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AND FALL IN SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC ART

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DRAMATIC ART

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## RISE AND FALL IN SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATIC ART

### I

THE presumptuous foreigner, attempting to speak of Shakespeare's art to English students, must needs feel somewhat like Ulysses between Scylla and Charybdis. He is in danger either of being admitted to be right enough, but obvious, commonplace, tedious—nay, irrelevant—or of being found interesting, even original, but hopelessly wrong.

I need scarcely say that I prefer Charybdis to Scylla: I had rather be contradicted than ignored, and I shall certainly be happy to stand corrected, particularly in the matter of Shakespearian chronology, with which I may occasionally seem to be playing havoc. All I can plead in extenuation of my dealings with it, is a conviction that Shakespeare's plays, like the works of similarly productive modern masters, must have originated in his mind, and may to some extent even have been actually produced by his pen, in groups of more than one at a time—that, in a word, Shakespeare, at different points of his career, may have had two (or more) 'irons in the fire' simultaneously.

Another important reservation which must be made before I come to my proper task, concerns that wildly debated subject, the Shakespearian canon. Here I cannot possibly hope to be in agreement with a great many of my English readers. Of recent years there has been a movement towards what even a sympathetic critic described as the 'disintegration of Shakespeare,' and what is perhaps more strictly defined as a strenuous segregation of an apparently large mass of non-Shakespearian

matter in the plays from an apparently small kernel of Shakespearian work with the true golden ring of Shakespeare's poetry in it. Now the author of this paper happens to have received his early Shakespearian training under the influence of a great continental scholar, Professor W. Creizenach, the author of *Geschichte des Neueren Dramas*, the fifth volume of which (the last one the author lived to publish) carries the history of Elizabethan drama down to the end of Shakespeare's career (published 1916). Professor Creizenach, like many scholars outside England, did not think Shakespeare infallible as a poet, as some of his more fervent English admirers seem apt to do. I must freely admit that I, likewise, think it by no means unworthy of the genius of Shakespeare that he should—like so many other great modern poets of whom we know this for certain—have occasionally imitated the style of other writers, particularly at the beginning of his career.

Thus, while far from the exaggeration of German romantics, who foisted a large mass of notorious Apocrypha on Shakespeare, I confess myself content to rank with those who have recently been ridiculed as declaring: 'The Folio is good enough for me, thank you.' I certainly believe that Shakespeare had a hand in all the thirty-six plays of the First Folio, as well as in *Pericles*. So far there would seem to be little scope for sharp disagreement; it is only when we come to the 'how much' or 'how little' that greater differences arise. Nobody could deny that in the Shakespearian plays as we have them, there is residue, or dross, from older dramas worked upon by the poet. But, on the other hand, some weaknesses of the early plays at least can be interpreted as being due to the unsteady hand of a novice rather than to that of another author. Thus, some of the poor stuff of *Henry VI* might possibly be put down to the desire of a young author to emulate the popularity of Peele as a chronicle-history writer

rather than to the authorship of Peele himself. It is likewise possible to see imitation of the blood-and-thunder style of Kyd in *Titus Andronicus* and more successful imitation of the courtly wit of Lyly in *Love's Labour's Lost*. The star of Marlowe distinctly shines over two plays, *Richard III* and *Richard II*—and it has not quite ceased to fascinate the writer of two others, *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*. Nobody has dreamed of ascribing the two later plays to Marlowe: need we necessarily go to the length of believing any of the two former ones to be entirely, or mainly, by him?

And to pass from the beginning to the end of the poet's career: might not the noticeable changes in the tone, and even in the versification of some of the last plays in the Canon be considered as due to the weakening of Shakespeare's own hand with advancing years; may not the ageing man have yielded to the fascinating *stil nuovo* of fresh and successful younger writers like Fletcher? Did not Goethe, in a similar way, in his later age, come for a time under the spell of his younger contemporaries of the Romantic School?

Finally, as to the middle and height of Shakespeare's work, inconsistencies and puzzling brokenness in such plays of middle date as *Troilus* or *Timon* might be partly accounted for by temporary breakdown of Shakespeare's creative power under the strain of his greatest work, or to the peculiar conditions of the moment at which the plays were taken in hand by him.

The mention of fatigue as a factor to be reckoned with, brings me to my principal argument.

When engaged, about 1912, in the preparation of my Polish edition of Shakespeare, I once had the privilege to discuss Shakespearian problems with a distinguished English scholar, and happening to mention the traditional 'four periods' of Dowden's scheme of Shakespeare's development, I was met by the words: 'Oh! I am tired of those four periods.' This casual

remark suggested the endeavour to form a view of Shakespeare's poetic career which would embrace the whole of it under an aspect of stricter unity.

Such a view, in a sense, exists. Broadly speaking, we all certainly conceive the total of Shakespeare's work as a wave slowly mounting and growing in might, filling the ear with a world of varied music at its majestic height, and then grandly ebbing away, 'too full for sound and foam.' But this widest generalisation cannot give satisfaction to the more zealous student, enamoured as he is of the 'infinite variety' of Shakespeare's achievements. It is not as *a* wave, but as waves that he will be apt to see the work of the poet. He will notice rise and fall more than once in its course: he will be led to think of it in terms of an alternation of success and failure, of effort and exhaustion, of stress and pause.

This may be objected to at the very outset as an endeavour to 'make patterns' of a poet's career in a spirit of rigid determinism or doctrinaire mania for regularity. But it should be remembered that such an interpretation of any man's work in any field has a solid basis in a law of nature: even great geniuses, the most self-willed of all our self-willed race, are subject, as common mortals are, to the law of fatigue. Work and rest alternate in man's life as necessarily as day and night follow each other in the life of the earth. And work undertaken *invitâ Minervâ*, in a time fit for rest after a great effort, means temporary failure.

In his masterly study of the great tragedies, Professor A. C. Bradley observed a regular succession of great and insignificant scenes within each play—implying almost conscious relaxation after effort, like the succession of accented and unaccented syllables in human speech, which was noticed as an elementary rhythmical necessity by Professor Otto Jespersen. Professor Bradley furthermore observed, as a common feature of the four

great tragedies, a drag in the fourth act of each after the culminating dramatic effects of the third. This is usually masked by some lyrical or other *intermezzo*, or marked by absence of the hero from the stage: Ophelia's madness fills the gap in *Hamlet*, the Rodrigo incident in *Othello*, the Macduff episode in *Macbeth*, the Gloucester scenes in *Lear*.

It was tempting to extend this observation to plays considered in their entirety, and to their grouping. If we could succeed in establishing rise and fall as the rhythm of Shakespeare's whole poetic career, we might hope, in doing so, to catch the very pulsation of his creative mind, the throbs and pauses of the life-blood of his art.

## II

SUCH an attempt is made here. It must of necessity take the form of a cursory survey of Shakespeare's entire course of poetical production.

From the evolutionary point of view adopted in this survey, Shakespeare's poetical production very naturally begins on the low level of youthful incompetence. The fairly smooth if uniform versification of that Senecan school-exercise in tragic drama, *Titus Andronicus*, and of that Plautine school-exercise in comedy, the *Comedy of Errors*, in both cases shows a literary beginner's determined seriousness. There are flickerings of a great flame rising in the humanised villainy of Aaron the Moor, and in the indomitable imperiousness of the crimeful Scythian Queen; similarly, some of the speeches, especially in the women's scenes, of the *Errors*, presage the sweet intoxication of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

These literary exercises may have been followed, for relief, by Shakespeare's most primitively boisterous farce, *The Taming of the Shrew*, that most unsophisticated practical joke of his dramatic career. In a summary, physical way the young poet here did away light-

heartedly with woman's free-will: it may be argued that he afterwards wittily chastised his own earlier self in this matter by eloquent pleading on behalf of women as an indispensable factor of social harmony in *Love's Labour's Lost* (iv, 3).

After his earlier effort in boisterous comedy Shakespeare may well have seen the necessity, for artistic self-discipline, of undertaking (to use his own words on a similar occasion) some 'graver labour.' Plays from English history being in demand and repute, we next see the young poet struggling with a disorderly mass of military and genealogical record in *Henry VI*. I do not enter into the vexed and difficult problems of joint authorship with regard to the different parts of this play; nor do I dismiss the plausibility of the argument that the 'First Part'—the weakest of all—was an after-thought, resulting in mere patchwork. Whatever may have been the actual chronological succession, nobody can fail to be struck by the marked success in dramatic handling of historical material achieved in the 'Second Part': the firm grouping of the jangling factions at the very outset, the symmetrical distribution of such outstanding events as the death of Duke Humphrey and the catastrophes of his two enemies, Cardinal Beaufort and the Duke of Suffolk, the skilful insertion of anecdotal and folklore stuff (i, 4; ii, 1; ii, 3): all this contrasts very favourably with the panoramic breadth and chaotic profusion of detail in the 'First Part,' and with its greatest blemish—the unsteady and inconsistent treatment of the figure of Joan of Arc—almost as vacillating as the alternative heroic enthusiasm and cynical irony of *Troilus and Cressida*.

The success undoubtedly achieved in dramatic skill in the 'Second Part' of *Henry VI* is accentuated by another early victory in the field of comedy. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* rises above the other comedies of the earliest group: it contains, in fact, all the elements

of good Shakespearian comedy deposited side by side, if in a crude and unamalgamated state only : there is enough of romantic plot, witty dialogue, and amusing if irrelevant fooling here to make the play serve as a storehouse for repeated use in several future comedies, after Shakespeare's frequent custom of unscrupulously repeating lucky hits and perfecting them in the repetition. And coming splendours of Shakespeare's comic poetry cast their light before, in *The Two Gentlemen*, in such flashes as this, a fit *motto* indeed for all Shakespeare's early comedy :—

O, how this spring of love resembleth  
The uncertain glory of an April day!  
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,  
And by and by a cloud takes all away ! (i, 3.)

### III

SUCH was the first undoubted *rise* of Shakespeare's talent. It was immediately followed by as evident *decline*, due, it is true, to a sort of *vis maior* this time.

The Third Part of *Henry VI* is concerned with material more repugnant to effective dramatic treatment than almost anything that Shakespeare ever touched. He had to wind his way through a kaleidoscopic series of Yorkist and Lancastrian victories and defeats, in order to come to *Richard III*, and we see him struggling, with a sort of dreary disgust, through unmanageable and embarrassing matter, perhaps largely the work of other hands, with his eyes fixed on 'the valiant crook-backed prodigy': his coming hero steps forward several times out of the frame of the play to tell us what metal he is made of.

Here, then, temporary collapse of dramatic power was the unavoidable preparation for the pinnacle of early strength which we find reached in that perfect embodiment of Machiavellianism as conceived by the Elizabethans—the tragedy of *Richard III*. Under the

fascination of Marlowe's plays, with their strong light centred on the towering, isolated figures of Titanic heroes, Shakespeare has now realised that limitation of artistic ambitions to a circumscribed theme is a surer way to success than the folklore vagaries and crowded stage of chronicle histories in the manner of Peele. Marlowe, a typical child of the Renaissance, was full of enthusiasm for the conception of a great man's power over others, overriding all barriers of law or dogma, and he had illustrated this, in his best work, by three strictly defined examples of power: by conquest (in *Tamburlaine*), by knowledge (in *Faustus*), and by riches (in *The Jew*). Shakespeare, following him, inspires the grandiose superiority of intellect and will in his hunchback with the same one pervading ideal of his aristocratic world, 'the sweet fruition of an earthly crown.' The recourse to conscious limitation in order to concentrate scattered strength, as illustrated by the solidity of *Richard III* after the diffuseness of *Henry VI*, becomes a favourite device of Shakespeare's: he repeats it, as we shall see, at several critical points of his career. But once again only did he write a play so whole-heartedly centred round one dominating figure as *Richard III*. *Coriolanus*, far away towards the other end of Shakespeare's course, with its pointed moral that even the greatest of us must bow to public opinion, gives occasion to measure, by comparison, the leagues and leagues of advance in moral judgment which Shakespeare travelled in life from his youthful drunkenness with the Renaissance ideal of Titanic delight in unbounded power over men.

Drunk, indeed, with power the poet himself seems at the time—with the power he has gained over his audience—in that most glittering and playfully spontaneous of his first group of comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost*. With the triumphant sense of attained security which it radiates in the form we have it in, it may well have come after such a solid achievement as *Richard III*.

In the easy-flowing harangues of Biron, who is so sure of superiority in worldly wisdom over his fellows, we seem to catch the poet's own voice, rejoicing in the possession of some knowledge of life, and in the sweetness of that knowledge as it tastes to most rising young men on the threshold of thirty.

Having drawn breath in such voluptuous fashion over early successes, the poet seems to have sunk to unproductiveness and uncertainty of touch once more about this time. And again, as in the Third Part of *Henry VI*, the fall may perhaps partly have been the work of external pressure. The closing of London theatres because of the plague, by severing for some time Shakespeare's contact with his dramatic workshop, may have deprived him of an assurance too freshly won to be constant in grasp.

In this season of his youth, Shakespeare is commonly supposed to have turned aside, for the first and last time, to production in *epic and lyric forms*. Here again the necessity of decline after a rise asserts itself palpably in the transition from the sensuous buoyancy of *Venus and Adonis* to the tedium of description, sentiment, and long-spun-out reflexion in *Lucrece*. Likewise, within the whole range of the *Sonnets*, that seem to accompany the poet through many a further year, we see the breath of inspiration coming and going: gems of imagination and feeling dwell side by side with unbearable conceits, and hardly ever is a genuine ring maintained through several sonnets in succession.

Returning—with the poet himself—to the sphere of drama, we find Shakespeare, after that pause in play-writing practice, perhaps at the lowest depth of workmanship in his whole career, in the attempt to open up another epoch of history in *King John*. The experience in grouping figures and arranging events, as displayed in the Second Part of *Henry VI*, has apparently slipped from him. The noble, simple figure of the bastard

Faulconbridge is indeed a prelude to the patriotic notes of *Henry V*, but a comparatively inarticulate prelude only. The Prince Arthur scenes—justly admired by Goethe—are indeed a pathetic, but a strikingly isolated episode. At the same time the bane of affected and pathetic style has beset the poet more heavily than it ever did, even in *Henry VI*: it mars such a powerful scene as the curses of Queen Constance upon the Monarchs.

And from this *nadir* of old-fashioned ‘chronicle history,’ Shakespeare soars at once—if our chronology be correct at this dangerous point—to the highest height of his poetic prime in the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Unique of its kind in the whole range of Shakespeare’s work for sheer beauty of imagination and melody, this dramatic poem is also unique for the originality of its varied, fantastic stuff among the works of a poet not generally distinguished by inventiveness.

*Romeo and Juliet* shares with the *Dream* the glory of presenting, in triumphant embodiment, all that is most worth living—and dying—for in ‘the kingly state of youth.’ As an apotheosis of love, and love only, the Veronese tragedy marks a return to Shakespeare’s frequent device of limitation of theme for power of effect; compared with the rich, manifold and frail texture of the *Dream* it certainly attains in that sense its own peculiar excellences of depth and unity. Yet in this very concentration it bears the stamp of more conscious effort and less divine spontaneity. This is manifested by way of contrast to the originality of the *Dream*, in the large dependence of this work on a definite previous treatment of the story: nay, is not the very essence of the inspiration of this love-tragedy identical with the ‘air and fire’ of Marlowe’s epic love-song ‘*Hero and Leander*’?

Further, it may be pointed out that *Romeo and Juliet* fairly swarms in its early acts with, and is by no means free in its later ones from, affectations of style in the

vein of *Henry VI* and *King John*: the *Dream* keeps much more consistently clear of such weaknesses in the rapture of its lyric verse. This blemish of style, counterbalancing the grandiose solidity of theme, might be claimed as a new indication of lessening power.

## IV

HOWEVER, we now enter on a period of the poet's work in which it would seem less possible than anywhere else to trace an alternation of rise and fall. The difference between the *Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Richard II* and *The Merchant of Venice*—their probable next-door neighbours—is one between the 'fine frenzy' of the crowning hour of youth and the mellow and serene sunshine of early manhood—between possession with the spirit of poetry and conscious domination of the poet's mind over his material: it would be scarcely admissible, even if the chronological succession was clear, to speak of decline here. It is barely arguable that *Richard II* bears traces of it by its lapses into affected diction in its sometimes monotonous elegiacs, and rising as it does above its model, Marlowe's *Edward II*, it still no doubt remains one of Shakespeare's least original conceptions.

Similarly, and more highly, Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* certainly rises above the crude elements that lay ready for the figure in that most monstrous birth of Marlowe's seething brain—the rich Jew of Malta. It seems more presumptuous than ever to detect signs of fatigue in the wondrous fabric of this play: yet the somewhat shiftless treatment of its interwoven plots may appear as a point of 'least resistance,' where weariness crept into the work. Shakespeare never cared much for 'plotting' or invention. Here he draws freely, for the first time, on his own early repertory of comic motifs—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. We shall find him again and again looking back fondly from the

heights of his mature work on 'the unsunn'd freshness of his strength,' and, surely, a man is most apt to do so at such stages of his onward journey as have an element of rest, of the breathing-while, in them.

As little resistance as is offered here to Shakespeare's familiar impulse of repeating himself, is offered to another tendency equally frequent with him: that of elaborating, beyond the limits of symmetry, such figures as fascinate him by their possibilities of purely human greatness and universality.

This structural fault—a *felix culpa*, indeed, in its monumental result—is indulged in twice in succession at this point of Shakespeare's career. Shylock, in growing under the poet's hands into the grandest type of Jew in modern literature, outgrows his proper place and function in the play. Falstaff in *King Henry the Fourth* does more: being 'not only witty himself, but the cause that wit is in other men,' he became perhaps the *spiritus movens* for his own author, too, making him write a Second Part to this play. The poet could not resist the temptation of giving his delighted public five acts more of this laughing philosopher's exploits and elucubrations; and in determining to do so, he involuntarily slips into largely repeating the whole frame of Part First. The First Part, with the rise and suppression of the nobles' rebellion, the wild youth of the Prince and his purification in heroic fight, was a finished whole. In the Second Part we are introduced to an aftermath of revolt, we see the Prince once more plunging into his riots and emerging into heroism; once more do we witness a *grande scène* between father and son in the middle of the play, and once more is the merry music of Falstaff the accompaniment to the same serious things. Repetition extends even to that music itself: in substance, and even in place, the Falstaff episodes are analogous to those of the First Part: a practical joke is played upon him in the second act, we see him

mustering recruits later on—he spoke of his soldiers in the First Part (iv. 2)—and we hear him wisely soliloquising on the field of battle towards the end.

Such dealing with a figure once visualized comes near to what Henry James, in a subtle criticism of contemporary 'naturalist' novelists' methods, expressively called 'squeezing the orange.' Shakespeare squeezed his orange for juice which was not in its real nature when he wrote, to command, of a Falstaff in love with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The countryside freshness which this otherwise unfortunate production breathes makes us like to think of it as written in a mood and season of recreation after the strain of the ten greatest acts of historical drama which it was Shakespeare's lot to compose. The relation of the comedy to the two great histories of *Henry IV* would, then, in our scheme of envisaging the poet's work, seem to be essentially the same as that of the *Taming of the Shrew* to more serious early labours, of *The Two Gentlemen* to the Second Part of *Henry VI*, of *Love's Labour's Lost* to *Richard III*, and finally, of *The Winter's Tale* to the graver dramatic romances of Shakespeare's last years.

In *King Henry V* we are on the ascent again, after the holiday trip to Windsor. The canvas of *Henry IV* had been somewhat panoramic and crowded, like that of *Henry VI*: again, as then (and as at many another time in his career), Shakespeare bethinks himself of limitation of aims as a narrow path to victory over exhaustion. He sets himself to show, not the all-round perfect king foreshadowed in Prince Hal, but a portrait of more circumscribed excellence in the sphere of military leadership and conquest, this being the sphere assigned by Fortune for Henry to shine in. Thus the poet produces in *Henry V* the one great war-song in the array of his dramas—his only properly patriotic play, designed to gladden for ever the hearts of his British countrymen rather than of all the world—his

one tribute of poetic worship at the shrine of purely national ideals. Within this narrow range he once more attains perfection, but it is a perfection not quite free from some of the defects of modern nationalist declamation, on which we surfeit in our days, and it is an unusually narrow range for Shakespeare.

Therefore, it is not contrary to the physiology of human effort underlying our present survey of the poet's work, that this almost perfect piece of patriotic pageantry should be followed by a step towards perfectness both higher and broader: we are once more in the golden glare of the sun that shines over privileged and other nations alike, in Shakespeare's ripest and most placidly unmixed comedy *Twelfth Night*. If that old tub of sinful flesh, Sir Toby, smells somewhat strongly of the same sack which Falstaff drank, if Sir Andrew Aguecheek is first cousin to Slender in the thinness of his figure, his mentality, and his affections as a wooer; these are only instances to show how excellent a thing happy repetition may sometimes be. However many devices may be hauled forth for use, in the plot of this play, from the old storehouse of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, we feel throughout, while moving in an atmosphere which unites romance and realism like almost nothing else in Shakespeare, that we are basking in the noonday sun of his comic art. We usually think, indeed, of a miraculous trinity of suns—like those in *Henry VI* (Part III, Act II, Scene 1)—as shining in this noon, and I, for one, am certainly as much dazzled as any admirer of Shakespeare, by the lyric gold that glitters through the shady leaves of the forest of Arden, and by the flashes from Benedick and Beatrice's sword-play of wit. But the point I wish to emphasize here is that the two other suns are no more so free from sun-spots as *Twelfth Night* happily is.

By lingeringly dwelling—in *As You Like It*—on the problematic figure of the sad cynic Jacques—however interesting this may be for studies in human nature, for

conclusions as to the spirit of the epoch, and for mere guesses as to the soul of the author—Shakespeare certainly appears singularly lacking, at such a brilliant moment of his career, in that artistic resolution, to which he has by this time accustomed us in his character-drawing: this curious ambiguity spells exhaustion, as the present writer reads it.

And there are more signs of exhaustion in *Much Ado*. We wade more than knee-deep in repetition here; we meet a coalblack stage villain of the most conventional manufacture, and, above all, we get entangled with unpleasant stuff, unfit for comedy, and hardly manageable dramatically at all in the later acts.

And from this we sink steadily to *All's Well that Ends Well*, boldly defined by Courthope as one of Shakespeare's weakest plays altogether. With a nervous persistence in the choice of subjects unsuited for comic treatment, Shakespeare deliberately turns to a theme closely resembling *Much Ado* in some of its least attractive moments. The hero here is as contemptible as the first lover there, and the 'comic relief' in the emphatically poor fun of Parolles certainly weaker than the very elementary humours of Dogberry and Verges. And if we reach higher upward in our comparisons, to Sir Toby as an off-shot of Falstaff, Parolles, who is another, falls into place as the last and faintest echo of Falstaff's wit in Shakespeare's art. True, the play contains broken bits of various sorts of excellence, even unusual, in their kind, in Shakespeare—the nearly solitary figure of a noble old lady, unique vistas of the poet's social thought in the unexpectedly democratic sentiments of a King of France, and an emancipated woman doctor who transfers us from Shakespeare's age into our own. Yet even this resolute heroine, like the rest of the actors, speaks the most intolerably tortured and convulsively strained rhetoric perhaps ever 'set down' by the pen of Shakespeare.

## V

WITH this decay of Shakespearian comedy we have entered the part of the field which is thickest with the weed of conjecture. There may be something in Mr. Bernard Shaw's witticism that Shakespeare, 'being forced to write popular plays to save his theatre from ruin,' dashed off several comedies, in succession, of the kind that the public liked best, gilding the first of them most fully, and the latter ones more intermittently, with the sunshine of comic and lyric genius, yet working half in contempt all the time, as he seems to indicate in titles like *What you Will*, *As You Like It*, *Much Ado*, or *All's Well that Ends Well*—that, finally, he broke down in attempting to do the thing once too often.

Others have surmised an influx of personal grief, or the impression of painful public events, as making more plausible to our palate the passage from 'cakes and ale, and ginger hot i' the mouth' of *Twelfth Night*, to the 'wormwood' taste of *Hamlet*.

However the sober Shakespearian student may dislike to enter the pathless woods of elaborate biographical guesswork after George Brandes and so many others 'in wandering mazes lost'—yet it cannot be denied that some such hypothesis might help to make humanly intelligible that stupendous rush towards tragic excellence in the very midst of Shakespeare's comic period, which our dazed eyes witness in *Julius Cæsar*. Shakespeare, perhaps really bitten by some 'inward agony' when writing of the melancholy Jacques, may have thought to shuffle off a coil of purely *individual* trouble by intentionally turning towards *social* problems in his art, and seeking for them in the favourite Roman chapters of his well-thumbed Plutarch. And in making the effort, and even trying to grasp too much of Plutarch's riches at once, this first time he draws upon it, he is indeed not whole-hearted enough to produce a solid masterpiece of drama—the play is most puzzlingly

disjointed—but he is interested enough to burst forth into a majestic blaze of noblest public oratory in proudest verse, into a profusion of eternal truths on weakness of heroes and fickleness of crowds, on the tragic illusion of democratic leadership and the sacredness and vanity of revolution.

This strain of creative meditation on the great social issues remains strong enough in the poet's mind to tinge the dynastic drama of *Hamlet* with large-eyed criticism of rottenness in states—perhaps as Shakespeare's keen eye saw it in his own outwardly brilliant Renaissance world. The same social interest gives universality of bearing to the personal ambitions of regicide Macbeth. It makes loyalty to the Venetian Republic the one permanent element in the stormed-tossed soul of Othello, and an element powerful enough for an entire great modern play, Browning's *Luria*, to be evolved from that *motif* alone. The same persistent social interest fixes on abuse of official power as the inspiration of *Measure for Measure*, and it deposits crystals of ripe statesman's wisdom in *Troilus and Cressida*, in such speeches as Ulysses' harangue on 'degree' as the substance of social order (i. 3). This lingering interest—a component perhaps too little regarded in the analysis of Shakespeare's great tragedies—is only absorbed finally in grapple with the innermost *moral* meaning of this human world in *King Lear*.

But the impulse is undeniably weakened long before *King Lear*, in the earlier masterpieces as compared with *Julius Cæsar*, which remains the supreme effort of Shakespeare's social thought.

Choosing Hamlet for his next hero after that Roman Hamlet, Brutus, Shakespeare evidently cannot help becoming personally more deeply enmeshed in the intricacies of the Prince's labouring soul, than he feels to be good for his work. 'Something too much of this,' in Hamlet's mouth, may be an occasional protest of the

poet's own artistic consciousness against the overpowering intensity with which he lived in the Hamlet theme (iii, 2); and Polonius' 'This is too long' is a just criticism of similar hysterics (ii, 2). Shakespeare perhaps was becoming aware at such moments of danger to poetic workmanship in the very humanity of his most commented work.

But the danger of human interest *versus* artistic control grew, even against the poet's will, and the dramatist's objective grasp weakened. Once more technical assurance was lessening through over-strain. *Measure for Measure* has sayings on death and on life which equal Hamlet's profoundest musings. Yet the very fact is significant that 'the best in this kind are but shadows' of the excellences of *Hamlet* and the extravagances of the 'poetic justice'—of which, as 'Q' has justly observed, there is plenty, but which is sublimely humane and drastically crude by incalculable turns—are but the most glaring instance of the strange unequalness of this play.

The author's skill and his firmness of judgment are visibly gliding down the inclined plane in this play, as well as in its neighbour *Troilus and Cressida*, where the wreckage of majesty, and floating fungus of poisonous growths, jostle each other on a sea of dejection. We witness a spectacle of complete corrosion of artistic faculties: paroxysms of hate and disdain for humanity in general, and women in particular, alternate unaccountably with lucid intervals of noble heroic drama. A particularly noticeable symptom of the loss of artistic balance consists in what the late lamented Sir Walter Raleigh justly described as an 'aversion to the fact of sex' in these years of Shakespeare's life. Within the limits of a technical and literary view, which does not attempt biography, we may describe it as a temporary disability of the artist to see sexual relations in the light of beauty. This derangement of the poet's imagination bursts, like a putrid wen, into that flood of filthy

words and fancies which is Thersites. And what is more significant, Shakespeare himself blasphemously parodies here (iv, 2) the parting-scene between his own Romeo and Juliet (iv, 2). The cloacine filth of Thersites' language trickles on, in thinner flow, throughout the speeches and thoughts of Iago in *Othello*, who is infected, and would infect others, with the same inclination to dwell on the physically repulsive aspects of sexuality. Shakespeare himself seems to feel the ebbing remainder of this disposition as a disease of the mind when he weaves into the manifold wanderings of King Lear's thunderstruck brain a wild outbreak of disgust at nasty erotic shapes that irresistibly throng into his blurred mental vision, and make him call for 'an ounce of civet, good apothecary, to sweeten my imagination' (iv, 6). Testimony to the same effect is borne by some of the most feverish and outrageous of Shakespeare's Sonnets in dispraise of his perfidious yet powerful dark mistress; and here again, self-criticism resounds with trumpet tones in the grand 129th Sonnet, that searching, intuitive analysis of the workings of sexual passion.

Noticing the gradual loss of control over his own warring humours in the bitter comedies and in *Troilus*, Shakespeare may be supposed to have once more applied the tried remedy of confinement to a subject of narrow range: and he turned out, in *Othello*, one of the most clear-cut jewels of his art. Restraint as to the number of foreground figures, scarcity of events, and austere effacement of the fascinating political background: all this bears its fruit in reconquered power of sustained poetic flight, and the poet soars into long-forsaken, glowing skies of romance in the declamations of the chivalrous Moor. Width of moral outlook is also on the increase again, though, to begin with, it is manifested only in the highly involved mental physiognomy of Iago, most enigmatic of all villains, and not

in Othello and Desdemona, whose figures are conceived in a vein of noble but almost child-like simplicity, and in a manner too oppressively fatalistic for the freedom of the most perfect art.

It is surely very unsafe to establish differences in level of artistic perfection between the four greatest works of Shakespeare, which usually are thought of as not only singularly solid, but also marvellously equal in their excellence. However, a rise in artistic ambition, at least, seems to be observable from *Othello* to *Macbeth*: in *Macbeth* and his lady, as contrasted with Othello and Desdemona, there is no doubt more subtle and difficult complexity of character-drawing, and in place of the somewhat elementary fatalism of the Venetian tragedy there is greater daring of meditation on the fundamental problem of free-will. And the higher ambition is crowned by the success of masterful adaptation of all this complex psychology and philosophy to the exigencies of a perfect stage-play. Deservedly has *Macbeth* always reigned supreme among Shakespeare's tragedies in the world of the theatre, as his most effectively *dramatic* work, and that not by the opportunities only which it gives to the great modern actress in the part of the heroine.

As undoubtedly, again, does *King Lear* surpass *Macbeth* and the rest by its grandeur, in the sense in which the solar system surpasses the earth. Cosmic comparisons are habitual in speaking of a play where the two world principles of Good and Evil seem bodily at strife in persons of superhuman stature. The unusually crowded stage, the baroque edifice of a story over-rich in incident and detail, the 'varieties of religious experience' expressed in speeches which range from superstitious star-worship to challenge of cruel gods, and on to philosophical nihilism—all this together constitutes *King Lear* the mightiest effort of Shakespeare towards metaphysical synthesis in poetry.

## VI

IT has often been observed that *Lear* leaves us with a deep consciousness of the value and vitality of good, but without the comfort of its ultimate victory. The outward pessimism of this conclusion powerfully striking the audience, its effect may have enticed Shakespeare into next turning up, in his Plutarch, the ultra-pessimist subject of misanthropy in the life of *Timon of Athens*, which had attracted his attention before, as allusions in earlier plays attest (e.g. 'L.L.L.', iv, 3, 170). 'And yet it almost goes against my conscience,' we seem to hear the poet muttering (like one of his villains): the feeling makes him fail, and perhaps even leave the work unfinished, a string of magnificent monologues. Possibly it was the worldly success which spoils, that made him unwary in choice and careless in execution. But more probably nothing uniformly powerful was possible after the huge labour of *Lear*. Most likely, too, here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare's manful nature strenuously revolted against a display of exaggeration and extremism in a picture of daily human relations. His sense of humour would of old have helped him to deal effectively with the absurdity of such discord, but that quality in him was under a cloud for a time, and therefore Molière's *Misanthrope*, whose humour is not lost in that very darkness of personal dejection, remains infinitely superior to *Timon* in playgoers' and readers' universal estimation as the literary type of the man-hater.

From *Lear*, in fact, no way could lead further up to broader outlook on life and more sublime abstraction. Shakespeare must have realized that after the failure of *Timon*, and once more we see him taking to his favourite device of seeking renewed vigour by limiting his subject to one great concern of our mortal existence. For the second time in his life he excels in writing of love, and love only. *Anthony and Cleopatra* is the 'Romeo and Juliet' of Shakespeare's later days. Besides illustrating

that fondness he has for looking back from heights of manhood on youthful effort, and rehandling its themes—the play also tempts the biographer by seeming so perfectly to fulfil Wordsworth's precept of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' as the condition of highest poetry. However, literary comparison alone is fertile enough here. No parallel, in fact, can show better than this one, between Shakespeare's early and his late tragedy of love, what gain for a great poetic mind there is in the bustle of a worldly, active, eventful life, like that of the playwright's in the Renaissance capital of England. In *Romeo*, Shakespeare, swift as a lark and light as a lark, soars in song towards the sun of love in his early heaven. In *Anthony and Cleopatra* the full light of all a manhood's experience of great men and great women and a great epoch, is centred on a vision of love between two lordly human beings, filling a stormy age of history with its splendour. More truly a spectacle for the gods, this, indeed, than almost anything on Shakespeare's stage. The creator's own exultation over his conception seems to burst forth in Anthony's kingly words at the outset, where Rome dissolves, the empire falls, and kingdoms crumble into clay before the shameless glory of a pair who 'stand up peerless' with a subject world at their feet. The same triumphant exultation of the creator over his creatures rings through the scenes of their death, which becomes them no less than their life. Shakespeare himself seems to warn us, in Anthony's voice, not to lament or sorrow at the 'miserable change' of his end, since he dies 'not basely,' 'a Roman by a Roman valiantly vanquished.' And Cleopatra, in robe and crown, she alone after so many Christian heroines of the poet's, hears her lover's call from meadows of immortality as she opens the door of death, and the word 'husband' sheds its sacred splendour round the majestic end of a guilty love.

Dryden, in his new treatment of the theme, revelled

in the by-work of the story. But even Shakespeare himself did not shrink from entwining the statues of his two demi-gods with garlands of rich, picturesque detail: a scene of Roman wassailing is expanded with evident gusto into an *intermezzo* worthy of comparison with Dutch paintings, and from this, as well as from the complete and pathetic minor drama of Enobarbus later on, the master's mind comes back with a spring, swift and sure, to the main task.

Such royal freedom from pedantic economy in the technique of limitation had its dangers, and the broken structure of Act III, with its snapshot scenes of battle, certainly shows deficiency in firmness of hand, if only in that most impossible of dramatic tasks—a sea-fight on the stage.

Something more serious was to happen next. Shakespeare's approved method of conscious limitation of effort at critical points of his career turns out to be a two-edged weapon, when immediately used again in *Coriolanus*. The too laborious insistence on the towering isolation of the hero makes this, Shakespeare's last great tragedy, almost dry in its restriction to political ambition. *Coriolanus* is not unjustly the least popular of all the great plays: it took the solitariness of the deaf Beethoven to do justice in music to its grandeur. The drama is poor in colour when set against the Oriental glow of *Anthony and Cleopatra*. The rustic simplicity of republican Rome is no match for the Hellenist Court on the Nile, truly; but in *Julius Cæsar* there was a picture of a still simple Rome, too, and it was richer in variety.

At the same time *Coriolanus*, by its recognition of the deference due from man's conscience to the worth and weight of fellow men's opinions, marks a distinct reawakening of the social interest, which had been so strong at the beginning of Shakespeare's tragic period. We have seen that interest absorbed in intense preoccupation with problems of personal conduct. Here it

emerges to take ultimate form. The moral of the tragedy of *Coriolanus*, being the necessary homage of a superior man to the great fact of Society, is Shakespeare's own supreme moral triumph over the pride of genius. This excellence of *Coriolanus* is ethical rather than artistic; it is also, in its very maturity and conclusiveness, an excellence emphatically peculiar to advancing age. *Coriolanus* terminates Shakespeare's poetic manhood.

## VII

As if the poet felt himself that a period had come, and that a new, easier style, fit for declining days, must be sought, he tries his hand, smiling at himself, in this strange style by adding touches of his own to another man's work in *Pericles*, and so adorning that play for the benefit of his theatre. That new departure establishes the *genre* of 'dramatic romances' as the dominant manner of Shakespeare's declining years. The wildness of adventure in this loosely-knit play was not shaped even by Shakespeare's hand into anything like successful application of this new style to drama of a higher sort. But Shakespeare, having found a style which suited his ageing condition, goes forward on this chosen way, manfully determined as ever, and soon reaches the sunset glories of *Cymbeline*. Here once again we feel, as we felt in *Twelfth Night* in the sphere of comedy, that everything has the absolute fitness, proportion and harmony of the mellowest fruits of spontaneously-working genius.

The strain which the sustained and rounded perfection of *Cymbeline* no doubt entailed, is relieved in *The Winter's Tale*, a true stage-manager's holiday in the fresh fields and pastures of the idyll. Some sense of dramatic responsibility, indeed, at first lingers in the attempt to make something like real drama of the subject of jealousy, so powerfully handled before in *Othello*; but this repetition proving a failure—perhaps

because the effort was not so very serious after all—the poet delightedly plunges into utter irresponsibility and lets dramatic consistency flow where it will, on the cooling ripple of romantic incident. He laughs, as from a far-off green arbour, at the gaping mouths of the London groundlings, when asking them to jump across sixteen years between two acts, or to behold a statue walking and speaking. And the verse, meandering rivulet-like with the fable, tinkles sweetly over its pebbles—a dramatic thunderer's lyric recreation, in 'the sweet of the year,'

with heigh! the sweet birds, O how they sing!

Here for once, repose and relaxation of a weary poet meant perfect achievement in its peculiar way. And the refreshment of this unbending made his great powers fit for reaching the crowning summit of dramatic romance in *The Tempest*. Cosmic in its greatness after the definable excellences of *Cymbeline* and the charms of *Winter's Tale*, it is the *King Lear* of Shakespeare's age. As that was the highest synthesis of his tragic philosophy, so Prospero is, by common consent, the herald of his testament as a beholder of this 'mortal coil' and looker into the haze beyond. In supreme earthly melody we hear suggestions of harmonies not fully conceivable by mortal ears. From *The Tempest*, as from *Lear*, there could be no step onward and higher, except 'into air, into thin air,' off the firm ground of stage, language, and material reality.

As if he felt that there were no further possibilities in this direction, Shakespeare turned, with a Virgilian *maiora canamus!* from dramatic romance, which had become so much more in his hands in that royal wedding gift of *The Tempest*, to his old field of history, where he had shone long ago. And of subjects from English history he this time—as if conscious it was the last—boldly undertook the very greatest: the whole

gorgeous pageant of the English Reformation, with its long array of grand figures, from the 'Scarlet Sin,' Cardinal Wolsey, and the patient suffering of Queen Catherine, to the Protestant personal rectitude of Cranmer. All this was to fill the stage together, and the popular figure of bluff King Harry was to stand in the midst of it all, translating into blustering English wraths and loves the Pagan Renaissance worship of life and beauty.

The amplest ambition the poet had ever entertained in the field of historical drama, 'over-leaped itself.' Broken glimpses only of all he had set out to show, are presented to us, and the play, with its dances and trials, dreams and coronations, executions and christenings, remained the loosest procession of dilapidated scenes that ever came from the hand of Shakespeare; and whether he had a younger fellow-worker, or left it for somebody else to finish, or whether he himself lapsed fitfully into Fletcherian cadence in a listless way, the gigantic structure remains loose and disjointed in any case.

The burning down of the Globe Theatre during a performance of *Henry VIII* in 1613 has in it a symbolic irony of blind fate, and it was after the supreme failure of his loftiest and widest ambition in the field of historical drama that Shakespeare may well have deliberately laid down his pen with a consciousness that he had 'seen the best of his time.'

Πόλεμος πατήρ πάντων. ('All things are born of strife.') The wise Greek saying may serve both as a summing-up, and a final justification, of our argument. We have endeavoured to behold Shakespeare's career in this rapid and no doubt occasionally faulty survey, as phases of the great struggle which is Life. In ever-renewed strife for full and flawless self-expression in his art, we have seen him droop, dissatisfied with himself, or tired and careless,

and we have seen him again and again start afresh, to seek in the choice of rigorously circumscribed themes a new way to regain lost power. And we have seen him do that once too often for unvarying and complete success. We have also seen moments of a rest which is success, and moments of a strain which is failure: so paradoxical is Life.

If we believe that whatever and whoever this Shakespeare may have been—stage-manager, capitalist, courtier, lover, what not?—the working-out of his artistic vocation was, throughout, the most serious and principal business in the world to him—then such a presentation of his work as attempted here stands freed of the reproach of dealing with it too much in terms of the literary workshop, and too little of the living man behind it all. For a great poet's work is his true life.

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