that, in all these respects, the first tragedy, *Julius Caesar*, is further removed from the later type than is the second, *Hamlet*.

These two earlier works are both distinguished from most of the succeeding tragedies in another though a kindred respect. Moral evil is not so intently scrutinised or so fully displayed in them. In *Julius Caesar*, we may almost say, everybody means well. In *Hamlet*, though we have a villain, he is a small one. The murder which gives rise to the action lies outside the play, and the centre of attention within the play lies in the hero's efforts to do his duty. It seems clear that Shakespeare's interest, since the early days when under Marlowe's influence he wrote *Richard III.*, has not been directed to the more extreme or terrible forms of evil. But in the tragedies that follow *Hamlet* the presence of this interest is equally clear. In Iago, in the 'bad' people of *King Lear*, even in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, human nature assumes shapes which inspire not mere sadness or repulsion but horror and dismay. If in *Timon* no monstrous cruelty is done, we still watch ingratitude and selfishness so blank that they provoke a loathing we never felt for Claudius; and in this play and *King Lear* we can fancy that we hear at times the *saeva indignatio*, if not the despair, of Swift. This prevalence of abnormal or appalling forms of evil, side by side with vehement passion, is another reason why the convulsion depicted in these tragedies seems to come from a deeper source, and to be vaster in extent, than the conflict in the two earlier plays. And here again *Julius Caesar* is further removed than *Hamlet* from *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*.

But in regard to this second point of difference a reservation must be made, on which I will speak a little more fully, because, unlike the matter hitherto touched on, its necessity seems hardly to have been recognised. *All* of the later tragedies may be called tragedies of passion, but not all of them display these extreme forms of evil. Neither of the last two does so. Antony and Coriolanus are, from one point of view, victims of passion; but the passion that ruins Antony also exalts him, he touches the infinite in it; and the pride and self-will of Coriolanus, though terrible in bulk, are scarcely so in quality; there is nothing base in them, and the huge creature whom they destroy is a noble, even a lovable, being. Nor does either of these dramas, though the earlier depicts a corrupt civilisation, include even among the minor characters anyone who can be called villainous or horrible. Consider, finally, the impression left on us at the close of each. It is remarkable that this impression,

[27] I should go perhaps too far if I said that it is generally admitted that *Timon of Athens* also precedes the two Roman tragedies; but its precedence seems to me so nearly certain that I assume it in what follows.

though very strong, can scarcely be called purely tragic; or, if we call it so, at least the feeling of reconciliation which mingles with the obviously tragic emotions is here exceptionally well-marked. The death of Antony, it will be remembered, comes before the opening of the Fifth Act. The death of Cleopatra, which closes the play, is greeted by the reader with sympathy and admiration, even with exultation at the thought that she has foiled Octavius; and these feelings are heightened by the deaths of Charmian and Iras, heroically faithful to their mistress, as Emilia was to hers. In *Coriolanus* the feeling of reconciliation is even stronger. The whole interest towards the close has been concentrated on the question whether the hero will persist in his revengeful design of storming and burning his native city, or whether better feelings will at last overpower his resentment and pride. He stands on the edge of a crime beside which, at least in outward dreadfulness, the slaughter of an individual looks insignificant. And when, at the sound of his mother's voice and the sight of his wife and child, nature asserts itself and he gives way, although we know he will lose his life, we care little for that: he has saved his soul. Our relief, and our exultation in the power of goodness, are so great that the actual catastrophe which follows and mingles sadness with these feelings leaves them but little diminished, and as we close the book we feel, it seems to me, more as we do at the close of *Cymbeline* than as we do at the close of *Othello*. In saying this I do not in the least mean to criticise *Coriolanus*. It is a much nobler play as it stands than it would have been if Shakespeare had made the hero persist, and we had seen him amid the flaming ruins of Rome, awaking suddenly to the enormity of his deed and taking vengeance on himself; but that would surely have been an ending more strictly tragic than the close of Shakespeare's play. Whether this close was simply due to his unwillingness to contradict his historical authority on a point of such magnitude we need not ask. In any case *Coriolanus* is, in more than an outward sense, the end of his tragic period. It marks the transition to his latest works, in which the powers of repentance and forgiveness charm to rest the tempest raised by error and guilt.

If we turn now from the substance of the tragedies to their style and versification, we find on the whole a corresponding difference between the earlier and the later. The usual assignment of *Julius Caesar*, and even of *Hamlet*, to the end of Shakespeare's Second Period—the period of *Henry V.*—is based mainly, we saw, on considerations of form. The general style of the serious parts of the last plays from English history is one of full, noble and comparatively equable eloquence. The 'honey-tongued' sweetness and beauty of Shakespeare's early writing, as seen in *Romeo and Juliet* or the *Midsummer-Night's Dream*, remain; the ease and lucidity remain; but there is an accession of force and weight. We find no great change from this style when we come to *Julius Caesar*,[28] which may be taken to mark its culmination. At this point in Shakespeare's literary development he reaches, if the phrase may be pardoned, a limited perfection. Neither thought on the one side, nor expression on the other, seems to have any tendency to outrun or contend with its fellow. We receive an impression of easy mastery and complete harmony, but not so strong an impression of inner power bursting into outer life. Shakespeare's style is perhaps nowhere else so free from defects, and yet almost every one of his subsequent plays contains writing which is greater. To speak familiarly, we feel in *Julius Caesar* that, although not even Shakespeare could better the style he has chosen, he has not let himself go.

In reading *Hamlet* we have no such feeling, and in many parts (for there is in the writing of *Hamlet* an unusual variety[29]) we are conscious of a decided change. The style in these parts is more rapid and vehement, less equable and less simple; and there is a change of the same kind in the versification. But on the whole the *type* is the same as in *Julius Caesar*, and the resemblance of the two plays is decidedly more marked than the difference. If Hamlet's soliloquies, considered simply as compositions, show a great change from Jaques's speech, 'All the world's a stage,' and even from the soliloquies of Brutus, yet *Hamlet* (for instance in the hero's interview with his mother) is like *Julius*

[28] That play, however, is distinguished, I think, by a deliberate endeavour after a dignified and unadorned simplicity,—a Roman simplicity perhaps.

[29] It is quite probable that this may arise in part from the fact, which seems hardly doubtful, that the tragedy was revised, and in places re-written, some little time after its first composition.

Caesar, and unlike the later tragedies, in the fulness of its eloquence, and passages like the following belong quite definitely to the style of the Second Period:

> *Mar.* It faded on the crowing of the cock.
> Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
> Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
> The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
> And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad;
> The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
> No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
> So hallow'd and so gracious is the time.
>
> *Hor.* So have I heard and do in part believe it.
> But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
> Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.

This bewitching music is heard again in Hamlet's farewell to Horatio:

> If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
> Absent thee from felicity awhile,
> And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
> To tell my story.

But after *Hamlet* this music is heard no more. It is followed by a music vaster and deeper, but not the same.

The changes observable in *Hamlet* are afterwards, and gradually, so greatly developed that Shakespeare's style and versification at last become almost new things. It is extremely difficult to illustrate this briefly in a manner to which no just exception can be taken, for it is almost impossible to find in two plays passages bearing a sufficiently close resemblance to one another in occasion and sentiment. But I will venture to put by the first of those quotations from *Hamlet* this from *Macbeth*:

> *Dun.* This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
> Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
> Unto our gentle senses.
>
> *Ban.*This guest of summer,
> The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
> By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
> Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
> Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
> Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle;
> Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,
> The air is delicate;

and by the second quotation from *Hamlet* this from *Antony and Cleopatra*:

> The miserable change now at my end
> Lament nor sorrow at; but please your thoughts
> In feeding them with those my former fortunes

Wherein I lived, the greatest prince o' the world,
The noblest; and do now not basely die,
Not cowardly put off my helmet to
My countryman,—a Roman by a Roman
Valiantly vanquish'd. Now my spirit is going;
I can no more.

It would be almost an impertinence to point out in detail how greatly these two passages, and especially the second, differ in effect from those in *Hamlet*, written perhaps five or six years earlier. The versification, by the time we reach *Antony and Cleopatra*, has assumed a new type; and although this change would appear comparatively slight in a typical passage from *Othello* or even from *King Lear*, its approach through these plays to *Timon* and *Macbeth* can easily be traced. It is accompanied by a similar change in diction and construction. After *Hamlet* the style, in the more emotional passages, is heightened. It becomes grander, sometimes wilder, sometimes more swelling, even tumid. It is also more concentrated, rapid, varied, and, in construction, less regular, not seldom twisted or elliptical. It is, therefore, not so easy and lucid, and in the more ordinary dialogue it is sometimes involved and obscure, and from these and other causes deficient in charm.[30] On the other hand, it is always full of life and movement, and in great passages produces sudden, strange, electrifying effects which are rarely found in earlier plays, and not so often even in *Hamlet*. The more pervading effect of beauty gives place to what may almost be called explosions of sublimity or pathos.

There is room for differences of taste and preference as regards the style and versification of the end of Shakespeare's Second Period, and those of the later tragedies and last romances. But readers who miss in the latter the peculiar enchantment of the earlier will not deny that the changes in form are in entire harmony with the inward changes. If they object to passages where, to exaggerate a little, the sense has rather to be discerned beyond the words than found in them, and if they do not wholly enjoy the movement of so typical a speech as this,

Yes, like enough, high-battled Caesar will
Unstate his happiness, and be staged to the show,
Against a sworder! I see men's judgements are
A parcel of their fortunes; and things outward
Do draw the inward quality after them,
To suffer all alike. That he should dream,
Knowing all measures, the full Caesar will
Answer his emptiness! Caesar, thou hast subdued
His judgement too,

they will admit that, in traversing the impatient throng of thoughts not always completely embodied, their minds move through an astonishing variety of ideas and experiences, and that a style less generally poetic than that of *Hamlet* is also a style more invariably dramatic. It may be that, for the purposes of tragedy, the highest point was reached during the progress of these changes, in the most critical passages of *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.[31]

[30] This, if we confine ourselves to the tragedies, is, I think, especially the case in *King Lear* and *Timon*.

[31] The first, at any rate, of these three plays is, of course, much nearer to *Hamlet*, especially in versification, than to *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Shakespeare's final style first shows itself practically complete. It has been impossible, in the brief treatment of this subject, to say what is required of the individual plays.

2

Suppose you were to describe the plot of *Hamlet* to a person quite ignorant of the play, and suppose you were careful to tell your hearer nothing about Hamlet's character, what impression would your sketch make on him? Would he not exclaim: 'What a sensational story! Why, here are some eight violent deaths, not to speak of adultery, a ghost, a mad woman, and a fight in a grave! If I did not know that the play was Shakespeare's, I should have thought it must have been one of those early tragedies of blood and horror from which he is said to have redeemed the stage'? And would he not then go on to ask: 'But why in the world did not Hamlet obey the Ghost at once, and so save seven of those eight lives?'

This exclamation and this question both show the same thing, that the whole story turns upon the peculiar character of the hero. For without this character the story would appear sensational and horrible; and yet the actual *Hamlet* is very far from being so, and even has a less terrible effect than *Othello*, *King Lear* or *Macbeth*. And again, if we had no knowledge of this character, the story would hardly be intelligible; it would at any rate at once suggest that wondering question about the conduct of the hero; while the story of any of the other three tragedies would sound plain enough and would raise no such question. It is further very probable that the main change made by Shakespeare in the story as already represented on the stage, lay in a new conception of Hamlet's character and so of the cause of his delay. And, lastly, when we examine the tragedy, we observe two things which illustrate the same point. First, we find by the side of the hero no other figure of tragic proportions, no one like Lady Macbeth or Iago, no one even like Cordelia or Desdemona; so that, in Hamlet's absence, the remaining characters could not yield a Shakespearean tragedy at all. And, secondly, we find among them two, Laertes and Fortinbras, who are evidently designed to throw the character of the hero into relief. Even in the situations there is a curious parallelism; for Fortinbras, like Hamlet, is the son of a king, lately dead, and succeeded by his brother; and Laertes, like Hamlet, has a father slain, and feels bound to avenge him. And with this parallelism in situation there is a strong contrast in character; for both Fortinbras and Laertes possess in abundance the very quality which the hero seems to lack, so that, as we read, we are tempted to exclaim that either of them would have accomplished Hamlet's task in a day. Naturally, then, the tragedy of *Hamlet* with Hamlet left out has become the symbol of extreme absurdity; while the character itself has probably exerted a greater fascination, and certainly has been the subject of more discussion, than any other in the whole literature of the world.

Before, however, we approach the task of examining it, it is as well to remind ourselves that the virtue of the play by no means wholly depends on this most subtle creation. We are all aware of this, and if we were not so the history of *Hamlet*, as a stage-play, might bring the fact home to us. It is to-day the most popular of Shakespeare's tragedies on our stage; and yet a large number, perhaps even the majority of the spectators, though they may feel some mysterious attraction in the hero, certainly do not question themselves about his character or the cause of his delay, and would still find the play exceptionally effective, even if he were an ordinary brave young man and the obstacles in his path were purely external. And this has probably always been the case. *Hamlet* seems from the first to have been a favourite play; but until late in the eighteenth century, I believe, scarcely a critic showed that he perceived anything specially interesting in the character. Hanmer, in 1730, to be sure, remarks that 'there appears no reason at all in nature why this young prince did not put the usurper to death as soon as possible'; but it does not even cross his mind that this apparent 'absurdity' is odd and might possibly be due to some design on the part of the poet. He simply explains the absurdity by observing that, if Shakespeare had made the young man go 'naturally to work,' the play would have come to an end at once! Johnson, in like manner, notices that 'Hamlet is, through the whole piece, rather an instrument than an agent,' but it does not occur to him that this peculiar circumstance can be anything but a defect in Shakespeare's management of the plot. Seeing, they saw not. Henry Mackenzie, the author

of *The Man of Feeling*, was, it would seem, the first of our critics to feel the 'indescribable charm' of Hamlet, and to divine something of Shakespeare's intention. 'We see a man,' he writes, 'who in other circumstances would have exercised all the moral and social virtues, placed in a situation in which even the amiable qualities of his mind serve but to aggravate his distress and to perplex his conduct.'[32] How significant is the fact (if it be the fact) that it was only when the slowly rising sun of Romance began to flush the sky that the wonder, beauty and pathos of this most marvellous of Shakespeare's creations began to be visible! We do not know that they were perceived even in his own day, and perhaps those are not wholly wrong who declare that this creation, so far from being a characteristic product of the time, was a vision of

> the prophetic soul
> Of the wide world dreaming on things to come.

But the dramatic splendour of the whole tragedy is another matter, and must have been manifest not only in Shakespeare's day but even in Hanmer's.

It is indeed so obvious that I pass it by, and proceed at once to the central question of Hamlet's character. And I believe time will be saved, and a good deal of positive interpretation may be introduced, if, without examining in detail any one theory, we first distinguish classes or types of theory which appear to be in various ways and degrees insufficient or mistaken. And we will confine our attention to sane theories;—for on this subject, as on all questions relating to Shakespeare, there are plenty of merely lunatic views: the view, for example, that Hamlet, being a disguised woman in love with Horatio, could hardly help seeming unkind to Ophelia; or the view that, being a very clever and wicked young man who wanted to oust his innocent uncle from the throne, he 'faked' the Ghost with this intent.

But, before we come to our types of theory, it is necessary to touch on an idea, not unfrequently met with, which would make it vain labour to discuss or propose any theory at all. It is sometimes said that Hamlet's character is not only intricate but unintelligible. Now this statement might mean something quite unobjectionable and even perhaps true and important. It might mean that the character cannot be *wholly* understood. As we saw, there may be questions which we cannot answer with certainty now, because we have nothing but the text to guide us, but which never arose for the spectators who saw *Hamlet* acted in Shakespeare's day; and we shall have to refer to such questions in these lectures. Again, it may be held without any improbability that, from carelessness or because he was engaged on this play for several years, Shakespeare left inconsistencies in his exhibition of the character which must prevent us from being certain of his ultimate meaning. Or, possibly, we may be baffled because he has illustrated in it certain strange facts of human nature, which he had noticed but of which we are ignorant. But then all this would apply in some measure to other characters in Shakespeare, and it is not this that is meant by the statement that Hamlet is unintelligible. What is meant is that Shakespeare *intended* him to be so, because he himself was feeling strongly, and wished his audience to feel strongly, what a mystery life is, and how impossible it is for us to understand it. Now here, surely, we have mere confusion of mind. The mysteriousness of life is one thing, the psychological unintelligibility of a dramatic character is quite another; and the second does not show the first, it shows only the incapacity or folly of the dramatist. If it did show the first, it would be very easy to surpass Shakespeare in producing a sense of mystery: we should simply have to portray an absolutely nonsensical character. Of course *Hamlet* appeals powerfully to our sense of the mystery of life, but so does *every* good tragedy; and it does so not because the hero is an enigma to us, but because, having a fair understanding of him, we feel how strange it is that strength and weakness

[32] *The Mirror*, 18th April, 1780, quoted by Furness, *Variorum Hamlet*, ii. 148. In the above remarks I have relied mainly on Furness's collection of extracts from early critics.

should be so mingled in one soul, and that this soul should be doomed to such misery and apparent failure.

(1) To come, then, to our typical views, we may lay it down, first, that no theory will hold water which finds the cause of Hamlet's delay merely, or mainly, or even to any considerable extent, in external difficulties. Nothing is easier than to spin a plausible theory of this kind. What, it may be asked,[33] was Hamlet to do when the Ghost had left him with its commission of vengeance? The King was surrounded not merely by courtiers but by a Swiss body-guard: how was Hamlet to get at him? Was he then to accuse him publicly of the murder? If he did, what would happen? How would he prove the charge? All that he had to offer in proof was—a ghost-story! Others, to be sure, had seen the Ghost, but no one else had heard its revelations. Obviously, then, even if the court had been honest, instead of subservient and corrupt, it would have voted Hamlet mad, or worse, and would have shut him up out of harm's way. He could not see what to do, therefore, and so he waited. Then came the actors, and at once with admirable promptness he arranged for the play-scene, hoping that the King would betray his guilt to the whole court. Unfortunately the King did not. It is true that immediately afterwards Hamlet got his chance; for he found the King defenceless on his knees. But what Hamlet wanted was not a private revenge, to be followed by his own imprisonment or execution; it was public justice. So he spared the King; and, as he unluckily killed Polonius just afterwards, he had to consent to be despatched to England. But, on the voyage there, he discovered the King's commission, ordering the King of England to put him immediately to death; and, with this in his pocket, he made his way back to Denmark. For now, he saw, the proof of the King's attempt to murder him would procure belief also for the story of the murder of his father. His enemy, however, was too quick for him, and his public arraignment of that enemy was prevented by his own death.

A theory like this sounds very plausible—so long as you do not remember the text. But no unsophisticated mind, fresh from the reading of *Hamlet*, will accept it; and, as soon as we begin to probe it, fatal objections arise in such numbers that I choose but a few, and indeed I think the first of them is enough.

(*a*) From beginning to end of the play, Hamlet never makes the slightest reference to any external difficulty. How is it possible to explain this fact in conformity with the theory? For what conceivable reason should Shakespeare conceal from us so carefully the key to the problem?

(*b*) Not only does Hamlet fail to allude to such difficulties, but he always assumes that he *can* obey the Ghost,[34] and he once asserts this in so many words ('Sith I have cause and will and strength and means To do't,' iv. iv. 45).

(*c*) Again, why does Shakespeare exhibit Laertes quite easily raising the people against the King? Why but to show how much more easily Hamlet, whom the people loved, could have done the same thing, if that was the plan he preferred?

(*d*) Again, Hamlet did *not* plan the play-scene in the hope that the King would betray his guilt to the court. He planned it, according to his own account, in order to convince *himself* by the King's agitation that the Ghost had spoken the truth. This is perfectly clear from ii. ii. 625 ff. and from iii. ii. 80 ff. Some readers are misled by the words in the latter passage:

> if his occulted guilt
> Do not itself unkennel in one speech,
> It is a damned ghost that we have seen.

[33] I do not profess to reproduce any one theory, and, still less, to do justice to the ablest exponent of this kind of view, Werder (*Vorlesungen über Hamlet*, 1875), who by no means regards Hamlet's difficulties as *merely* external.

[34] I give one instance. When he spares the King, he speaks of killing him when he is drunk asleep, when he is in his rage, when he is awake in bed, when he is gaming, as if there were in none of these cases the least obstacle (iii. iii. 89 ff.).

The meaning obviously is, as the context shows, 'if his hidden guilt do not betray itself *on occasion of* one speech,' viz., the 'dozen or sixteen lines' with which Hamlet has furnished the player, and of which only six are delivered, because the King does not merely show his guilt in his face (which was all Hamlet had hoped, iii. ii. 90) but rushes from the room.

It may be as well to add that, although Hamlet's own account of his reason for arranging the play-scene may be questioned, it is impossible to suppose that, if his real design had been to provoke an open confession of guilt, he could have been unconscious of this design.

(*e*) Again, Hamlet never once talks, or shows a sign of thinking, of the plan of bringing the King to public justice; he always talks of using his 'sword' or his 'arm.' And this is so just as much after he has returned to Denmark with the commission in his pocket as it was before this event. When he has told Horatio the story of the voyage, he does not say, 'Now I can convict him': he says, 'Now am I not justified in using this arm?'

This class of theory, then, we must simply reject. But it suggests two remarks. It is of course quite probable that, when Hamlet was 'thinking too precisely on the event,' he was considering, among other things, the question how he could avenge his father without sacrificing his own life or freedom. And assuredly, also, he was anxious that his act of vengeance should not be misconstrued, and would never have been content to leave a 'wounded name' behind him. His dying words prove that.

(2) Assuming, now, that Hamlet's main difficulty—almost the whole of his difficulty—was internal, I pass to views which, acknowledging this, are still unsatisfactory because they isolate one element in his character and situation and treat it as the whole.

According to the first of these typical views, Hamlet was restrained by conscience or a moral scruple; he could not satisfy himself that it was right to avenge his father.

This idea, like the first, can easily be made to look very plausible if we vaguely imagine the circumstances without attending to the text. But attention to the text is fatal to it. For, on the one hand, scarcely anything can be produced in support of it, and, on the other hand, a great deal can be produced in its disproof. To take the latter point first, Hamlet, it is impossible to deny, habitually assumes, without any questioning, that he *ought* to avenge his father. Even when he doubts, or thinks that he doubts, the honesty of the Ghost, he expresses no doubt as to what his duty will be if the Ghost turns out honest: 'If he but blench I know my course.' In the two soliloquies where he reviews his position (ii. ii., 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I,' and iv. iv., 'How all occasions do inform against me') he reproaches himself bitterly for the neglect of his duty. When he reflects on the possible causes of this neglect he never mentions among them a moral scruple. When the Ghost appears in the Queen's chamber he confesses, conscience-stricken, that, lapsed in time and passion, he has let go by the acting of its command; but he does not plead that his conscience stood in his way. The Ghost itself says that it comes to whet his 'almost blunted purpose'; and conscience may unsettle a purpose but does not blunt it. What natural explanation of all this can be given on the conscience theory?

And now what can be set against this evidence? One solitary passage.[35] Quite late, after Hamlet has narrated to Horatio the events of his voyage, he asks him (v. ii. 63):

> Does it not, thinks't thee, stand me now upon—
> He that hath kill'd my king and whored my mother,

[35] It is surprising to find quoted, in support of the conscience view, the line 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,' and to observe the total misinterpretation of the soliloquy *To be or not to be*, from which the line comes. In this soliloquy Hamlet is not thinking of the duty laid upon him at all. He is debating the question of suicide. No one oppressed by the ills of life, he says, would continue to bear them if it were not for speculation about his possible fortune in another life. And then, generalising, he says (what applies to himself, no doubt, though he shows no consciousness of the fact) that such speculation or reflection makes men hesitate and shrink like cowards from great actions and enterprises. 'Conscience' does not mean moral sense or scrupulosity, but this reflection on the *consequences* of action. It is the same thing as the 'craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event' of the speech in iv. iv. As to this use of 'conscience,' see Schmidt, *s.v.* and the parallels there given. The *Oxford Dictionary* also gives many examples of similar uses of 'conscience,' though it unfortunately lends its authority to the misinterpretation criticised.

> Popp'd in between the election and my hopes,
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life,
> And with such cozenage—is't not perfect conscience
> To quit him with this arm? and is't not to be damn'd
> To let this canker of our nature come
> In further evil?

Here, certainly, is a question of conscience in the usual present sense of the word; and, it may be said, does not this show that all along Hamlet really has been deterred by moral scruples? But I ask first how, in that case, the facts just adduced are to be explained: for they must be explained, not ignored. Next, let the reader observe that even if this passage did show that *one* hindrance to Hamlet's action was his conscience, it by no means follows that this was the sole or the chief hindrance. And, thirdly, let him observe, and let him ask himself whether the coincidence is a mere accident, that Hamlet is here almost repeating the words he used in vain self-reproach some time before (iv. iv. 56):

> How stand I then,
> That have a father kill'd, a mother stain'd,
> Excitements of my reason and my blood,
> And let all sleep?

Is it not clear that he is speculating just as vainly now, and that this question of conscience is but one of his many unconscious excuses for delay? And, lastly, is it not so that Horatio takes it? He declines to discuss that unreal question, and answers simply,

> It must be shortly known to him from England
> What is the issue of the business there.

In other words, 'Enough of this endless procrastination. What is wanted is not reasons for the deed, but the deed itself.' What can be more significant?

Perhaps, however, it may be answered: 'Your explanation of this passage may be correct, and the facts you have mentioned do seem to be fatal to the theory of conscience in its usual form. But there is another and subtler theory of conscience. According to it, Hamlet, so far as his explicit consciousness went, was sure that he ought to obey the Ghost; but in the depths of his nature, and unknown to himself, there was a moral repulsion to the deed. The conventional moral ideas of his time, which he shared with the Ghost, told him plainly that he ought to avenge his father; but a deeper conscience in him, which was in advance of his time, contended with these explicit conventional ideas. It is because this deeper conscience remains below the surface that he fails to recognise it, and fancies he is hindered by cowardice or sloth or passion or what not; but it emerges into light in that speech to Horatio. And it is just because he has this nobler moral nature in him that we admire and love him.'

Now I at once admit not only that this view is much more attractive and more truly tragic than the ordinary conscience theory, but that it has more verisimilitude. But I feel no doubt that it does not answer to Shakespeare's meaning, and I will simply mention, out of many objections to it, three which seem to be fatal. (*a*) If it answers to Shakespeare's meaning, why in the world did he conceal that meaning until the last Act? The facts adduced above seem to show beyond question that, on the hypothesis, he did so. That he did so is surely next door to incredible. In any case, it certainly requires an explanation, and certainly has not received one. (*b*) Let us test the theory by reference to a single important passage, that where Hamlet finds the King at prayer and spares him. The reason Hamlet gives himself for sparing the King is that, if he kills him now, he will send him to heaven, whereas he desires to send him to hell. Now, this reason may be an unconscious excuse, but is it believable

that, if the real reason had been the stirrings of his deeper conscience, *that* could have masked itself in the form of a desire to send his enemy's soul to hell? Is not the idea quite ludicrous? (*c*) The theory requires us to suppose that, when the Ghost enjoins Hamlet to avenge the murder of his father, it is laying on him a duty which *we* are to understand to be no duty but the very reverse. And is not that supposition wholly contrary to the natural impression which we all receive in reading the play? Surely it is clear that, whatever we in the twentieth century may think about Hamlet's duty, we are meant in the play to assume that he *ought* to have obeyed the Ghost.

The conscience theory, then, in either of its forms we must reject. But it may remind us of points worth noting. In the first place, it is certainly true that Hamlet, in spite of some appearances to the contrary, was, as Goethe said, of a most moral nature, and had a great anxiety to do right. In this anxiety he resembles Brutus, and it is stronger in him than in any of the later heroes. And, secondly, it is highly probable that in his interminable broodings the kind of paralysis with which he was stricken masked itself in the shape of conscientious scruples as well as in many other shapes. And, finally, in his shrinking from the deed there was probably, together with much else, something which may be called a moral, though not a conscientious, repulsion: I mean a repugnance to the idea of falling suddenly on a man who could not defend himself. This, so far as we can see, was the only plan that Hamlet ever contemplated. There is no positive evidence in the play that he regarded it with the aversion that any brave and honourable man, one must suppose, would feel for it; but, as Hamlet certainly was brave and honourable, we may presume that he did so.

(3) We come next to what may be called the sentimental view of Hamlet, a view common both among his worshippers and among his defamers. Its germ may perhaps be found in an unfortunate phrase of Goethe's (who of course is not responsible for the whole view): 'a lovely, pure and most moral nature, *without the strength of nerve which forms a hero*, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away.' When this idea is isolated, developed and popularised, we get the picture of a graceful youth, sweet and sensitive, full of delicate sympathies and yearning aspirations, shrinking from the touch of everything gross and earthly; but frail and weak, a kind of Werther, with a face like Shelley's and a voice like Mr. Tree's. And then we ask in tender pity, how could such a man perform the terrible duty laid on him?

How, indeed! And what a foolish Ghost even to suggest such a duty! But this conception, though not without its basis in certain beautiful traits of Hamlet's nature, is utterly untrue. It is too kind to Hamlet on one side, and it is quite unjust to him on another. The 'conscience' theory at any rate leaves Hamlet a great nature which you can admire and even revere. But for the 'sentimental' Hamlet you can feel only pity not unmingled with contempt. Whatever else he is, he is no *hero*.

But consider the text. This shrinking, flower-like youth—how could he possibly have done what we *see* Hamlet do? What likeness to him is there in the Hamlet who, summoned by the Ghost, bursts from his terrified friends with the cry:

> Unhand me, gentlemen!
> By heaven, I'll make a ghost of him that lets me;

the Hamlet who scarcely once speaks to the King without an insult, or to Polonius without a gibe; the Hamlet who storms at Ophelia and speaks daggers to his mother; the Hamlet who, hearing a cry behind the arras, whips out his sword in an instant and runs the eavesdropper through; the Hamlet who sends his 'school-fellows' to their death and never troubles his head about them more; the Hamlet who is the first man to board a pirate ship, and who fights with Laertes in the grave; the Hamlet of the catastrophe, an omnipotent fate, before whom all the court stands helpless, who, as the truth breaks upon him, rushes on the King, drives his foil right through his body,[36] then seizes the poisoned

[36] The King does not die of the *poison* on the foil, like Laertes and Hamlet. They were wounded before he was, but they die

cup and forces it violently between the wretched man's lips, and in the throes of death has force and fire enough to wrest the cup from Horatio's hand ('By heaven, I'll have it!') lest he should drink and die? This man, the Hamlet of the play, is a heroic, terrible figure. He would have been formidable to Othello or Macbeth. If the sentimental Hamlet had crossed him, he would have hurled him from his path with one sweep of his arm.

This view, then, or any view that approaches it, is grossly unjust to Hamlet, and turns tragedy into mere pathos. But, on the other side, it is too kind to him. It ignores the hardness and cynicism which were indeed no part of his nature, but yet, in this crisis of his life, are indubitably present and painfully marked. His sternness, itself left out of sight by this theory, is no defect; but he is much more than stern. Polonius possibly deserved nothing better than the words addressed to his corpse:

> Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
> I took thee for thy better: take thy fortune:
> Thou find'st to be too busy is some danger;

yet this was Ophelia's father, and, whatever he deserved, it pains us, for Hamlet's own sake, to hear the words:

> This man shall set me packing:
> I'll lug the guts into the neighbour room.

There is the same insensibility in Hamlet's language about the fate of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; and, observe, their deaths were not in the least required by his purpose. Grant, again, that his cruelty to Ophelia was partly due to misunderstanding, partly forced on him, partly feigned; still one surely cannot altogether so account for it, and still less can one so account for the disgusting and insulting grossness of his language to her in the play-scene. I know this is said to be merely an example of the custom of Shakespeare's time. But it is not so. It is such language as you will find addressed to a woman by no other hero of Shakespeare's, not even in that dreadful scene where Othello accuses Desdemona. It is a great mistake to ignore these things, or to try to soften the impression which they naturally make on one. That this embitterment, callousness, grossness, brutality, should be induced on a soul so pure and noble is profoundly tragic; and Shakespeare's business was to show this tragedy, not to paint an ideally beautiful soul unstained and undisturbed by the evil of the world and the anguish of conscious failure.[37]

(4) There remains, finally, that class of view which may be named after Schlegel and Coleridge. According to this, *Hamlet* is the tragedy of reflection. The cause of the hero's delay is irresolution; and the cause of this irresolution is excess of the reflective or speculative habit of mind. He has a

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after him.

[37] I may add here a word on one small matter. It is constantly asserted that Hamlet wept over the body of Polonius. Now, if he did, it would make no difference to my point in the paragraph above; but there is no warrant in the text for the assertion. It is based on some words of the Queen (iv. i. 24), in answer to the King's question, 'Where is he gone?':To draw apart the body he hath killed:O'er whom his very madness, like some oreAmong a mineral of metals base,Shows itself pure; he weeps for what is done.But the Queen, as was pointed out by Doering, is trying to screen her son. She has already made the false statement that when Hamlet, crying, 'A rat! a rat!', ran his rapier through the arras, it was because he heard *something stir* there, whereas we know that what he heard was a man's voice crying, 'What ho! help, help, help!' And in this scene she has come straight from the interview with her son, terribly agitated, shaken with 'sighs' and 'profound heaves,' in the night (line 30). Now we know what Hamlet said to the body, and of the body, in that interview; and there is assuredly no sound of tears in the voice that said those things and others. The only sign of relenting is in the words (iii. iv. 171):For this same lord,I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so,To punish me with this and this with me,That I must be their scourge and minister.His mother's statement, therefore, is almost certainly untrue, though it may be to her credit. (It is just conceivable that Hamlet wept at iii. iv. 130, and that the Queen supposed he was weeping for Polonius.)Perhaps, however, he may have wept over Polonius's body afterwards? Well, in the *next* scene (iv. ii.) we see him *alone* with the body, and are therefore likely to witness his genuine feelings. And his first words are, 'Safely stowed'!

general intention to obey the Ghost, but 'the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.' He is 'thought-sick.' 'The whole,' says Schlegel, 'is intended to show how a calculating consideration which aims at exhausting, so far as human foresight can, all the relations and possible consequences of a deed, cripples[38] the power of acting.... Hamlet is a hypocrite towards himself; his far-fetched scruples are often mere pretexts to cover his want of determination.... He has no firm belief in himself or in anything else.... He loses himself in labyrinths of thought.' So Coleridge finds in Hamlet 'an almost enormous intellectual activity and a proportionate aversion to real action consequent upon it' (the aversion, that is to say, is consequent on the activity). Professor Dowden objects to this view, very justly, that it neglects the emotional side of Hamlet's character, 'which is quite as important as the intellectual'; but, with this supplement, he appears on the whole to adopt it. Hamlet, he says, 'loses a sense of fact because with him each object and event transforms and expands itself into an idea.... He cannot steadily keep alive within himself a sense of the importance of any positive, limited thing,—a deed, for example.' And Professor Dowden explains this condition by reference to Hamlet's life. 'When the play opens he has reached the age of thirty years … and he has received culture of every kind except the culture of active life. During the reign of the strong-willed elder Hamlet there was no call to action for his meditative son. He has slipped on into years of full manhood still a haunter of the university, a student of philosophies, an amateur in art, a ponderer on the things of life and death, who has never formed a resolution or executed a deed' (*Shakspere, his Mind and Art*, 4th ed., pp. 132, 133).

On the whole, the Schlegel-Coleridge theory (with or without Professor Dowden's modification and amplification) is the most widely received view of Hamlet's character. And with it we come at last into close contact with the text of the play. It not only answers, in some fundamental respects, to the general impression produced by the drama, but it can be supported by Hamlet's own words in his soliloquies—such words, for example, as those about the native hue of resolution, or those about the craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event. It is confirmed, also, by the contrast between Hamlet on the one side and Laertes and Fortinbras on the other; and, further, by the occurrence of those words of the King to Laertes (iv. vii. 119 f.), which, if they are not in character, are all the more important as showing what was in Shakespeare's mind at the time:

> that we would do
> We should do when we would; for this 'would' changes,
> And hath abatements and delays as many
> As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents;
> And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift sigh
> That hurts by easing.

And, lastly, even if the view itself does not suffice, the *description* given by its adherents of Hamlet's state of mind, as we see him in the last four Acts, is, on the whole and so far as it goes, a true description. The energy of resolve is dissipated in an endless brooding on the deed required. When he acts, his action does not proceed from this deliberation and analysis, but is sudden and impulsive, evoked by an emergency in which he has no time to think. And most of the reasons he assigns for his procrastination are evidently not the true reasons, but unconscious excuses.

Nevertheless this theory fails to satisfy. And it fails not merely in this or that detail, but as a whole. We feel that its Hamlet does not fully answer to our imaginative impression. He is not nearly so inadequate to this impression as the sentimental Hamlet, but still we feel he is inferior to Shakespeare's man and does him wrong. And when we come to examine the theory we find that it is

[38] Not 'must cripple,' as the English translation has it.

partial and leaves much unexplained. I pass that by for the present, for we shall see, I believe, that the theory is also positively misleading, and that in a most important way. And of this I proceed to speak.

Hamlet's irresolution, or his aversion to real action, is, according to the theory, the *direct* result of 'an almost enormous intellectual activity' in the way of 'a calculating consideration which attempts to exhaust all the relations and possible consequences of a deed.' And this again proceeds from an original one-sidedness of nature, strengthened by habit, and, perhaps, by years of speculative inaction. The theory describes, therefore, a man in certain respects like Coleridge himself, on one side a man of genius, on the other side, the side of will, deplorably weak, always procrastinating and avoiding unpleasant duties, and often reproaching himself in vain; a man, observe, who at *any* time and in *any* circumstances would be unequal to the task assigned to Hamlet. And thus, I must maintain, it degrades Hamlet and travesties the play. For Hamlet, according to all the indications in the text, was not naturally or normally such a man, but rather, I venture to affirm, a man who at any *other* time and in any *other* circumstances than those presented would have been perfectly equal to his task; and it is, in fact, the very cruelty of his fate that the crisis of his life comes on him at the one moment when he cannot meet it, and when his highest gifts, instead of helping him, conspire to paralyse him. This aspect of the tragedy the theory quite misses; and it does so because it misconceives the cause of that irresolution which, on the whole, it truly describes. For the cause was not directly or mainly an habitual excess of reflectiveness. The direct cause was a state of mind quite abnormal and induced by special circumstances,—a state of profound melancholy. Now, Hamlet's reflectiveness doubtless played a certain part in the *production* of that melancholy, and was thus one indirect contributory cause of his irresolution. And, again, the melancholy, once established, displayed, as one of its *symptoms*, an excessive reflection on the required deed. But excess of reflection was not, as the theory makes it, the *direct* cause of the irresolution at all; nor was it the *only* indirect cause; and in the Hamlet of the last four Acts it is to be considered rather a symptom of his state than a cause of it.

These assertions may be too brief to be at once clear, but I hope they will presently become so.

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Let us first ask ourselves what we can gather from the play, immediately or by inference, concerning Hamlet as he was just before his father's death. And I begin by observing that the text does not bear out the idea that he was one-sidedly reflective and indisposed to action. Nobody who knew him seems to have noticed this weakness. Nobody regards him as a mere scholar who has 'never formed a resolution or executed a deed.' In a court which certainly would not much admire such a person he is the observed of all observers. Though he has been disappointed of the throne everyone shows him respect; and he is the favourite of the people, who are not given to worship philosophers. Fortinbras, a sufficiently practical man, considered that he was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royally. He has Hamlet borne by four captains 'like a soldier' to his grave; and Ophelia says that Hamlet *was* a soldier. If he was fond of acting, an aesthetic pursuit, he was equally fond of fencing, an athletic one: he practised it assiduously even in his worst days.[39] So far as we can conjecture from what we see of him in those bad days, he must normally have been charmingly frank, courteous and kindly to everyone, of whatever rank, whom he liked or respected, but by no means timid or deferential to others; indeed, one would gather that he was rather the reverse, and also that he was apt to be decided and even imperious if thwarted or interfered with. He must always have been fearless,—in the play he appears insensible to fear of any ordinary kind. And, finally, he must have been quick and impetuous in action; for it is downright impossible that the man we see rushing after the Ghost, killing Polonius, dealing with the King's commission on the ship, boarding the pirate,

[39] He says so to Horatio, whom he has no motive for deceiving (v. ii. 218). His contrary statement (ii. ii. 308) is made to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

leaping into the grave, executing his final vengeance, could *ever* have been shrinking or slow in an emergency. Imagine Coleridge doing any of these things!

If we consider all this, how can we accept the notion that Hamlet's was a weak and one-sided character? 'Oh, but he spent ten or twelve years at a University!' Well, even if he did, it is possible to do that without becoming the victim of excessive thought. But the statement that he did rests upon a most insecure foundation.[40]

Where then are we to look for the seeds of danger?

(1) Trying to reconstruct from the Hamlet of the play, one would not judge that his temperament was melancholy in the present sense of the word; there seems nothing to show that; but one would judge that by temperament he was inclined to nervous instability, to rapid and perhaps extreme changes of feeling and mood, and that he was disposed to be, for the time, absorbed in the feeling or mood that possessed him, whether it were joyous or depressed. This temperament the Elizabethans would have called melancholic; and Hamlet seems to be an example of it, as Lear is of a temperament mixedly choleric and sanguine. And the doctrine of temperaments was so familiar in Shakespeare's time—as Burton, and earlier prose-writers, and many of the dramatists show—that Shakespeare may quite well have given this temperament to Hamlet consciously and deliberately. Of melancholy in its developed form, a habit, not a mere temperament, he often speaks. He more than once laughs at the passing and half-fictitious melancholy of youth and love; in Don John in *Much Ado* he had sketched the sour and surly melancholy of discontent; in Jaques a whimsical self-pleasing melancholy; in Antonio in the *Merchant of Venice* a quiet but deep melancholy, for which neither the victim nor his friends can assign any cause.[41] He gives to Hamlet a temperament which would not develop into melancholy unless under some exceptional strain, but which still involved a danger. In the play we see the danger realised, and find a melancholy quite unlike any that Shakespeare had as yet depicted, because the temperament of Hamlet is quite different.

(2) Next, we cannot be mistaken in attributing to the Hamlet of earlier days an exquisite sensibility, to which we may give the name 'moral,' if that word is taken in the wide meaning it ought to bear. This, though it suffers cruelly in later days, as we saw in criticising the sentimental view of Hamlet, never deserts him; it makes all his cynicism, grossness and hardness appear to us morbidities, and has an inexpressibly attractive and pathetic effect. He had the soul of the youthful poet as Shelley and Tennyson have described it, an unbounded delight and faith in everything good and beautiful. We know this from himself. The world for him was *herrlich wie am ersten Tag*—'this goodly frame the earth, this most excellent canopy the air, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire.' And not nature only: 'What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable! in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god!' This is no commonplace to Hamlet; it is the language of a heart thrilled with wonder and swelling into ecstasy.

Doubtless it was with the same eager enthusiasm he turned to those around him. Where else in Shakespeare is there anything like Hamlet's adoration of his father? The words melt into music whenever he speaks of him. And, if there are no signs of any such feeling towards his mother, though many signs of love, it is characteristic that he evidently never entertained a suspicion of anything unworthy in her,—characteristic, and significant of his tendency to see only what is good unless he is forced to see the reverse. For we find this tendency elsewhere, and find it going so far that we must call it a disposition to idealise, to see something better than what is there, or at least to ignore deficiencies. He says to Laertes, 'I loved you ever,' and he describes Laertes as a 'very noble youth,' which he was far from being. In his first greeting of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, where his old self revives, we

[40] See Note B.

[41] The critics have laboured to find a cause, but it seems to me Shakespeare simply meant to portray a pathological condition; and a very touching picture he draws. Antonio's sadness, which he describes in the opening lines of the play, would never drive him to suicide, but it makes him indifferent to the issue of the trial, as all his speeches in the trial-scene show.

trace the same affectionateness and readiness to take men at their best. His love for Ophelia, too, which seems strange to some, is surely the most natural thing in the world. He saw her innocence, simplicity and sweetness, and it was like him to ask no more; and it is noticeable that Horatio, though entirely worthy of his friendship, is, like Ophelia, intellectually not remarkable. To the very end, however clouded, this generous disposition, this 'free and open nature,' this unsuspiciousness survive. They cost him his life; for the King knew them, and was sure that he was too 'generous and free from all contriving' to 'peruse the foils.' To the very end, his soul, however sick and tortured it may be, answers instantaneously when good and evil are presented to it, loving the one and hating the other. He is called a sceptic who has no firm belief in anything, but he is never sceptical about *them*.

And the negative side of his idealism, the aversion to evil, is perhaps even more developed in the hero of the tragedy than in the Hamlet of earlier days. It is intensely characteristic. Nothing, I believe, is to be found elsewhere in Shakespeare (unless in the rage of the disillusioned idealist Timon) of quite the same kind as Hamlet's disgust at his uncle's drunkenness, his loathing of his mother's sensuality, his astonishment and horror at her shallowness, his contempt for everything pretentious or false, his indifference to everything merely external. This last characteristic appears in his choice of the friend of his heart, and in a certain impatience of distinctions of rank or wealth. When Horatio calls his father 'a goodly king,' he answers, surely with an emphasis on 'man,'

> He was a man, take him for all in all,
> I shall not look upon his like again.

He will not listen to talk of Horatio being his 'servant.' When the others speak of their 'duty' to him, he answers, 'Your love, as mine to you.' He speaks to the actor precisely as he does to an honest courtier. He is not in the least a revolutionary, but still, in effect, a king and a beggar are all one to him. He cares for nothing but human worth, and his pitilessness towards Polonius and Osric and his 'school-fellows' is not wholly due to morbidity, but belongs in part to his original character.

Now, in Hamlet's moral sensibility there undoubtedly lay a danger. Any great shock that life might inflict on it would be felt with extreme intensity. Such a shock might even produce tragic results. And, in fact, *Hamlet* deserves the title 'tragedy of moral idealism' quite as much as the title 'tragedy of reflection.'

(3) With this temperament and this sensibility we find, lastly, in the Hamlet of earlier days, as of later, intellectual genius. It is chiefly this that makes him so different from all those about him, good and bad alike, and hardly less different from most of Shakespeare's other heroes. And this, though on the whole the most important trait in his nature, is also so obvious and so famous that I need not dwell on it at length. But against one prevalent misconception I must say a word of warning. Hamlet's intellectual power is not a specific gift, like a genius for music or mathematics or philosophy. It shows itself, fitfully, in the affairs of life as unusual quickness of perception, great agility in shifting the mental attitude, a striking rapidity and fertility in resource; so that, when his natural belief in others does not make him unwary, Hamlet easily sees through them and masters them, and no one can be much less like the typical helpless dreamer. It shows itself in conversation chiefly in the form of wit or humour; and, alike in conversation and in soliloquy, it shows itself in the form of imagination quite as much as in that of thought in the stricter sense. Further, where it takes the latter shape, as it very often does, it is not philosophic in the technical meaning of the word. There is really nothing in the play to show that Hamlet ever was 'a student of philosophies,' unless it be the famous lines which, comically enough, exhibit this supposed victim of philosophy as its critic:

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,

Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.[42]

His philosophy, if the word is to be used, was, like Shakespeare's own, the immediate product of the wondering and meditating mind; and such thoughts as that celebrated one, 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so,' surely needed no special training to produce them. Or does Portia's remark, 'Nothing is good without respect,' *i.e.*, out of relation, prove that she had studied metaphysics?

Still Hamlet had speculative genius without being a philosopher, just as he had imaginative genius without being a poet. Doubtless in happier days he was a close and constant observer of men and manners, noting his results in those tables which he afterwards snatched from his breast to make in wild irony his last note of all, that one may smile and smile and be a villain. Again and again we remark that passion for generalisation which so occupied him, for instance, in reflections suggested by the King's drunkenness that he quite forgot what it was he was waiting to meet upon the battlements. Doubtless, too, he was always considering things, as Horatio thought, too curiously. There was a necessity in his soul driving him to penetrate below the surface and to question what others took for granted. That fixed habitual look which the world wears for most men did not exist for him. He was for ever unmaking his world and rebuilding it in thought, dissolving what to others were solid facts, and discovering what to others were old truths. There were no old truths for Hamlet. It is for Horatio a thing of course that there's a divinity that shapes our ends, but for Hamlet it is a discovery hardly won. And throughout this kingdom of the mind, where he felt that man, who in action is only like an angel, is in apprehension like a god, he moved (we must imagine) more than content, so that even in his dark days he declares he could be bounded in a nutshell and yet count himself a king of infinite space, were it not that he had bad dreams.

If now we ask whether any special danger lurked *here*, how shall we answer? We must answer, it seems to me, 'Some danger, no doubt, but, granted the ordinary chances of life, not much.' For, in the first place, that idea which so many critics quietly take for granted—the idea that the gift and the habit of meditative and speculative thought tend to produce irresolution in the affairs of life—would be found by no means easy to verify. Can you verify it, for example, in the lives of the philosophers, or again in the lives of men whom you have personally known to be addicted to such speculation? I cannot. Of course, individual peculiarities being set apart, absorption in *any* intellectual interest, together with withdrawal from affairs, may make a man slow and unskilful in affairs; and doubtless, individual peculiarities being again set apart, a mere student is likely to be more at a loss in a sudden and great practical emergency than a soldier or a lawyer. But in all this there is no difference between a physicist, a historian, and a philosopher; and again, slowness, want of skill, and even helplessness are something totally different from the peculiar kind of irresolution that Hamlet shows. The notion that speculative thinking specially tends to produce *this* is really a mere illusion.

In the second place, even if this notion were true, it has appeared that Hamlet did *not* live the life of a mere student, much less of a mere dreamer, and that his nature was by no means simply or even one-sidedly intellectual, but was healthily active. Hence, granted the ordinary chances of life, there would seem to be no great danger in his intellectual tendency and his habit of speculation; and I would go further and say that there was nothing in them, taken alone, to unfit him even for the extraordinary call that was made upon him. In fact, if the message of the Ghost had come to him within a week of his father's death, I see no reason to doubt that he would have acted on it as decisively as Othello himself, though probably after a longer and more anxious deliberation. And therefore the Schlegel-Coleridge view (apart from its descriptive value) seems to me fatally untrue, for it implies

[42] Of course 'your' does not mean Horatio's philosophy in particular. 'Your' is used as the Gravedigger uses it when he says that 'your water is a sore decayer of your … dead body.'

that Hamlet's procrastination was the normal response of an over-speculative nature confronted with a difficult practical problem.

On the other hand, under conditions of a peculiar kind, Hamlet's reflectiveness certainly might prove dangerous to him, and his genius might even (to exaggerate a little) become his doom. Suppose that violent shock to his moral being of which I spoke; and suppose that under this shock, any possible action being denied to him, he began to sink into melancholy; then, no doubt, his imaginative and generalising habit of mind might extend the effects of this shock through his whole being and mental world. And if, the state of melancholy being thus deepened and fixed, a sudden demand for difficult and decisive action in a matter connected with the melancholy arose, this state might well have for one of its symptoms an endless and futile mental dissection of the required deed. And, finally, the futility of this process, and the shame of his delay, would further weaken him and enslave him to his melancholy still more. Thus the speculative habit would be *one* indirect cause of the morbid state which hindered action; and it would also reappear in a degenerate form as one of the *symptoms* of this morbid state.

Now this is what actually happens in the play. Turn to the first words Hamlet utters when he is alone; turn, that is to say, to the place where the author is likely to indicate his meaning most plainly. What do you hear?

> O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!
> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
> Seem to me all the uses of this world!
> Fie on't! ah fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
> That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
> Possess it merely.

Here are a sickness of life, and even a longing for death, so intense that nothing stands between Hamlet and suicide except religious awe. And what has caused them? The rest of the soliloquy so thrusts the answer upon us that it might seem impossible to miss it. It was not his father's death; that doubtless brought deep grief, but mere grief for some one loved and lost does not make a noble spirit loathe the world as a place full only of things rank and gross. It was not the vague suspicion that we know Hamlet felt. Still less was it the loss of the crown; for though the subserviency of the electors might well disgust him, there is not a reference to the subject in the soliloquy, nor any sign elsewhere that it greatly occupied his mind. It was the moral shock of the sudden ghastly disclosure of his mother's true nature, falling on him when his heart was aching with love, and his body doubtless was weakened by sorrow. And it is essential, however disagreeable, to realise the nature of this shock. It matters little here whether Hamlet's age was twenty or thirty: in either case his mother was a matron of mature years. All his life he had believed in her, we may be sure, as such a son would. He had seen her not merely devoted to his father, but hanging on him like a newly-wedded bride, hanging on him

> As if increase of appetite had grown
> By what it fed on.

He had seen her following his body 'like Niobe, all tears.' And then within a month—'O God! a beast would have mourned longer'—she married again, and married Hamlet's uncle, a man utterly

contemptible and loathsome in his eyes; married him in what to Hamlet was incestuous wedlock;[43] married him not for any reason of state, nor even out of old family affection, but in such a way that her son was forced to see in her action not only an astounding shallowness of feeling but an eruption of coarse sensuality, 'rank and gross,'[44] speeding post-haste to its horrible delight. Is it possible to conceive an experience more desolating to a man such as we have seen Hamlet to be; and is its result anything but perfectly natural? It brings bewildered horror, then loathing, then despair of human nature. His whole mind is poisoned. He can never see Ophelia in the same light again: she is a woman, and his mother is a woman: if she mentions the word 'brief' to him, the answer drops from his lips like venom, 'as woman's love.' The last words of the soliloquy, which is *wholly* concerned with this subject, are,

> But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue!

He can do nothing. He must lock in his heart, not any suspicion of his uncle that moves obscurely there, but that horror and loathing; and if his heart ever found relief, it was when those feelings, mingled with the love that never died out in him, poured themselves forth in a flood as he stood in his mother's chamber beside his father's marriage-bed.[45]

If we still wonder, and ask why the effect of this shock should be so tremendous, let us observe that *now* the conditions have arisen under which Hamlet's highest endowments, his moral sensibility and his genius, become his enemies. A nature morally blunter would have felt even so dreadful a revelation less keenly. A slower and more limited and positive mind might not have extended so widely through its world the disgust and disbelief that have entered it. But Hamlet has the imagination which, for evil as well as good, feels and sees all things in one. Thought is the element of his life, and his thought is infected. He cannot prevent himself from probing and lacerating the wound in his soul. One idea, full of peril, holds him fast, and he cries out in agony at it, but is impotent to free himself ('Must I remember?' 'Let me not think on't'). And when, with the fading of his passion, the vividness of this idea abates, it does so only to leave behind a boundless weariness and a sick longing for death.

And this is the time which his fate chooses. In this hour of uttermost weakness, this sinking of his whole being towards annihilation, there comes on him, bursting the bounds of the natural world with a shock of astonishment and terror, the revelation of his mother's adultery and his father's murder, and, with this, the demand on him, in the name of everything dearest and most sacred, to arise and act. And for a moment, though his brain reels and totters,[46] his soul leaps up in passion to answer this demand. But it comes too late. It does but strike home the last rivet in the melancholy which holds him bound.

> The time is out of joint! O cursed spite
> That ever I was born to set it right,—

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[43] This aspect of the matter leaves *us* comparatively unaffected, but Shakespeare evidently means it to be of importance. The Ghost speaks of it twice, and Hamlet thrice (once in his last furious words to the King). If, as we must suppose, the marriage was universally admitted to be incestuous, the corrupt acquiescence of the court and the electors to the crown would naturally have a strong effect on Hamlet's mind.

[44] It is most significant that the metaphor of this soliloquy reappears in Hamlet's adjuration to his mother (iii. iv. 150):Repent what's past; avoid what is to come;And do not spread the compost on the weedsTo make them ranker.

[45] If the reader will now look at the only speech of Hamlet's that precedes the soliloquy, and is more than one line in length—the speech beginning 'Seems, madam! nay, it *is*'—he will understand what, surely, when first we come to it, sounds very strange and almost boastful. It is not, in effect, about Hamlet himself at all; it is about his mother (I do not mean that it is intentionally and consciously so; and still less that she understood it so).

[46] See Note D.

so he mutters within an hour of the moment when he vowed to give his life to the duty of revenge; and the rest of the story exhibits his vain efforts to fulfil this duty, his unconscious self-excuses and unavailing self-reproaches, and the tragic results of his delay.

4

'Melancholy,' I said, not dejection, nor yet insanity. That Hamlet was not far from insanity is very probable. His adoption of the pretence of madness may well have been due in part to fear of the reality; to an instinct of self-preservation, a fore-feeling that the pretence would enable him to give some utterance to the load that pressed on his heart and brain, and a fear that he would be unable altogether to repress such utterance. And if the pathologist calls his state melancholia, and even proceeds to determine its species, I see nothing to object to in that; I am grateful to him for emphasising the fact that Hamlet's melancholy was no mere common depression of spirits; and I have no doubt that many readers of the play would understand it better if they read an account of melancholia in a work on mental diseases. If we like to use the word 'disease' loosely, Hamlet's condition may truly be called diseased. No exertion of will could have dispelled it. Even if he had been able at once to do the bidding of the Ghost he would doubtless have still remained for some time under the cloud. It would be absurdly unjust to call *Hamlet* a study of melancholy, but it contains such a study.

But this melancholy is something very different from insanity, in anything like the usual meaning of that word. No doubt it might develop into insanity. The longing for death might become an irresistible impulse to self-destruction; the disorder of feeling and will might extend to sense and intellect; delusions might arise; and the man might become, as we say, incapable and irresponsible. But Hamlet's melancholy is some way from this condition. It is a totally different thing from the madness which he feigns; and he never, when alone or in company with Horatio alone, exhibits the signs of that madness. Nor is the dramatic use of this melancholy, again, open to the objections which would justly be made to the portrayal of an insanity which brought the hero to a tragic end. The man who suffers as Hamlet suffers—and thousands go about their business suffering thus in greater or less degree—is considered irresponsible neither by other people nor by himself: he is only too keenly conscious of his responsibility. He is therefore, so far, quite capable of being a tragic agent, which an insane person, at any rate according to Shakespeare's practice, is not.[47] And, finally, Hamlet's state is not one which a healthy mind is unable sufficiently to imagine. It is probably not further from average experience, nor more difficult to realise, than the great tragic passions of Othello, Antony or Macbeth.

Let me try to show now, briefly, how much this melancholy accounts for.

It accounts for the main fact, Hamlet's inaction. For the *immediate* cause of that is simply that his habitual feeling is one of disgust at life and everything in it, himself included,—a disgust which varies in intensity, rising at times into a longing for death, sinking often into weary apathy, but is never dispelled for more than brief intervals. Such a state of feeling is inevitably adverse to *any* kind of decided action; the body is inert, the mind indifferent or worse; its response is, 'it does not matter,' 'it is not worth while,' 'it is no good.' And the action required of Hamlet is very exceptional. It is violent, dangerous, difficult to accomplish perfectly, on one side repulsive to a man of honour and sensitive feeling, on another side involved in a certain mystery (here come in thus, in their subordinate place, various causes of inaction assigned by various theories). These obstacles would not suffice to prevent Hamlet from acting, if his state were normal; and against them there operate, even in his morbid state, healthy and positive feelings, love of his father, loathing of his uncle, desire of revenge, desire to do duty. But the retarding motives acquire an unnatural strength because they have an ally in something far stronger than themselves, the melancholic disgust and apathy; while the healthy

[47] See p. 13.

motives, emerging with difficulty from the central mass of diseased feeling, rapidly sink back into it and 'lose the name of action.' We *see* them doing so; and sometimes the process is quite simple, no analytical reflection on the deed intervening between the outburst of passion and the relapse into melancholy.[48] But this melancholy is perfectly consistent also with that incessant dissection of the task assigned, of which the Schlegel-Coleridge theory makes so much. For those endless questions (as we may imagine them), 'Was I deceived by the Ghost? How am I to do the deed? When? Where? What will be the consequence of attempting it—success, my death, utter misunderstanding, mere mischief to the State? Can it be right to do it, or noble to kill a defenceless man? What is the good of doing it in such a world as this?'—all this, and whatever else passed in a sickening round through Hamlet's mind, was not the healthy and right deliberation of a man with such a task, but otiose thinking hardly deserving the name of thought, an unconscious weaving of pretexts for inaction, aimless tossings on a sick bed, symptoms of melancholy which only increased it by deepening self-contempt.

Again, (*a*) this state accounts for Hamlet's energy as well as for his lassitude, those quick decided actions of his being the outcome of a nature normally far from passive, now suddenly stimulated, and producing healthy impulses which work themselves out before they have time to subside. (*b*) It accounts for the evidently keen satisfaction which some of these actions give to him. He arranges the play-scene with lively interest, and exults in its success, not really because it brings him nearer to his goal, but partly because it has hurt his enemy and partly because it has demonstrated his own skill (iii. ii. 286-304). He looks forward almost with glee to countermining the King's designs in sending him away (iii. iv. 209), and looks back with obvious satisfaction, even with pride, to the address and vigour he displayed on the voyage (v. ii. 1-55). These were not *the* action on which his morbid self-feeling had centred; he feels in them his old force, and escapes in them from his disgust. (*c*) It accounts for the pleasure with which he meets old acquaintances, like his 'school-fellows' or the actors. The former observed (and we can observe) in him a 'kind of joy' at first, though it is followed by 'much forcing of his disposition' as he attempts to keep this joy and his courtesy alive in spite of the misery which so soon returns upon him and the suspicion he is forced to feel. (*d*) It accounts no less for the painful features of his character as seen in the play, his almost savage irritability on the one hand, and on the other his self-absorption, his callousness, his insensibility to the fates of those whom he despises, and to the feelings even of those whom he loves. These are frequent symptoms of such melancholy, and (*e*) they sometimes alternate, as they do in Hamlet, with bursts of transitory, almost hysterical, and quite fruitless emotion. It is to these last (of which a part of the soliloquy, 'O what a rogue,' gives a good example) that Hamlet alludes when, to the Ghost, he speaks of himself as 'lapsed in *passion*,' and it is doubtless partly his conscious weakness in regard to them that inspires his praise of Horatio as a man who is not 'passion's slave.'[49]

Finally, Hamlet's melancholy accounts for two things which seem to be explained by nothing else. The first of these is his apathy or 'lethargy.' We are bound to consider the evidence which the text supplies of this, though it is usual to ignore it. When Hamlet mentions, as one possible cause of his inaction, his 'thinking too precisely on the event,' he mentions another, 'bestial oblivion'; and the thing against which he inveighs in the greater part of that soliloquy (iv. iv.) is not the excess or the misuse of reason (which for him here and always is god-like), but this *bestial* oblivion or '*dullness*,' this 'letting all *sleep*,' this allowing of heaven-sent reason to 'fust unused':

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[48] *E.g.* in the transition, referred to above, from desire for vengeance into the wish never to have been born; in the soliloquy, 'O what a rogue'; in the scene at Ophelia's grave. The Schlegel-Coleridge theory does not account for the psychological movement in these passages.

[49] Hamlet's violence at Ophelia's grave, though probably intentionally exaggerated, is another example of this want of self-control. The Queen's description of him (v. i. 307),This is mere madness;And thus awhile the fit will work on him;Anon, as patient as the female dove,When that her golden couplets are disclosed,His silence will sit drooping.may be true to life, though it is evidently prompted by anxiety to excuse his violence on the ground of his insanity. On this passage see further Note G.

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to *sleep* and feed? a *beast*, no more.[50]

So, in the soliloquy in ii. ii. he accuses himself of being 'a *dull* and muddy-mettled rascal,' who 'peaks [mopes] like John-a-dreams, unpregnant of his cause,' dully indifferent to his cause.[51] So, when the Ghost appears to him the second time, he accuses himself of being tardy and lapsed in *time*; and the Ghost speaks of his purpose being almost *blunted*, and bids him not to *forget* (cf. 'oblivion'). And so, what is emphasised in those undramatic but significant speeches of the player-king and of Claudius is the mere dying away of purpose or of love.[52] Surely what all this points to is not a condition of excessive but useless mental activity (indeed there is, in reality, curiously little about that in the text), but rather one of dull, apathetic, brooding gloom, in which Hamlet, so far from analysing his duty, is not thinking of it at all, but for the time literally *forgets* it. It seems to me we are driven to think of Hamlet *chiefly* thus during the long time which elapsed between the appearance of the Ghost and the events presented in the Second Act. The Ghost, in fact, had more reason than we suppose at first for leaving with Hamlet as his parting injunction the command, 'Remember me,' and for greeting him, on re-appearing, with the command, 'Do not forget.'[53] These little things in Shakespeare are not accidents.

The second trait which is fully explained only by Hamlet's melancholy is his own inability to understand why he delays. This emerges in a marked degree when an occasion like the player's emotion or the sight of Fortinbras's army stings Hamlet into shame at his inaction. '*Why*,' he asks himself in genuine bewilderment, 'do I linger? Can the cause be cowardice? Can it be sloth? Can it be thinking too precisely of the event? And does *that* again mean cowardice? What is it that makes me sit idle when I feel it is shameful to do so, and when I have *cause, and will, and strength, and means*, to act?' A man irresolute merely because he was considering a proposed action too minutely would not feel this bewilderment. A man might feel it whose conscience secretly condemned the act which his explicit consciousness approved; but we have seen that there is no sufficient evidence to justify us in conceiving Hamlet thus. These are the questions of a man stimulated for the moment to shake off the weight of his melancholy, and, because for the moment he is free from it, unable to understand the paralysing pressure which it exerts at other times.

I have dwelt thus at length on Hamlet's melancholy because, from the psychological point of view, it is the centre of the tragedy, and to omit it from consideration or to underrate its intensity is to make Shakespeare's story unintelligible. But the psychological point of view is not equivalent to the tragic; and, having once given its due weight to the fact of Hamlet's melancholy, we may freely admit, or rather may be anxious to insist, that this pathological condition would excite but little, if any, tragic interest if it were not the condition of a nature distinguished by that speculative genius on which the Schlegel-Coleridge type of theory lays stress. Such theories misinterpret the connection between that genius and Hamlet's failure, but still it is this connection which gives to his story its peculiar fascination and makes it appear (if the phrase may be allowed) as the symbol of a tragic mystery inherent in human nature. Wherever this mystery touches us, wherever we are forced to feel the wonder and awe of man's godlike 'apprehension' and his 'thoughts that wander through eternity,' and at the same time are forced to see him powerless in his petty sphere of action, and powerless (it would appear) from the very divinity of his thought, we remember Hamlet. And this is the reason why, in the great ideal movement which began towards the close of the eighteenth century, this tragedy

[50] Throughout, I italicise to show the connection of ideas.

[51] Cf. *Measure for Measure*, iv. iv. 23, 'This deed … makes me unpregnant and dull to all proceedings.'

[52] iii. ii. 196 ff., iv. vii. 111 ff.: *e.g.*,Purpose is but the slave to memory,Of violent birth but poor validity.

[53] So, before, he had said to him:And duller should'st thou be than the fat weedThat roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf,Would'st thou not stir in this.On Hamlet's soliloquy after the Ghost's disappearance see Note D.

acquired a position unique among Shakespeare's dramas, and shared only by Goethe's *Faust*. It was not that *Hamlet* is Shakespeare's greatest tragedy or most perfect work of art; it was that *Hamlet* most brings home to us at once the sense of the soul's infinity, and the sense of the doom which not only circumscribes that infinity but appears to be its offspring.

LECTURE IV

HAMLET

The only way, if there is any way, in which a conception of Hamlet's character could be proved true, would be to show that it, and it alone, explains all the relevant facts presented by the text of the drama. To attempt such a demonstration here would obviously be impossible, even if I felt certain of the interpretation of all the facts. But I propose now to follow rapidly the course of the action in so far as it specially illustrates the character, reserving for separate consideration one important but particularly doubtful point.

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We left Hamlet, at the close of the First Act, when he had just received his charge from the spirit of his father; and his condition was vividly depicted in the fact that, within an hour of receiving this charge, he had relapsed into that weariness of life or longing for death which is the immediate cause of his later inaction. When next we meet him, at the opening of the Second Act, a considerable time has elapsed, apparently as much as two months.[54] The ambassadors sent to the King of Norway (i. ii. 27) are just returning. Laertes, whom we saw leaving Elsinore (i. iii.), has been in Paris long enough to be in want of fresh supplies. Ophelia has obeyed her father's command (given in i. iii.), and has refused to receive Hamlet's visits or letters. What has Hamlet done? He has put on an 'antic disposition' and established a reputation for lunacy, with the result that his mother has become deeply anxious about him, and with the further result that the King, who was formerly so entirely at ease regarding him that he wished him to stay on at Court, is now extremely uneasy and very desirous to discover the cause of his 'transformation.' Hence Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have been sent for, to cheer him by their company and to worm his secret out of him; and they are just about to arrive. Beyond exciting thus the apprehensions of his enemy Hamlet has done absolutely nothing; and, as we have seen, we must imagine him during this long period sunk for the most part in 'bestial oblivion' or fruitless broodings, and falling deeper and deeper into the slough of despond.

Now he takes a further step. He suddenly appears unannounced in Ophelia's chamber; and his appearance and behaviour are such as to suggest both to Ophelia and to her father that his brain is turned by disappointment in love. How far this step was due to the design of creating a false impression as to the origin of his lunacy, how far to other causes, is a difficult question; but such a design seems certainly present. It succeeds, however, only in part; for, although Polonius is fully convinced, the King is not so, and it is therefore arranged that the two shall secretly witness a meeting between Ophelia and Hamlet. Meanwhile Rosencrantz and Guildenstern arrive, and at the King's request begin their attempts, easily foiled by Hamlet, to pluck out the heart of his mystery. Then the players come to Court, and for a little while one of Hamlet's old interests revives, and he is almost happy. But only for a little while. The emotion shown by the player in reciting the speech which tells of Hecuba's grief for her slaughtered husband awakes into burning life the slumbering sense of duty and shame. He must act. With the extreme rapidity which always distinguishes him in his healthier moments, he conceives and arranges the plan of having the 'Murder of Gonzago' played before the King and Queen, with the addition of a speech written by himself for the occasion. Then, longing to

[54] In the First Act (i. ii. 138) Hamlet says that his father has been dead not quite two months. In the Third Act (iii. ii. 135) Ophelia says King Hamlet has been dead 'twice two months.' The events of the Third Act are separated from those of the Second by one night (ii. ii. 565).

be alone, he abruptly dismisses his guests, and pours out a passion of self-reproach for his delay, asks himself in bewilderment what can be its cause, lashes himself into a fury of hatred against his foe, checks himself in disgust at his futile emotion, and quiets his conscience for the moment by trying to convince himself that he has doubts about the Ghost, and by assuring himself that, if the King's behaviour at the play-scene shows but a sign of guilt, he 'knows his course.'

Nothing, surely, can be clearer than the meaning of this famous soliloquy. The doubt which appears at its close, instead of being the natural conclusion of the preceding thoughts, is totally inconsistent with them. For Hamlet's self-reproaches, his curses on his enemy, and his perplexity about his own inaction, one and all imply his faith in the identity and truthfulness of the Ghost. Evidently this sudden doubt, of which there has not been the slightest trace before, is no genuine doubt; it is an unconscious fiction, an excuse for his delay—and for its continuance.

A night passes, and the day that follows it brings the crisis. First takes place that interview from which the King is to learn whether disappointed love is really the cause of his nephew's lunacy. Hamlet is sent for; poor Ophelia is told to walk up and down, reading her prayer-book; Polonius and the King conceal themselves behind the arras. And Hamlet enters, so deeply absorbed in thought that for some time he supposes himself to be alone. What is he thinking of? 'The Murder of Gonzago,' which is to be played in a few hours, and on which everything depends? Not at all. He is meditating on suicide; and he finds that what stands in the way of it, and counterbalances its infinite attraction, is not any thought of a sacred unaccomplished duty, but the doubt, quite irrelevant to that issue, whether it is not ignoble in the mind to end its misery, and, still more, whether death *would* end it. Hamlet, that is to say, is here, in effect, precisely where he was at the time of his first soliloquy ('O that this too too solid flesh would melt') two months ago, before ever he heard of his father's murder.[55] His reflections have no reference to this particular moment; they represent that habitual weariness of life with which his passing outbursts of emotion or energy are contrasted. What can be more significant than the fact that he is sunk in these reflections on the very day which is to determine for him the truthfulness of the Ghost? And how is it possible for us to hope that, if that truthfulness should be established, Hamlet will be any nearer to his revenge?[56]

His interview with Ophelia follows; and its result shows that his delay is becoming most dangerous to himself. The King is satisfied that, whatever else may be the hidden cause of Hamlet's madness, it is not love. He is by no means certain even that Hamlet is mad at all. He has heard that infuriated threat, 'I say, we will have no more marriages; those that are married, all but one, shall live; the rest shall keep as they are.' He is thoroughly alarmed. He at any rate will not delay. On the spot he determines to send Hamlet to England. But, as Polonius is present, we do not learn at once the meaning of this purpose.

Evening comes. The approach of the play-scene raises Hamlet's spirits. He is in his element. He feels that he is doing *something* towards his end, striking a stroke, but a stroke of intellect. In his instructions to the actor on the delivery of the inserted speech, and again in his conversation with Horatio just before the entry of the Court, we see the true Hamlet, the Hamlet of the days before his father's death. But how characteristic it is that he appears quite as anxious that his speech should not be ranted as that Horatio should observe its effect upon the King! This trait appears again even at that thrilling moment when the actor is just going to deliver the speech. Hamlet sees him beginning

[55] The only difference is that in the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy there is no reference to the idea that suicide is forbidden by 'the Everlasting.' Even this, however, seems to have been present in the original form of the speech, for the version in the First Quarto has a line about our being 'borne before an everlasting Judge.'

[56] The present position of the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, and of the interview with Ophelia, appears to have been due to an after-thought of Shakespeare's; for in the First Quarto they precede, instead of following, the arrival of the players, and consequently the arrangement for the play-scene. This is a notable instance of the truth that 'inspiration' is by no means confined to a poet's first conceptions.

to frown and glare like the conventional stage-murderer, and calls to him impatiently, 'Leave thy damnable faces and begin!'[57]

Hamlet's device proves a triumph far more complete than he had dared to expect. He had thought the King might 'blench,' but he does much more. When only six of the 'dozen or sixteen lines' have been spoken he starts to his feet and rushes from the hall, followed by the whole dismayed Court. In the elation of success—an elation at first almost hysterical—Hamlet treats Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are sent to him, with undisguised contempt. Left to himself, he declares that now he could

> drink hot blood,
> And do such bitter business as the day
> Would quake to look on.

He has been sent for by his mother, and is going to her chamber; and so vehement and revengeful is his mood that he actually fancies himself in danger of using daggers to her as well as speaking them.[58]

In this mood, on his way to his mother's chamber, he comes upon the King, alone, kneeling, conscience-stricken and attempting to pray. His enemy is delivered into his hands.

> Now might I do it pat, now he is praying:
> And now I'll do it: and so he goes to heaven:
> And so am I revenged.[59] That would be scanned.

He scans it; and the sword that he drew at the words, 'And now I'll do it,' is thrust back into its sheath. If he killed the villain now he would send his soul to heaven; and he would fain kill soul as well as body.

That this again is an unconscious excuse for delay is now pretty generally agreed, and it is needless to describe again the state of mind which, on the view explained in our last lecture, is the real cause of Hamlet's failure here. The first five words he utters, 'Now might I do it,' show that he has no effective *desire* to 'do it'; and in the little sentences that follow, and the long pauses between them, the endeavour at a resolution, and the sickening return of melancholic paralysis, however difficult a task they set to the actor, are plain enough to a reader. And any reader who may retain a doubt should observe the fact that, when the Ghost reappears, Hamlet does not think of justifying his delay by the plea that he was waiting for a more perfect vengeance. But in one point the great majority of critics, I think, go astray. The feeling of intense hatred which Hamlet expresses is not the cause of his sparing the King, and in his heart he knows this; but it does not at all follow that this feeling is unreal. All the evidence afforded by the play goes to show that it is perfectly genuine, and I see no reason whatever to doubt that Hamlet would have been very sorry to send his father's murderer to heaven, nor much to doubt that he would have been glad to send him to perdition. The reason for refusing to accept his own version of his motive in sparing Claudius is not that his sentiments are horrible, but that elsewhere, and also in the opening of his speech here, we can see that his reluctance to act is due to other causes.

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[57] Cf. again the scene at Ophelia's grave, where a strong strain of aesthetic disgust is traceable in Hamlet's 'towering passion' with Laertes: 'Nay, an thou'lt mouth, I'll rant as well as thou' (v. i. 306).

[58] O heart, lose not thy nature; let not everThe soul of Nero enter this firm bosom:Nero, who put to death his mother who had poisoned her husband. This passage is surely remarkable. And so are the later words (iii. iv. 28):A bloody deed! almost as bad, good mother,As kill a king, and marry with his brother.Are we to understand that at this time he really suspected her of complicity in the murder? We must remember that the Ghost had not told him she was innocent of that.

[59] I am inclined to think that the note of interrogation put after 'revenged' in a late Quarto is right.

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