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The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare

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by

JOHN LAWLOR

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In memory of

TERESA ANNE CLARE KNIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

THE phrase 'Shakespearian tragedy' has the substantial drawback that it focusses attention on 'tragedy'—so enthralling is the tragic experience, by whomever communicated—and away from Shakespeare. In what follows my concern is to seek the 'Shakespearian', the decisive tone and emphasis of one dramatist's imagination. I therefore choose 'the tragic sense' as my title: and here, again, I have wanted to avoid the implications of another common phrase, 'tragic vision'. We have perhaps done with the seraphic and serene Shakespeare of Matthew Arnold's eulogy. But the word 'vision' may still suggest a region of truth permanently accessible to the dramatist-sage to which the persons and actions of the drama are ultimately referred. I therefore speak of 'sense' rather than 'vision', for it seems to me that the central truths offered by the Shakespearian imagination are things felt, groped towards and finally held to. They are not the mountain peak to which the traveller lifts his eyes, but the rock to which a drowning man clings. I speak, of course, of the persons of the plays: it is in and through them that we reach the Shakespearian tragic imagination, and not otherwise. That imagination is truly creative; we do not know it in any lesser manifestation than its 'negative capability' 'of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason'. Our concern must be with the truths apprehended and explored by the working dramatist, not with what may be conjectured of progress towards wisdom in any less 'exalted mood'. We can have nothing to contribute to 'the tragi-comedy of his mythical sorrows'.[1]

But if 'vision' in the one sense might mislead, in another it may serve our purpose well. As we speak of a painter's

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[1] C. J. Sisson, 'The Mythical Sorrows of Shakespeare', British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1934, p. 28.

'vision', the power to see both separately and in distinctive combination, so we might approach Shakespeare's tragic plays by fastening on a characteristic which, essential to all drama, is of the highest significance in tragedy. It is that duality of vision which allows the spectator to be both involved in and removed from the action, the 'passions' that 'spin the plot'. We are both detached and 'committed', for while our knowledge is other than that of the persons of the play, considered both separately and collectively, yet, strangely, knowing more, we suffer not less but more intensely. Certainly, dramatic irony will play a decisive part in tragic experience; but our knowledge, though greater than that available within the play—for before us is the whole of the evidence—will never explain all. We may take upon us 'the mystery of things As if we were God's spies': but that mystery is revealed only in part of its vast workings. This kind of knowledge constitutes—may one call it?—the contractual relationship between tragic dramatist and spectator. The price of our knowledge, a knowledge immeasurably heightened beyond common experience, is that we forfeit any possibility of intervention, a possibility always present in actuality. Especially do we forfeit imaginative intervention, the taking of sides which, tragic experience may teach us, is assuredly a possibility in all other representations of human suffering, whether barely factual or heightened by imagination. The story of the spectator rising to shout Desdemona's innocence to Othello is truly instructive; for it offers us the tragic experience at its breaking-point. Once mistake the play for reality, and intervention is immediate. With it goes the last trace of tragic knowledge, the intensely absorbed awareness of what is beyond our control but never out of the reach of our experience. Thus elements of pleasure and pain are strangely combined. We may turn where we will for 'explanations'. The most illuminating remark I have found is that of Wordsworth:

> We have no sympathy but what is propagated by pleasure: I would not be misunderstood; but wherever we sympathize with

> pain, it will be found that the sympathy is produced and carried on by subtle combinations with pleasure.

We approach the heart of tragic experience as the spectator knows it when we read

> However painful may be the objects with which the Anatomist's knowledge is connected, he feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge.[1]

The analogy is profoundly revealing. The Anatomist is both the dramatist and the spectator; and the dissection is upon the body of our brother, man. But knowledge, the overmastering desire to penetrate to the truth, does not merely sustain but rewards the spectator, in an experience in which the dichotomies of common experience are known to be inadequate. The truth can be put without loss in other and more familiar terms:

> The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.[2]

So the great paradox of tragic experience declares itself. What would be sordid or distressing as otherwise encountered is, in tragedy, ennobling, and thus fortifying. We may try to account for this in more recent terminology, seeing the play-experience, perhaps, as a region in which the gregarious instinct is for once allowed full play since the instinct of self-preservation is wholly allayed. We cannot enter the region of mimed disaster save in imagination; we thus enter without restraint, with a degree of attachment and comprehension inhibited in all actual experience. But however we may characterize it, what is to be noticed is that in tragic experience apparent opposites are held in balance—sympathy and detachment, insight and the sense of the mysterious, pleasure and pain. Thus, of the chain of events in tragedy (that aspect which has absorbed the larger part of critical attention from earliest times) Aristotle remarked:

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[1] *Wordsworth's Literary Criticism*, ed. Nowell C. Smith (London, 1925), p. 26.

[2] *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Maurice Buxton Forman (London, 1947), p. 71.

> Tragedy . . . is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur *unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another*; there is more of the marvellous in them then than if they happened of themselves or by mere chance.[1]

We appear to need the best of both worlds—of chance and of design, of 'the probable' and 'the necessary'—to make us feel that we have touched extremities, and thus glimpsed a system universal in scope but exact and particular in its bearings. We can then accept and approve what has had to be, 'the probable or the necessary', the interlocking of particular fact and wide-ranging fate at those points which it is for the tragic drama to reveal. The play of paradox in tragic drama has therefore no subsidiary end, to heighten certain unambiguous issues that reach the spectator mainly by other means. It is the very foundation and centre of tragic experience.

It is here that the decisively Shakespearian contribution to tragic art emerges. In the plays we are to examine, Shakespeare's very mode of presentation, his characteristic handling of his themes, is in and through the co-existence of opposites—the real and the apparent; man as agent and patient; accident and design in the train of events; natural and supernatural in human affairs; and, finally, the human and the inhuman co-existing in the creature Man. To this organic sense of the co-existence of apparent opposites many factors contribute, and modern scholarship has made us aware of their presence if not, always, of their significance in this particular regard. Thus, there is in Shakespeare the characteristically medieval cast of mind which would look for definition between opposites, the thesis and the antithesis of that dialectical habit which is possibly the greatest single factor in forming the Shakespearian outlook. It comes upon us in such steadily contemplated ambiguities as may underpin the whole fabric of a play—as that of 'nature' in *King Lear*, 'honour' in *Henry IV* and *Hamlet*, and so on: and, too, in the fundamental process of his tragic art, whereby inherent difference must grow to irreconcilable conflict. There is, again, that hierarchy in civil society which by its very existence prompts the question of human reality behind the outward show, and thus leads to the great issues of kingship *de jure* and *de facto*, and to the nearer but not less exacting questions of the moral authority of governors and rulers. There is, too, that ordered and correspondent universe, the macrocosm faithfully answering to the little world of man, of which perhaps we have heard more than enough in recent scholarship, as though it were an unquestioned advantage to the working dramatist to have this vast cyclorama against which to deploy the human figures it might all too easily dwarf. There is, above all, that pragmatic poise of the Englishman of the later sixteenth century, between an old order in religion proscribed by authority and a new, established with its Ministers and its Bible 'appointed to be read'. For the theologically minded in that age the questions of an earlier period were born again with renewed intensity: Predestination as against Free Will, the New Adam and the Old in Christian life, Faith and Works—these are the problems which only the individual can answer. They lie underground in Shakespeare, save for a passing jest or a set-piece appeal. But the centre of his drama is in the overburdened human creature, placed between mighty opposites, working out his own salvation or damnation. This awareness of the individual life constitutes Shakespeare's 'fund of Nature', the saving grace that even the most rigorous of critics-by-rule in the eighteenth century must allow him. And in the very presentation we may think him favoured by the circumstances of his profession. Dryden thought Shakespeare 'drew' 'luckily'. Without underrating Shakespeare's art, we may yet be heartily thankful that he writes for all kinds and conditions of men, assembled in the public playhouse. The very things which are inexcusable by the rigorist critic—neglect of the 'Unities'; 'low' language; a mixture of comic and tragic scenes; the absence of a clearly definable 'moral'—all these are the uneven grain and joint of common experience, the clash of contraries in life as we know it. So, too, the faults in him which have been remarked by a later generation of critics—the 'conventions' of common Elizabethan playhouse practice, telescoping and stylizing without due regard to 'character' (as naturalistically conceived) and to the 'facts' of time and space—these also play an essential part, in energizing creative power so that the working imagination can span mighty opposites, unimpeded by the merely circumstantial. But to say so much is perhaps to suggest that in Shakespeare theatrecraft is all; that he is prince of illusionists and we must submit to what is, in the end, no more than a rough magic. In fact, for all the macrocosmic setting of mortal choice, the sheer reach of dramatic language into hyperbole, the skilled theatrical sense that can boldly annihilate time and space, the Shakespearian universe is penetratingly simple. It offers no painted backcloth to human posturing. It comes before us primarily as 'a vale of soul-making', a field of choice in which the decision must be made between alternatives which are not less real for being of immeasurable consequence.

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[1] Aristotle *On the Art of Poetry*, tr. Ingram Bywater (Oxford, 1951), p. 45.

There is, finally, one other characteristic of Shakespeare which all critics, past and present, do well to heed. The spectator's vision in tragedy is privileged; knowing more than they, he can detect inadequacy in the persons of the play—whether in their attempts to arrive at the truth about each other (more rarely, about themselves) or their guesses at the final reality which they seek to confront or evade. Irony, as we have seen, will play a large part in tragic experience; and the spectator will have throughout the drama cumulative evidence on which to judge the persons of the play and the reality which is asserted. In this respect, modern scholarship has much help to offer where the pattern of belief or assumption may have faded from the modern consciousness. Awareness of, let us say, the nature of Elizabethan kingship, against a background of morality-play—the assertion of an unquestioned good—may help us to keep a true balance of sympathy between the politic heir to the throne in Prince Hal and the lively old rogue in Falstaff. But it is the definitive characteristic of reality in Shakespearian tragedy to surprise—and that not only the ignorant or the would-be evader (and this the spectator readily foresees, and enjoys); but to surprise, too, those who would collaborate with the scheme of things, and, with them, the spectator. The pattern of reality is free—free as 'the time is free', and so independent of any man's mere contriving. But a good deal of modern scholarship may insensibly encourage us in fixing or finalizing that pattern, by selecting one aspect, however important. We may thus unhappily witness 'a sinister alliance between the pedantry of two ages'.[1] It is as well to be aware that, where 'ideas' are in question, a play is 'permeated' not 'buttressed' by them.[2] There is thus some warrant for looking again at certain of the classic 'problems' of Shakespearian tragedy—as, the rejection of Falstaff, the theme of delay in *Hamlet*, the motivation of Iago—side by side with some less well-worn issues. So, too, as the analytical tendency to apprehend a part for the whole both proceeds from and in turn reinforces any inattention to the actual development of each play, there is reason to look with especial closeness at the endings of certain plays—in *Henry IV* (to ask whether the rejection of Falstaff is an ending); in *Hamlet* (where things of great importance but of very different natures happen almost together); and, above all, in *King Lear*, where, perhaps, there may seem to be not one but three 'endings'. There seemed, again, some reason to attempt—though indeed inadequately—one of the central problems of dramatic make-believe: and here I have chosen the relation, in strict terms of theatrecraft, between fate and free-will—the ends to which the persons of the play are to be moved and the acceptability to the audience of their going there. A relatively new branch of Shakespeare study (though its foundations were laid as long ago as the decade following Johnson's death) is here employed—I hope, suitably. But the approaches that might be made to any or all of these plays are truly manifold: the fact that I concentrate on a few must not be taken to imply that I think those alone profitable. Throughout what follows the main focus of attention is upon the paired opposites which tragic vision allows and even compels, and on the distinctive emphasis and tension which they receive from this Elizabethan dramatist. I have selected certain plays not because they seem to me the only works in the Shakespearian canon deserving of the title 'tragedies', nor because taken together they seem to offer a coherence of tragic statement. As Kenneth Muir well remarks, 'There is no such thing as Shakespearian Tragedy: there are only Shakespearian tragedies'.[1] I have, in fact, chosen to start with a tetralogy of 'histories', *Richard II–Henry IV–Henry V*, for the light they throw, by contrast as well as comparison, on tragic purpose and method. Indeed, my whole concern is to show certain permanent characteristics of the Shakespearian imagination, whatever the genre in which we find that imagination at work. For this reason, too, I place my treatment of *Macbeth* before that of *King Lear*. I have been concerned not, primarily, with development but with certain deep-rooted characteristics which, as I believe, receive a unique and collective weight in *King Lear*—not the last of Shakespeare's tragedies in any chronological sense and certainly not Shakespeare's last word on man and his destiny.

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[1] Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare's Audience* (New York, 1941), pp. 148-9.

[2] L. C. Knights, 'On Historical Scholarship and the Interpretation of Shakespeare', *Sewanee Review*, LXIII (1955), 227.

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[1] 'Shakespeare and the Tragic Pattern', British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1958, p. 146.

Chapter One

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

I

THE tetralogy *Richard II–Henry IV–Henry V* offers us a relatively unfamiliar starting-point for the tragic plays of Shakespeare. A setting less concentrated than is afforded by any one tragedy may allow us to see more distinctly certain characteristics of the Shakespearian imagination contemplating the mixed good and ill of human existence: and, too, this very width of setting may lead us to appreciate certain qualities of order and structure in any one tragic play. These however are incidental advantages; it is the relationship of parent and child and their separate attempts to evade or to collaborate with final reality that directly concern us, and powerfully foreshadow Shakespeare's greatest tragic achievements, with which the remaining chapters are concerned.

The complexities of *Henry IV*, I and II—to take the middle of the tetralogy—may be set out, to show how intricate a framework they require. We have the symmetrical groupings of father as against true son, Hal, who is an apparent rebel; and of (pretended) father and would-be rebel against authority, Falstaff, who may be set over against Hotspur, the false son (the son whom Hal's father would have wished to have), who is the true rebel. So we have in this mirror-like world a series of games of *trompeur trompé*, as the father with his faith in outward show is confounded in his hopes by the apparently wayward but actually loyal son; as the rogue and boon-companion Falstaff, with his unshaken confidence in the coming heyday of Hal's rule, is confronted by the heir-apparent's unchangeable resolve to achieve an unexpected 'reformation'; and we may add a third pattern of expectation and reversal in the gloomy belief of that other old man, the Lord Chief Justice, that wayward youth come to the Throne will make Law an outlaw. This close, Chinese box-like world of symmetrical groupings, where expectation and reversal lie in one pattern with identity and dissimilarity, is in marked contrast to the simplicity of such a work as *King Lear*, which also deploys a pattern of counterpart and reversal, within a similar framework of the double authority of King and father, and the double disaster of revolt against that authority. But there sub-plot and main-plot are identical; so that the dramatist strikes with doubled and redoubled power. The simplicity of *King Lear*, as of *Othello* and *Macbeth*, offers a compelling instance of Shakespeare's ability to transform the common ways of theatre-craft and story-spinning. *Henry IV*, I and II, is certainly a good instance of the direction the subtler kind of Elizabethan drama might have taken. The elaboration of symmetrical pattern recalls that Elizabethan interest in ingenuity of design which ~~we meet on many levels~~—in word-play, singly terse or hyperbolically elaborated; in that crossword-puzzle intricacy of plot and situation which loves to play with identical twins, with impenetrable disguise, ~~and, in turn, with the~~ 'double-takes' on disguise and on the play-situation ('Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness . . .'), and on the audience-within-the-audience ('If this were played upon a stage now, I could condemn it as an improbable fiction'). But in *Henry IV* these elements are used to present a world where men would change the shape of things. The 'night-tripping fairy' of Henry's fruitless wish—

> O that it could be prov'd
> That some night-tripping fairy had exchang'd
> In cradle-clothes our children where they lay,
> And call'd mine Percy, his Plantagenet!—

joins with those mime-scenes between Hal and Falstaff which we shall discuss below to communicate not merely the sense of discrepancy between the real and the apparent but its unchanging nature. The world of wish-fulfilment is presented as evidence for the real, for unchanging inward purpose, in a world of purposes permanently at odds but inextricably interlocked and thus not to be set to rights by any master-plan.

Certainly, symmetry, balanced likeness and contrast of pattern, is appropriate to the ceremonious associations of 'history' plays. Matters of lineage, of family and personal honour, of subordination and ceremonious courtesy, all pertain to that hierarchical system which is organically involved in these plays, and which lends itself naturally to the consideration of opposites—the true and false title, the loyal and the disloyal subject, the parent and the child, divided or united in the divided state. They are mighty opposites; nothing less than the life of man in ordered society is at stake. Thus, *Richard II*, the first play in this tetralogy, is often and rightly interpreted in these terms; rhetoric lies so close to action that, as one critic notes of the fierce exchanges between Bolingbroke and Mowbray:

> the words themselves take on the nature of action: Bolingbroke stuffs the name of traitor down Mowbray's throat; Mowbray, as he spits out his counter-challenge, retaliates by cramming these terms of abuse *doubled* down Bolingbroke's.[1]

But this kind of pattern is not adequate to tragedy: clear opposition and a right that must finally in some sense prevail deny us any penetration in depth. *Magna est veritas et praevalebit* is insufficient as tragic formula. Certainly *Richard II* has all the brave attraction of a lost cause; its specific quality is a haunting pathos. The possibilities of tragedy occur when the 'right' represented by Richard is decisively overset by the 'right' maintained by Bolingbroke. There is at once at work the sense that words, and thus ideas, may be turned upside-down: a sense that Professor Danby does justice to in his account of the opposed meanings of 'nature' in *King Lear*,[2] where that aspect of man's nature which enables him to perceive and to seek the good of others is in conflict with the merely animal, pursuing its own ends before all else and through all else. But what in *King Lear* is largely explicit in *Henry IV* remains muted; and it is not the less effective for that. The lost 'right' of Richard sounds throughout *Henry IV* and *Henry V* with the indefinable authority of the numinous. It is felt to have ultimate sanction:

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[1] M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London, 1957), p. 75.

[2] *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London, 1949).

> Not all the water in the rough rude sea
> Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
> The breath of worldly men cannot depose
> The deputy elected by the Lord.

So, too, prophecy had been given that if Richard were deposed

> The blood of English shall manure the ground,
> And future ages groan for this foul act;
> Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels,
> And in this seat of peace tumultuous wars
> Shall kin with kin and kind with kind confound.

But we do not know at the outset of *Henry IV* how this right is to be asserted: nor do we know how far-reaching are to be its exactions. We thus have a dual vision: firstly, in the father's and the son's separate understandings of the reality which is to be met, or placated; and secondly in the audience's perception that these understandings are unchangeably separate. The father has no comprehension of the son's purpose, but instead misinterprets it; and in this, the apparent revolt against his authority as a father, the former usurper receives the major part of his punishment (the lesser being the real revolt against his authority as monarch). In this, as we shall see, Henry's punishment is akin to that of other tragic sufferers in Shakespeare: their sorrow is to realize the void they have made between themselves and the rest of humanity—most painfully, between themselves and those from whom they might otherwise look to have 'honour, love, obedience'. That this punishment of Henry's is illusion does not lessen but heightens its sting. To begin by living in the world of appearance is to end by being blind to reality.

For the moment we are concerned with the situation with which *Henry IV* opens. Since none knows how the right which Henry Bolingbroke has set aside is to be asserted, nor how far-reaching are to be its demands, we have a fundamental characteristic of Shakespearian tragedy—guesses at a reality that, eluding the persons of the play, finally asserts itself while remaining mysterious in its whole nature and scope. As it is *the* reality, the final touchstone which men would grasp, so in its slow outworking it reveals differences between both the real and the apparent in human nature, and between the real and the apparent as objects of human contriving. Truly, the 'book of fate' which the politic man would read is best kept shut, for it is full of surprises. This is a truth wrung from Henry at the news of Northumberland's revolt: but reality has yet more surprises in store for both Henry and his son. In the course of the play there are involved a number of contrasted themes, each turning upon the great contrast between the real and the apparent. First, there is the contrast between authority *de jure* and *de facto*, the difference between Richard's title and Bolingbroke's. Bolingbroke, having asserted his claim and thus usurped the throne will make it good—by finding 'a time for frighted peace to pant', in preparing the expedition to the Holy Land. Secondly, if Law is thus set aside, expediency is triumphant; and in this play there are only degrees of expediency, of the 'politic'. The best advice the King can give his heir is 'To busy giddy minds With foreign quarrels'. His own projected Crusade had a politic end—just as his coming back to England from exile to assert his claim to his estates was also politically the right time to come, when a Crown was in question. This advice in statecraft matches Bolingbroke's contempt for the outward appearance and behaviour of Richard, 'the skipping king' who

ambled up and down
With shallow jesters and rash bavin wits.

His own deportment is based upon an unquestioned but trivial confidence:

By being seldom seen, I could not stir
But, like a comet, I was wonder'd at.

These are the father's 'politic' characteristics; they pertain to the first generation of usurpation. But we recall the Bishop of Carlisle's prophecy, 'Peace shall go sleep with Turks and infidels'; 'future ages' are to 'groan for this foul act' of Richard's deposition. The next generation after Richard's fall must also have its plans: so the usurper's son is 'politic'; he, too, is a Bolingbroke.

Since Hal inherits a Crown rightfully his, the sharpness of the antithesis *de jure* and *de facto* is softened. The father speaks truly when he says to his son

> what in me was purchas'd
> Falls upon thee in a more fairer sort.

Yet Hal, too, must in a sense make his title good; expediency is again the rule. Only, the son's course must be the antithesis of the father's; for a world turned upside down by usurpation must be set right way up. The son's concern will be to establish Law: the Lord Chief Justice will rise in power unexpectedly, contrary to all appearances. Again, where the father had stood aloof from common men, refusing to make himself, like Richard, 'a companion to the common streets', the son will consort with the folk of Eastcheap. It serves a double end, as Bolingbroke's return from exile had done. The Bolingbroke in Hal is well understood by Warwick, who explains the son to the father:

> The Prince will, in the perfectness of time,
> Cast off his followers; and their memory
> Shall as a pattern or a measure live
> By which his Grace must mete the lives of other,
> Turning past evils to advantages.

Hal's purpose is clear from the outset; the famous soliloquy at the end of Act I Scene 2, after the company of Eastcheap has departed, states unequivocally the 'reformation' which he intends. But will acquaintance with Eastcheap in fact give the future King insight into humanity 'by which' to 'mete the lives of other'? This is one of those expectations which may not in the end correspond with reality. For the present, we see that the play offers ample room for surprise, for what is contrary to appearances declaring itself as reality: and the principal surprises may be readily enumerated.

Firstly, as we have seen, Warwick must explain the son to the father; and this, we note, long after the son himself had made solemn declaration to his father. But the great truth we attend to is that the parent confronted with his own motives—though with an honourable difference—in the child cannot *see* the truth. Bolingbroke face to face with Bolingbroke remains blind; and to put this beyond all doubt Shakespeare shows us at the outset of the play the father rejecting the true, the natural son, for the 'unnatural' child, that Hotspur whose motives and actions Henry Bolingbroke can grasp, for they are his own. He must envy Northumberland's having

> So blest a son—
> A son who is the theme of honour's tongue . . .

for all appearances condemn his own son:

> Whilst I, by looking on the praise of him,
> See riot and dishonour stain the brow
> Of my young Harry.

As late as Act IV Scene 4 of Part II, Henry is still unable to grasp the truth. In reply to Warwick's speech, affirming Hal's policy, he says dubiously:

> 'Tis seldom when the bee doth leave her comb
> In the dead carrion

(that is, Hal is not likely to give up his pleasures even though he may know that his companions are corrupt). On his death-bed the King is still counselling the son to follow the father's policy, 'To busy giddy minds With foreign quarrels'. It is a further irony that this does in fact come about, in Hal's war with France—ironically, for it is Hal's apparent waywardness that tempts the Dauphin to mock him.

Parallel with the blindness of the father is the blindness of the other old man of the play, Falstaff. Like Bolingbroke, who is confident that there can be no other path to right reputation than his own, and that is in preserving outward dignity, Falstaff is unshakeably certain that behind the masks some men must wear all men are unalterably the same. Man's natural state is to be gregarious—and, at the same time, healthily alert to his own interests, for good men must be able to recognize one another, so that they may stick together. So, for Falstaff as for Henry Bolingbroke, prudential values are the only ones to proceed upon. But for Falstaff, Law, which would regulate and repress, is 'old father antic'. In the end the successor to Hal's 'royal father' is not Falstaff but the Lord Chief Justice, chosen by the new King in solemn submission:

> You shall be as a father to my youth.

It is a substitution that Falstaff could by no means foresee. And we may note, in passing, that it is consonant with the close and intricate pattern of this play that when the substitution occurs it comes as a reversal of apparent roles. The King had begun by appearing to put the Lord Chief Justice on trial for the 'So great indignities' he, as Prince Hal, had suffered. The Lord Chief Justice's defence in its turn had been based upon 'substitution'. He begins

> I then did use the person of your father;

and in his defence he pleads for a reversal of roles between son and father:

> Question your royal thoughts, make the case yours;
> Be now the father, and propose a son . . .

The whole scene is a decisive turning-point in the play; and as such it is marked by appropriate action. As Lear, the father and the monarch, must eventually kneel to the daughter and the subject, and be raised by her; so here the monarch must raise Justice from the posture of a suppliant to a place at his right hand. In both plays, a reversal of roles must take place (here, the monarch submitting to the 'father') so that a world turned upside down may be set to rights. Perhaps, too, it is the fulfilment, again in a manner he could not foresee, of Henry Bolingbroke's wish that some night-tripping fairy had exchanged his son for another, Hotspur the rebel! To invoke the fairies is always dangerous; they have a way of setting mortal wishes to rights. Here, at least, the wish is transmuted; it is the son who exchanges fathers —to the unruly Falstaff, the rebel against law, he prefers 'old father antic' himself, the Law in the person of the Lord Chief Justice.

Linking the apparent antithesis father/son with that of self-interest/altruism is the theme of Honour, expressed variously: in Hotspur's lunatic ambition; in Falstaff's celebrated soliloquy, and, much more, in his practice in the wars —his wary eye upon the main chance; and, of course, in Hal's emergence as champion in the King's cause. We may perhaps see this theme of Honour more clearly if we attend to the turning-point in Hal's career—the colloquy between father and son in Act III Scene 2 of Part I, which ends with Hal making a solemn vow to bring Hotspur to book. There is no danger that modern scholarship will fail to attend to the text of the plays. But we are not perhaps always alert for indications in the Shakespearian text of 'business', the action that suiting the word will make its significance unmistakable. I have already cited the kneeling of Lear to Cordelia when the natural order is restored, comparing it with the monarch's acceptance of the Lord Chief Justice. In that acceptance, the hand is given in pledge, with the words that speak a contract of submission:

> There is my hand.
> You shall be as a father to my youth;
> My voice shall sound as you do prompt mine ear;
> And I will stoop and humble my intents
> To your well-practis'd wise directions.

The whole movement is to bring the Lord Chief Justice up to the throne, away from the role of defendant in his own case to that of King's adviser. Law has ceased to be on trial: the natural order is restored. Thus, in the colloquy between father and son, where honour is to be affirmed, Hal's avowal is perhaps made upon his knees, with the sword-hilts kissed, cross-fashion, to solemnize the vow:

This, in the name of God, I promise here.

The 'here' is the posture of humility and solemn avowal. It is a knight's oath, to mark the emergence of the man of honour. We may compare the gesture with that in the parallel scene in Part II (Act IV Scene 4) where once again Hal must make protestation of his loyalty to his father. Bitterly upbraided by the dying King for wearing the Crown, Hal replies with words that link the theme of outward appearance and inward reality with the kneeling of solemn avowal:

If I affect it more
Than as your honour and as your renown,
Let me no more from this obedience rise,
Which my most inward true and duteous spirit
Teacheth this prostrate and exterior bending.

The time is long past when the inward could be one thing, the outward another. Now they must conform; the 'inward true and duteous spirit' must be at one with the 'exterior bending'. And this it is which Falstaff will never comprehend.

The theme receives its most moving and ceremonious expression at the moment of Hal's triumph as King's champion, the fulfilment of his vow that Hotspur shall

render every glory up,
Yea, even the slightest worship of his time,
Or I will tear the reckoning from his heart.

In the last Act of Part I we see Hotspur dead at Hal's feet: 'every glory' is indeed rendered up; and the sightless blood-marked face proclaims the final 'reckoning'. Now there is a time for courtesy, for chivalry towards the dead: and Professor Dover Wilson has brilliantly recovered for us the action of the heir-apparent covering the dead man's face with his own plumes:

let my favours hide thy mangled face.

Here, too, is an 'exterior bending' as the Prince stoops over the dead body. And let us note that Hal's real 'reformation' is put beyond all doubt when we are told that this magnanimous action is free from any taint of 'appearance'; there is no audience. If there were, the action would be withheld:

> If thou wert sensible of courtesy,
> I should not make so dear a show of zeal.

So, as Dover Wilson perceptively remarks, the epitaph on Hotspur is placed side by side with that on Falstaff. 'In the new world that opens up at Shrewsbury there is little place left for the follies of the past.'[1] Certainly, that is the firm resolve of the Prince, seen here at the moment of his triumph and, with it, his greatest magnanimity. But the last thing we in fact see is the revived Falstaff mutilating the body of Percy and carting it off for his own vainglory. This bold co-existence of tender magnanimity and unabashed self-interest may alert us, at the virtual end of the first Part of this play, to the major truth that has been evident so far. It has been a play in which irony has played the largest part. Surprises have been prepared for those who confidently shape things to their own ends; and in this play that means every one of the principal characters. For expediency is the rule, in the disordered state of affairs which on the one side follows from usurpation, and on the other leads to the emergence of, dare one say, a career-King—one who sets himself to ensure that his rule, being *de jure*, shall also be *de facto*.

II

The complex pattern we have been examining relates primarily to an act of will, the Prince's resolution, and thus the deception of the world at large, including, most prominently, Falstaff. Let us look a little more closely at the relationship of Hal and Falstaff. At the outset, in the second scene of Act I, we have a scene riddled with ironies, so that we are prepared for the disclosure with which we end—'I know you all . . .' With Hal, we, too, know the simplicity of Falstaff's conviction, and his shrewd eye to the main chance. For example, in the first exchange upon the theme 'when thou art king', 'grace' is played upon, in the double sense of titular dignity and the quality itself:

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[1] *The Fortunes of Falstaff* (Cambridge, 1944), p. 67.

> when thou art a king, as, God save thy Grace—Majesty, I should say; for grace thou wilt have none . . .

It is a first sounding of the Falstaff theme, the conviction that outward and inward may well be at variance, and no harm done. And perhaps it goes deeper than we immediately realize. The last promise of Falstaff to his cronies before the King emerges from his crowning is

> I will make the King do you grace.

But even at first hearing we identify the mock-complaisance of Hal, and relish the skill with which the truth is conveyed. Thus, with Falstaff's roguish conception of 'good government', drawing upon that central image of instability, the moon 'under whose countenance we steal', we await an expert twist in the retort. Hal's reply, relating the moon's dominance to the ebb and flow of fortune, takes us neatly to law, which regulates in an irregular world. There are not only rewards but punishments, too. The career Falstaff foresees may well fluctuate:

> now in as low an ebb as the foot of the ladder, and by and by in as high a flow as the ridge of the gallows.

Similarly, 'old father antic the law' is not to be so easily put down as Falstaff imagines. The Prince's equivocation on 'hanging'; his veiled allusion to wisdom that 'cries out in the streets, and no man regards it'; and the irony of the last exchange before he diverts Falstaff into a fresh purse-taking—

> *Fal.* By the Lord, I'll be a traitor then, when thou art king.
> *Prince* I care not—

all these point in one direction only—the Falstaff who presumes too far. Hal's soliloquy thus comes neatly into place. Our awareness is confirmed, and all is set for the unfailing entertainment of *le trompeur trompé*.

These things are well enough understood—perhaps too well. It is fatally easy on this basis to discredit Falstaff; and the loss, if we do so, is not merely in terms of 'character', particular truth to life, but also in terms of the complexity of the whole dramatic structure, its power to carry us beyond the awareness of discrepancy between apparent and real as something to be resolved, to a deeper sense of that which will not be altered. As the blindness of Henry Bolingbroke is an unchanging condition, so, too, is the blindness of Falstaff: and each may co-exist with—more, proceed from—genuineness of love, a love that creates in its own image. Certainly, in the collision of mere purposes, time must have a stop. But while there is a time for inward resolution and a time for explicit declaration, we are not therefore to assume that some conditions are not timeless, some dispositions unalterable. We must beware of imposing a morality-pattern of unargued good on the whole play; for it would be a disastrous limitation of the play's potentiality, its power to awaken our response to a situation in which willed purpose is one thing, unquestioned conviction another, and the truth of things is not to be tied wholly to either.

The best instance of this potentiality—which is a tragic potentiality, essentially Shakespearian—is in Act II Scene 4 of Part I, a tavern-scene where alternately Falstaff and Hal are enthroned, to act out, each in terms of his own desires, a future situation. We may compare, in passing, the feigning of his plight by Lear, kneeling in savage mimicry to Regan: for Lear, all unknowing, is acting out his real plight, the situation of a complete dependant, though as yet he knows it not. The role of Falstaff, who here alternately plays King and Prince, is thus invested with irony: and as he changes from the one part to the other, but still pleading the same cause, that of Jack Falstaff, the simplicity of the earlier relationship, Heir Apparent versus Would-be Pensioner, a game that must have an end, is merged with something deeper. Realization grows as we watch that whatever the end proposed by the Prince, there is no end for Falstaff of the belief that 'to be old and merry', being no sin, fits him to be the King's confidant as he had been the Prince's fellow-roysterer. There is no writing off Falstaff. Let us attend to the scene in detail: it is central to the whole play, with its series of attempts by the Prince and Falstaff to 'practise an answer'—to rehearse the roles long prepared and to be put into performance in that 'tomorrow' in which most of the play resides.

The turning-point has been Falstaff's painting the direful picture of the prospects for the heir-apparent (345-360), concluding

> Art thou not horribly afraid? Doth not thy blood thrill at it?

The Prince's reply takes up Falstaff's impudent defence, a few minutes before, of his conduct at Gad's Hill—he wouldn't attack his assailants, knowing one of them to be the Prince; he was 'a coward on instinct'. So, to the question of fear, the Prince retorts:

> Not a whit, i'faith; I lack some of thy instinct.

Hal's answer neatly marks off his own state of mind from Falstaff's half-comic foreboding and at the same time glances again at the 'disguise' motif. Just as Falstaff could not truly penetrate the vizard at Gad's Hill, so, too, he cannot perceive Hal's true resolution, to overcome 'fiend Douglas', 'spirit Percy', 'devil Glendower' and all who oppose him. Falstaff cannot conceive of humanity cast in any other mould than his own. 'Instinct' is thus fallible; appearance and reality are not to be so easily penetrated as Falstaff thinks. There follows the exquisite foolery of Falstaff, representing the King, and speaking in the best 'King Cambyses' vein': and it would be a dull spectator who did not see in the very ease and *panache* with which the part is boomed forth that for Falstaff appearances are readily counterfeited and exchanged, since beneath all appearances there is but one unchanging reality. So, too, the praise of Falstaff, the 'virtuous man', distances and objectifies the permanent Falstaffian characteristic of speaking of himself in the third person. For Falstaff habitually sees himself as a character. Mr Priestley once remarked that the difference between Jonson's Bobadill and Shakespeare's Falstaff is that Jonson handles Bobadill while Shakespeare dandles Falstaff. We have only to add that it is Falstaff who dandles honest Jack. And this has its boldest expression when the roles are exchanged, and Falstaff as the 'Prince' concludes his case not with any plea but with the confident and unshakeable assertion that to banish Falstaff would be to banish not one but many men:

> sweet Jack Falstaff, kind Jack Falstaff, true Jack Falstaff, valiant Jack Falstaff—and therefore more valiant, being, as he is, old Jack Falstaff—banish not him thy Harry's company, banish not him thy Harry's company . . .

It is unthinkable; and so the truth is out. To 'Banish plump Jack' would be to

> banish all the world.

In the silence we hear the Prince's four words. We have reached the centre of the labyrinth, as the reality of settled intention speaks through the appearances of a 'play extempore'. The Prince speaks in mime as the King, in reality as the future Henry V:

> I do, I will

—and in these four words present and future are one; for the time of dissimulation draws to its end.

The knocking, with the panic that at once breaks out, marks the return to the real world, the 'now' of present danger for Falstaff. But Falstaff is not moved; something of the truth of Hal's settled purpose has come to him in the four words of banishment upon the whole world. I take it to be pertinacity rather than courage (as Dover Wilson would have it) which causes Falstaff to stand his guard, and shout above the clamour, in the direct and familiar address which will dispel the uncomfortable chill which came with Hal's unmoved words,

> Dost thou hear, Hal?—

and we are back upon the old comfortable footing, as he thinks; so that we hear again the theme of outward and inward—

> Never call a true piece of gold a counterfeit. Thou art essentially made, without seeming so.

But it is an unfortunate thrust. Falstaff means no more than 'Don't judge by appearances; you are a King's son, though no one would think so to look at you'. The irony is that Falstaff is first among those who are deceived by appearances; what Hal has pretended to be in the play extempore is in fact no pretence.

To the 'truth' about himself, as Falstaff grasps it, the Prince replies with a truth about Falstaff; and it is a final comment on Falstaff's lack of perceptiveness, at this moment when the Rejection to come has already in part disclosed itself. Falstaff is

> a natural coward, without instinct.

The particular issue of cowardice is less important than the general point, that Falstaff's much-vaunted 'instinct' is worthless. He has not perceived the truth which is before his eyes. How should he? It is for lesser men to take heed of outward appearances; Falstaff has an unfailing 'instinct' for the inward reality. His blindness is therefore, as we have seen, complementary to that of the other old man, Henry Bolingbroke, for whom outward appearances are all-important. The disclosure that Hal makes in play-acting to Falstaff, with its emphasis upon the process of time, is followed by a scene in which the impetuosity of Hotspur sweep saside all appearances that would counsel caution. The Prince's biding his time is set between two kinds of impatience—that which like Falstaff's would impose the present on all time, and that which, like Hotspur's, brooks no delay in reaching out to an imagined future.

There follows the scene in which, having made a covert disclosure to his companion, the Prince finds that nothing less than open avowal will suffice for the King. As with Falstaff in the Tavern, so here in the Court, conviction about the true nature of the young man's actions leads the old man to reject protestation. The mere assurance—

> I shall hereafter, my thrice gracious lord,
> Be more myself—

is swept aside in a torrent of denunciation which concludes with the desperate surmise that Harry will stoop to treachery —to show, the father cries,

> how much thou art *degenerate*!

It is tantamount to a father's curse; and after it there is no holding back. Nothing will serve but outright pledge. Hal's intentions are never in doubt: but Shakespeare deepens his play from a series of variations on the theme *le trompeur trompé* by showing us that those whom Hal must in their separate ways, convince—his father, Falstaff, Hotspur, the Lord Chief Justice—are all unshaken in their estimates of him. The father who accepts the vow made in Act III Scene 2 of Part I must still be persuaded of his son's capacity to rule when he lies on his death-bed (Act IV Scene 5 of Part II). No one approach to this play will save us if we allow it to usurp all our attention. So, here, Falstaff's boasted 'instinct', which the Prince retorts upon his head after Gad's Hill, is not entirely a minor matter: and it assuredly is not if a 'morality' approach to the play would claim that Falstaff's 'instinct', enabling him to penetrate outward shows, is in fact justified. Dover Wilson, drawing attention to the steady and fantastic multiplication of buckram men in Falstaff's account of Gad's Hill, makes the inference that in going to such incredible lengths Falstaff cannot expect to be believed:

> the exaggerations . . . are of quite a different order from the rest . . . the number of enemies . . . mounts in a regular series, in a kind of arithmetical progression, two, four, seven, nine, eleven . . .

So, Dover Wilson concludes, Falstaff 'very well knows what he is about'; 'he holds the trump card'—since his explanation is 'nothing but the simple truth'.[1] He did in fact know the Prince all the time. Truly, 'Instinct is a great matter': and, if we follow Dover Wilson, she is justified of her buckram men.

To argue in this way is of course to insist upon a refinement beyond the fooling offered in the text—the 'incomprehensible lies' forecast by Poins

> how thirty, at least, he fought with . . . and in the reproof of this lives the jest.

It is, too, to run counter to the weight of the evidence the whole play affords in presenting Falstaff the fatly prudent man of war, balancing a minimum risk against a maximum possibility of advancement. 'What *really* happened at Gad's Hill?' is a question Dover Wilson will have nothing to do with; for 'nothing ever "really happens" on the stage'. However that may be, we may venture to suggest what really happens in the Boar's Head Tavern. Falstaff senses his questioners are getting uncomfortably close; so he begins his 'arithmetical progression'—not, indeed, hoping to be believed. But this is not because 'he holds the trump card'. It is because he wishes to move the whole interrogation away from the factual, What *did* happen?, to the fantastic—which cheats them of their triumph, gives him a breathing-space—and thus prepares for the thumping lie. For lie it is. Shakespeare's art is to link disguise of dress inseparably with that of pretended purpose. To take away the truth of Hal's retort upon Falstaff's boasted penetration is to undo the art of a play where the shows of things are the centre of attention. 'Instinct' is the final comment upon the blindness of what pretends to be shrewdly realistic—in Falstaff no less than in Henry Bolingbroke.

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[1] *op. cit.*, pp. 53-6.

The 'medieval' approach to this play may be seen at its most rigorous in its easy justification of Falstaff's Rejection. Thus, Dover Wilson would discredit Falstaff's love for the Prince; 'the old humbug's professions of affection are no more to be credited than his offers of marriage'. So, when the sentence falls, it is easy to echo Johnson's cool verdict:

> but if it be considered that the fat knight has never uttered one sentiment of generosity, and with all his power of exciting mirth, has nothing in him that can be esteemed, no great pain will be suffered from the reflection that he is compelled to live honestly, and maintained by the King, with a promise of advancement when he shall deserve it.[1]

One is reminded of the dictum of La Rochefoucauld:

> Nous avons tous assez de force pour supporter les maux d'autrui.

Perception of the striking simplicity of the overall design should not allow us to ignore the human truth of its execution. At the Rejection it is important to keep our eyes upon Falstaff. Before the King appears we have seen him busily promising his favours: he will 'make the King' do 'grace'. There can be a total disregard of all other appearances—the 'poor show' of everyday attire—beside the great appearance of 'zeal':

> to stand stained with travel, and sweating with desire to see him; thinking of nothing else, putting all affairs else in oblivion, as if there were nothing else to be done but to see him.

For Falstaff the King's crowning is a relatively unimportant occasion; what matters is the long-awaited era it begins. So, with the rejection of his first salutation, Falstaff thrusts between King and Lord Chief Justice, calling upon the King in the familiar terms of old friendship:

> My King! my Jove! I speak to thee,
> my heart!

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[1] *ibid.*, pp. 104, 122.

Then the sentence is given; and the words 'I know thee not' are the conclusion of a theme that, sounded in Hal's first soliloquy, 'I know you all', had been all but revealed to Falstaff in the play-acting of the Tavern. 'Knowledge', we remember, was to end the duality of real and apparent:

> *Prince* That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan.
>
> *Fal.* My lord, the man I know.
>
> *Prince* I know thou dost.
>
> *Fal.* But to say I know more harm in him than in myself were to say more than I know.

It was a triumphant defence against any distinction between 'youth' and its 'misleader'. Now, at the Rejection, Falstaff must know, if ever he is to know, that the new King holds there is equal 'harm' in both the former Hal and his companion, Falstaff. But we must mark Falstaff's words: and, incredible as it may seem, there is no penetration to this truth. Falstaff's first thought is for the immediate present:

> Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pound.

But his next is an unshaken confidence in the future: for now he has the answer. The King's public appearance is one thing, his private company another:

> I shall be sent for in private to him. Look you, he must seem thus to the world.

So they need not fear their 'advancements'; Falstaff will be as good as his word. What they have heard 'was but a colour': and they must go off to dine in the expectation that Falstaff will 'be sent for soon at night'. Any interpretation which would take this as *bravura*, a desperate attempt to keep up appearances, or even merely temporizing, is out of court, as running counter to the whole weight of the play. Shallow perceives the truth of Falstaff's being rejected; and, with it, Falstaff's illusion as incurable. If this is a 'colour', then it is

> A colour that I fear you will die in, Sir John.

Falstaff's continuing conviction has been that whatever the masks they adopt, inwardly men do not change. Revelry behind locked doors is his whole and innocent notion of enthroned Kingship. So he has chosen the wrong time to accost his boon-companion; it was 'but a colour', and he will be 'sent for soon at night'. But he is indeed wrong. The night is the time of a King's watching, those 'careful' hours which, apprehended in bitterness by the father, are to be experienced by the son in the fullness of time, before his cause can be approved. Then, truly, we shall know that there can be no colours in the dark.

On Falstaff's part there is genuine love. Only by understanding this can we enter into the essential situation—Hal's willed isolation over against Falstaff's invincible faith that men do not change; that sovereignty can be confidently asked to drop the mask; that the King must be the thing that he was. The theme of outward appearance and inward reality has come to its decisive issue. Its decisive issue, we may note, but not its final development. The newness of Hal's resolve is deftly marked by the jest into which he nearly falls, looking once more on Falstaff's familiar bulk:

> know the grave doth gape
> For thee thrice wider than for other men.

He immediately recovers, and, as Warburton notes, 'checks both himself and the knight, with—

> Reply not to me with a fool-born jest.[1]

We might add that the momentary lack of balance is marked by the energy of protest in the recovery:

> For God doth know, so shall the world perceive,
> That I have turn'd away my former self;
> So will I those that kept me company.

We thus end *Henry IV* with one kind of reality asserted—a reality of purpose in the young King that had come as a surprise both to Hal's father and to the King's enemies, notably the 'child of honour and renown', Hotspur. The rebel illusion is at an end: the rule of Law is upheld. Similarly, reality in the individual is disclosed, in the blindness of Falstaff and the willed isolation of Hal. But the story does not end there. In tragic experience final reality is not to be contracted with. It is a scheme of things that will answer no man's bidding, and will correspond perfectly to no man's planning.

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[1] Quoted by Dover Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

III

In *Henry V* we open with reminders of the past; but there is not merely the assurance of true lineage and thus title to France; there is also the taunt which arises from the nearer past, the former Hal's waywardness. The Dauphin's message is contemptuous of this gadabout:

> there's nought in France
> That can be with a nimble galliard won.

The Dauphin, Hal understands well, 'comes o'er us with our wilder days': he, at least, presumes that the King is the thing he was. And, as the past comes home in this present contempt, so too it comes home (in Act II Scene 2) with the exposure of treachery in Scroop, Cambridge and Grey. In this scene we hear again the theme of appearance and reality in one of its main aspects, the professions of men as against their concealed purposes. The King's bitter denunciation of Scroop as the worst of traitors expresses his wonder at the incredible nature of treachery, of seeming one thing and appearing another. Scroop had been the King's trusted confidant: is he perhaps made to bear the weight of condemnation which the King would have had for another in his place, the banished Falstaff? 'Thou', the King cries, who

> didst bear the key of all my counsels . . .

and

> almost mightst have coin'd me into gold . . .

We remember 'My King, my Jove!', the golden shower that

Falstaff confidently looked for. Here it is a storm that bursts—

> Wouldst *thou* have practis'd on me for thy use!
> . . . 'Tis so strange
> That, though the truth of it stands off as gross
> As black and white, my eye will scarcely see it.

Scroop's treachery, indeed, excels all: for the usual thing is to

> botch and bungle up damnation
> With patches, colours, and with forms, being fetch'd
> From glist'ring semblances of piety.

But Scroop was perfect in the 'show' and 'seem' of outward behaviour. The King moves one step nearer to isolation in perceiving an offence which must taint all men; it

> hath left a kind of blot
> To mark the full-fraught man and best indued
> With some suspicion.

Scroop's revolt is indeed 'like Another fall of man'.

With an end of misplaced trust the theme of the ruler's sole responsibility sounds more strongly. We had heard it first in the King's reception of the Dauphin's mockery:

> some are yet ungotten and unborn
> That shall have cause to curse the Dauphin's scorn.

We hear it again from Exeter, as envoy to the French Court: if the French King provokes war the guilt will be his—

> on your head
> Turning the widows' tears, the orphans' cries,
> The dead men's blood, the privy maidens' groans,
> For husbands, fathers, and betrothed lovers,
> That shall be swallowed in this controversy.

All this is preparation for the 'little touch of Harry in the night' (Act IV Scene I), where the King comes to his maturity in accepting responsibility for all as his inescapable lot. But in this scene the last gambit of appearance and reality is indeed surprising. What the King proposes is not entirely what is disposed for him.

'Harry le Roy' is the last disguise the former madcap will put on: and his qualifications for playing a role are surely sound enough. Certainly, we begin with unshaken confidence. The King, he says, is but a man; so he must fear—and yet there should be no 'appearance' of fear. This noble sentiment is rudely douched by John Bates:

> He may show what outward courage he will; but I believe, as cold a night as 'tis, he could wish himself in Thames up to the neck; and so I would he were, and I by him, at all adventures, so we were quit here.

It is incurable; and so Henry's illusion must go. Humanity at large, his subjects, are one with Falstaff in believing that outward and inward are wholly and irreconcilably different things; and that what is hidden is prudent, self-interested humanity, like to their own, the world of 'private men'. It is well for the King to perceive that inward and outward must be made one in himself. But let him not expect his subjects to grasp this self-dedication. Yet the King tries for understanding once more. This time it is on the level of honour—'his cause being just and his quarrel honourable'; and it meets with the flat refusal

> That's more than we know—

and the prudent corollary

> Ay, or more than we should seek after; for we know enough if we know we are the King's subjects.

Now he has the other half of the truth: understanding is not to be looked for; and remoteness is expected of him. The willed separateness begins to perceive that kingship is in fact isolation: it is not dependent upon the King's choosing that all is laid upon the King. So, too, there can be cynicism for a King's promises; and there is a sting here for the Hal who was taunted by his own father as one

like enough, through vassal fear,
Base inclination, and the start of spleen,
To fight against me under Percy's pay.

It is this Hal who must hear his vow not to be ransomed taken as an empty profession:

> Ay, he said so, to make us fight cheerfully; but when our throats are cut he may be ransom'd, and we ne'er the wiser.

The former Hal thus comes to his maturity at last in the discovery of himself when all have left him, alone. All is laid upon the King. It is a 'hard condition'; but monarchy has accepted it with its regal 'We must bear all'. Kingship is not 'ceremony'; it is not 'poison'd flattery'; for the King commanding 'the beggar's knee' cannot 'Command the health of it'. Certainly it is not the outward trappings of state, those garments hiding the reality that we are to hear much of in the major tragedies:

'Tis not the balm, the sceptre, and the ball,
The sword, the mace, the crown imperial,
The intertissued robe of gold and pearl . . .

Hal is gone forever in the realization and authority of his knowledge—

I am a king that find thee.

The reality is endless vigilance, the sleeplessness that marks the King off forever from the 'private' man.

Now for the first time since the Rejection the link between humanity and kingship, between 'private' man and monarch, can be restored. Once isolation is seen as the fact of kingship, the King is returned to humanity on a different level. He is to find his kin among those who suffer with him:

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother.

One great anxiety remains; the guilt of Henry Bolingbroke lies heavy upon the son. Before Agincourt we have the prayer

Not to-day, O Lord,
O, not to-day, think not upon the fault
My father made in compassing the crown!

The prayer is heard; and relief after Agincourt is not merely exultation in the English feat of arms. Divine approval rests on the King; no more is to be heard of Henry Bolingbroke's offence:

O God, thy arm was here!
And not to us, but to thy arm alone,
Ascribe we all . . .

It is an end of anxiety: so we fitly conclude with marriage, and thus the union of England and France.

IV

This tetralogy of 'history' plays illustrates strikingly two truths which are of incalculable importance in Shakespeare's tragic art. The first is this: that the world of appearance is largely the world of illusion, and the illusion is the projection of ourselves, our dominant interests. Thus there is blindness to what is outside our own conception; and so our guesses about each other can be disastrously wrong. This we see above all in the relation of parent and child: the one thing in the created universe that eludes understanding is our own motives confronting us in our own flesh and blood. Conversely, the projection of our own motives on to another can lead only to disillusion; though the nature of that disillusion may be something we cannot grasp, our condition being perhaps, like Falstaff's, incurable.

Secondly, reality, the shape of things, that which will not be altered, is not finally conformable to our best intentions, our deepest affections, or, surprisingly, our most strongly willed purposes. As with our guesses about each other, so it is with our guesses at reality; they will be in greater or less degree inadequate. This carries its own lesson for those who would closely study the plays. In the present instance, many critics have understood the framework of Elizabethan Law, the sacredness of monarchy, and the morality-pattern in which a Lord of Misrule runs his licensed course. But the play, the whole play, is greater than all these; and if we follow it in its whole extent from *Richard II* to *Henry V* we see that the theme of appearance and reality must run its full course before the King can learn that what he has willed is what was always required, and that in unsparing measure. The isolation he had sought is indeed isolation; and the world of 'private men', banished with Falstaff, has in fact the last word of limited understanding, to disclaim all responsibility. Nothing less can bring about this presentation of absolute isolation with boundless responsibility: 'We must bear all'. There is a third thing, minor in the scale of this play, but unmistakably guaranteeing the reality of what we attend to, and of major importance in fully tragic design. The young King must learn a lesson of the greatest significance in the Shakespearian scheme of things. It is that the consequences of our 'mistreadings' do not end when we will them to. Hal's 'reformation' is one thing; but the Dauphin's mockery springs from his past deeds, not his new-found words. Act and consequence are not to be set aside, least of all when it is a monarch who would do so. As to the dramatic design of the whole, we see that for Shakespeare's purpose the blindness of love is a greater thing than any mere victory of Reason over Passion. The richness of these plays is therefore preserved. They offer no simple or single issues. Law is one thing; and obedience to it is good: the Lord Chief Justice is accepted and Falstaff is rejected. 'Ceremony', too, when understood for what it is, is good; the gravity and outward appearances of the monarch are not to be overset by boisterous familiarity on the day of his Coronation; for in the true King the public and private character can never be divorced. These things are approved; but neither is any final guide to reality—a reality which retains throughout its capacity to surprise. The whole story is full of surprises, not least for those who had most soundly planned their separate courses, the two Bolingbrokes, as well as the blindly credulous Falstaff. A drama of appearance and reality is a drama of purposes largely gone awry. In the next chapter we must follow the question of surprise a stage further, by asking how far we may be brought to ends not of our own choosing. Is man agent or patient of his destiny?

Chapter Two

AGENT OR PATIENT?

I

WE are now to consider that tragedy in which surprise manifestly plays the largest part. From the thrilling opening on the battlements, with the Ghost come to proclaim what hitherto had not been known, through the stirring thrust and counter-thrust of a plot in which the avenger now delays, now, more rarely, attempts to strike back at his enemies, right up to the last duel, with its decisive weighting of the odds against an honourable man who yet would enact revenge—*Hamlet* offers surprise upon surprise. It is a crowded and complex play, and as such may remind us of *Henry IV*, where also there was concealment of purpose, and a day of reckoning that could not be indefinitely postponed. But *Hamlet* has another and greater surprise, which carries a stage further this pattern, complex enough as it already is. In *Henry V*, reality had yet a surprise for the King on the eve of his final testing in battle; so that we cannot point to a simple 'right' or 'wrong' in the long drawn-out exchanges of *Henry IV*. So, too, in this play, in the end we cannot say that the problem which is posed is solved. There is no plucking out the heart of Hamlet's mystery: and it is as well to say so at the outset. Once again, it is the capacity of reality to surprise us; as it is the dramatist's privilege and genius to withhold final answers and yet satisfy our sense of the real.

Certainly, the question we have been preparing for is of no small importance. It may be put thus. Since, as we have seen, men make such notable mistakes about each other, can man ever know himself? Is he to be always subject to the surprise with which reality finally confronts him, and therefore the patient, never the agent, of his destiny? The issue is posed for us in that Hamlet discovers he is the son of a murdered father. On him there falls the duty of revenge. He may not choose to fulfil this duty; his is the choice only of means. Accepting the role of avenger, he is within these limits the agent, driving all before him in the furious prosecution of revenge. He must be 'bloody, bold and resolute'. But this is not suited to Hamlet's nature; quite how, we shall know in those great soliloquies which open up the fabric of the soul itself. Thus, in so far as he refuses to embrace the role of avenger, Hamlet becomes the patient of it; and he must spurn himself for the very search into his own nature which would discover causes for delay:

> This is most brave
> That I, the son of a dear father murder'd,
> Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
> Must, like a whore, unpack my heart with words! . . .

We see that what this play offers for our permanent enrichment, the deep probing into the nature of man, though central to our understanding, yet lies on the margin of Hamlet's attention. His concern is to find causes for his inability to act. We see, progressively, that his nature is opposed to the simple demand of vengeance; and in his desperation he will contemplate all things under the sun (except the duty of revenge). But we do not know whether Hamlet's inquiry will at last uncover the truth, the cause of his inability to *be* the avenger, as distinct from his acceptance of the duty of revenge. In the end, the mere inquiry is not terminated but laid aside, unfinished, for ever. In the end Hamlet acts, and acts decisively. But we may remain for ever in doubt about the significance of his last act. For what he does in justice in one sense makes redundant what he was to have done as an avenger. The mere argument, Hamlet's agonized contemplation of man 'crawling between earth and heaven', reaches a conclusion in which nothing is concluded. But the name of action is at last preserved.

There is thus an ample opportunity for critical conjecture; and it is an opportunity which has been amply taken. It follows that any new account of the play must go some way to accounting for this universal and unending appeal; and, too, for its enormous discrepancies—differences, we may note, not only between critic and critic but within the same critic's account. Where there are two *Hamlet* critics there may be three opinions. Why so? This, too, is one of the facts with which criticism must reckon: and far from daunting it should encourage us. For there is clearly no profit to be had in emulating the man who would set out to read all the books about *Hamlet*. He, we remember, 'would have time to read nothing else, not even *Hamlet*'.[1] We must confront the play itself. Let us begin by trying to answer from the play the simplest of questions which it prompts: Why does Hamlet delay his revenge?

II

What is revenge? There are two things which it is not: the first is Justice—'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth', simple requital, measure for measure. Revenge must be 'pressed down and running over'; it demands disproportion. It does not ask merely that the malefactor must pay the penalty of death—that is Justice. Hamlet nearly achieves that, and saves himself from it in time, when he withholds from killing Claudius at his prayers:

> A villain kills my father; and for that,
> I, his sole son, do this same villain send
> To heaven.
> Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.

Not the fact of death, but the manner of dying is the essential requirement. Hamlet's father was hurled into eternity, as the Ghost has proclaimed:

> Unhous'led, disappointed, unanel'd.

So Claudius must be despatched when he is

> about some act
> That has no relish of salvation in 't—

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[1] F. P. Wilson, *Elizabethan and Jacobean* (Oxford, 1945), p. 116.

Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes.

It is of course a stroke of profound irony that as Hamlet makes off Claudius rises from the posture of prayer. His words were one thing; his thoughts another—they had remained below. Hamlet's revenge could have been accomplished in the one stroke. But the irony turns upon an essential point: the avenger who unwittingly achieved mere justice would have lamentably and absurdly failed of his purpose. The point is vital, as we shall see, to what happens last of all.

Secondly, revenge is not Honour; and this, too, is vital to an understanding of Hamlet face to face with Laertes. The avenger must be 'bloody, bold and resolute'; and such Laertes is. Shakespeare makes clear what we are attending to when he places Hamlet's delaying in the same context as Laertes's instant decision to show himself 'in deed' his 'father's son More than in words'. Claudius, preparing Laertes, comments on the difference between will and act:

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 . . .

So, as Hamlet had sadly admitted,

enterprises of great pitch and moment,
With this regard, their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

The same truth comes in plainer language from Claudius:

And then this 'should' is like a spendthrift's sigh
That hurts by easing.

Hamlet's has been a world of words: but Laertes needs no prompting; he is a man of few words. Claudius's speech concludes:

what would you undertake
To show yourself in deed your father's son
More than in words?

The reply is in seven words and seven syllables:

To cut his throat i' th' church.

Claudius speaks for all avengers in the old tradition:

No place, indeed, should murder sanctuarize;
Revenge should have no bounds.

But if Hamlet's procrastination thus stands out in relief, so, too, does Laertes's brutality. The balance is held even. They are to meet under the honourable terms of a duel, 'a pass of practice'; but Laertes can gladly accept Claudius's assurance that Hamlet's honourable nature will be his undoing:

He, being remiss,
Most generous, and free from all contriving,
Will not peruse the foils.

The rest is simple:

so that with ease
Or with a little shuffling, you may choose
A sword unbated, and, in a pass of practice,
Requite him for your father.

The 'requital', let us notice, is by devious and dishonourable means: it is thus that the 'honourable' man will proceed. The irony is deepened when Hamlet regrets his anger with Laertes at the grave-side. He generously takes virtue at his own valuation:

by the image of my cause I see
The portraiture of his.

Hamlet is mistaken. Shakespeare has conveyed the empty rant of the traditional revenge play, as one critic notes,[1] in the scene of Laertes's leaping into his sister's grave with the cry—

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[1] Percy Simpson, 'The Theme of Revenge in Elizabethan Tragedy', British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1935, p. 17 (reprinted in *Studies in Elizabethan Drama*, Oxford, 1955, pp. 138-70).

> Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead,
> Till of this flat a mountain you have made
> T' o'er-top old Pelion or the skyish head
> Of blue Olympus.

Hamlet's stinging rejoinder—

> Nay, an thou'lt mouth,
> I'll rant as well as thou—

puts this fustian contemptuously aside. The same resounding rhetoric is to be heard in the terms of Laertes's earlier rejection of all other considerations beside those of revenge:

> To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!
> Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
> I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
> That both the worlds I give to negligence,
> Let come what comes; only I'll be reveng'd
> Most throughly for my father.

And this is the dare-all who agrees to be 'rul'd' by Claudius in a covert trick to be carried off

> with ease
> Or with a little shuffling.

We see the significance of the dead father's charge to his son, 'Taint not thy mind'. Laertes's trickery is a 'point' to which Hamlet may not come.

This in its turn corresponds with the difference in character between Hamlet the truly honourable man and Laertes the man aflame to vindicate 'honour' who will descend to treachery. 'Honour' is thus played upon. Before the duel, the very exemplification of an honourable code, Hamlet freely asks pardon:

> What I have done
> That might your nature, honour, and exception
> Roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.

The appeal is to Laertes as to 'a gentleman'; it is nobly addressed to his 'most generous thoughts'. But it receives only dissimulation in reply:

> I am satisfied in nature,
> Whose motive in this case should stir me most
> To my revenge—

there is the lie direct; and now the man of honour speaks—

> but in my terms of honour
> I stand aloof.

This is the 'honour' that sanctions the treachery of the unbated and envenomed foil. The honour of free trust is opposed to the 'honour' of the vengeful man. We thus deepen an antithesis seen in *Henry IV*, where the 'honour' of Percy was contrasted with that of Hal. Percy dies honourably, and receives an appropriate tribute from his opponent. But in *Hamlet* the false 'honour' is seen to be not merely wrong-headed but plainly criminal, descending to treachery in the worst Italianate way,[1] just as the 'unnatural' in *King Lear* descends to savagery. Differences must grow to a point in the tragic vision. In the present play, the one who will act, the unhesitating agent of vengeance, is seen to be the patient of others. The language in which Laertes accepts control reminds us that the difference between him and Hamlet reaches to a fundamental difference in human nature:

> My lord, I will be rul'd
> The rather, if you could devise it so
> That I might be the organ.

The truly vengeful man will submit to any course that prosecutes revenge: and so he becomes the patient of others' designs. The double sense of 'organ' may remind us of Hamlet, who prefers before all others the man

> That is not passion's slave,

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[1] On the significance of Laertes's 'extreme touchiness of spirit', see Paul N. Siegel, *Shakespearian Tragedy and the Elizabethan Compromise* (New York, 1957), pp. 111, 206-7.

those

> Whose blood and judgement are so well comeddled,
> That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
> To sound what stop she please.

His greatest wrath descends upon those who would 'play' upon him, a practice 'as easy as lying'; for this is to make man an unworthy thing compared with a mere musical instrument

> You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak.

It is imagery that suitably follows a 'play' in which Claudius was successfully played upon. Hamlet's confidence in his stratagem was justified:

> For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak
> With most miraculous organ.

Claudius was a fit thing to play upon; for he is one of passion's slaves. But the truly honourable man will be the agent of his destiny, at whatever cost; and the final cost may be in making an end of argument. When put to shame at sight of the Norwegian expedition, Hamlet fully recognizes the futility of 'honour' in the avenger's sense, the amazing disproportion between offence and requital which makes the occasion 'a fantasy and trick of fame':

> Rightly to be great
> Is not to stir without great argument,
> But greatly to find quarrel in a straw,
> When honour's at the stake.

This is all that 'godlike reason' can conclude. Hamlet is not deceived; but for him there can be only one ending—not a conclusion to the debate but an abandonment of the search:

> O, from this time forth,
> My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

So much for revenge as we meet it in this play of Shakespeare's. We have seen that Hamlet's nature appears to be at odds with a duty he none the less accepts. How far is this a unique demonstration? If we are to ask how the Elizabethan audience may have apprehended Hamlet, we must see how the matter of revenge is presented in other plays of the period, including those of Shakespeare.

III

The tragedy of revenge, however treated by the dramatist, quickly became a dominant form. Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* marked out a course fruitful for his successors in presenting the delays of Hieronimo before achieving the final carnage that the genre demands. The delay in Kyd serves this main end, a mounting horror at last resolved in the blood-bath. Hieronimo delays; at first in despair of executing vengeance, later in doubt whether to leave his wrongs to Divine retribution: but finally he accepts the role of avenger, and his last act is the very top and bent of revenge. The murder play with which he 'fits' the evil-doers fulfils his dark promise; vengeance is exacted

> not as the vulgar wits of men
> With open, but inevitable ills,
> As by a secret, yet a certain mean,
> Which under kindship will be cloaked best.

It is easy enough to ridicule the *Spanish Tragedy*; and the modern reader would not be the first to do so. Kyd's play proved a real 'get-penny'. But not, I fancy, solely for its lurid qualities, though they are prominent enough. Let us remember that the madness of Hieronimo was originally 'a natural touch . . . the outcome of the intolerable delay'.[1] The later hands that irreverently pointed this up into melodramatic rant moved the emphasis from a natural to a purely theatrical effect. The real focus of attention in Kyd's play was where it ought to be, upon man caught between earth and heaven. The distinctive contribution of the bad old tragedy of unquestioned revenge—'blood will have blood' —is to put a limit to man's sphere of action. Precisely in so far as the duty of revenge is axiomatic, there is an end to the freedom of the avenger. Hieronimo stabbing in savage futility at the earth offers the true appeal of revenge-tragedy. In the pitiless foreclosing of their destiny upon them, the company of avengers is revealed as fellows 'crawling between earth and heaven'; for both secular precept and divine counsel are other than vengeance. The avenger is one who takes it upon himself to say, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay'. It is no mere device of theatre that a purpose so dire should be, in all save the wicked or degenerate, not easily sustained. Equally, it is no accident that those who must come to whet the avenger's purpose rise from infernal regions, fresh from such sights as would 'harrow up' the soul. Andrea's Ghost has gazed upon

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[1] Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

> the deepest hell,
> Where bloody Furies shakes their whips of steel,
> And poor Ixion turns an endless wheel.

We may mark the change in power when the lurid detail of Kyd gives way to the melancholy reticence of a Ghost who would spare his son's sensibilities. But the central situation in the play of revenge is unalterable: it is of man condemned by inescapable warrant to prosecute a lonely and perilous course towards carnage, in which the innocent and the guilty alike may perish. As such, though it may be in garish colour, the revenge-kind underlines a central lesson of Elizabethan tragedy—the endurance, the ripeness, with which man must learn to confront his lot, the shocks that flesh is heir to. In the old tragedy of blood, the lesson of suffering is, if we will, rubricated for us.

There is, however, another use of delay which later dramatists are to employ, writers who come after *Hamlet* and are not slow to learn from it. This use of delay may best be seen in Tourneur's *Atheist's Tragedy* and in Chapman's *Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*. In both these plays, the avenger delays, not from despair or indecision which are finally rejected in favour of the duty of revenge, but—and this is of capital importance for our inquiry—because there is a scruple about revenge itself. The duty of revenge, finally triumphant in Kyd, is called into question throughout: is it justice? The Ghost of Tourneur's play maintains that we mortals must leave vengeance to Heaven. It is the Ghost who tells Charlemont that he is a wronged man; but the same Ghost adds

Attend with patience the success of things,
But leave revenge unto the King of kings.

Later, when Charlemont, drawing to defend himself, is about to kill his assailant in the name of 'Revenge' the Ghost intervenes:

Hold, Charlemont!
Let Him revenge my murder, and thy wrongs,
To Whom the justice of revenge belongs.

'The justice of revenge'!: we have come a long way from the axiomatic compulsions of Kyd and Marston—and, as we shall see, the early Shakespeare. Tourneur's play tries to demonstrate, in its own queer fashion, the truth of the Ghost's solemn assertions: Charlemont, convinced of the truth, 'sums up' (the phrase is just):

Only to heaven I attribute the work,
Whose gracious motives made me still forbear
To be mine own revenger. Now I see
That Patience is the Honest Man's Revenge.

Chapman's play, three or four years later, rejects this simple solution, 'leave it to Heaven'. Tourneur's hero had been the lay-figure in the demonstration of this moral. Chapman's hero, Clermont, has wholly explicit scruples about the justice of revenge. He asks:

Shall we revenge a villainy with a villainy? . . .
Shall we equal be
With villains?

There can be only one conclusion—

> We must wreak our wrongs
> So as we take not more.

Revenge on these terms appears impossible; and Clermont repents his earlier acceptance of the duty of vengeance. Now he is certain of his real duty:

> All worthy men should ever bring their blood
> To bear an ill not to be wreak'd with good.

Law is to have first place:

> Never private cause
> Should take on it the part of public laws.

But this will not serve the needs of drama: the guilty must not go wholly unrequited. So the last Act opens with the Ghost of Bussy, the murdered man, risen from 'the chaos of eternal night', to controvert this view of Clermont. This Ghost, 'the most philosophic Ghost in Elizabethan drama',[1] roundly condemns Clermont and proclaims man's duty to exact retribution:

> Away then! use the means thou hast to right
> The wrong I suffer'd.

Clermont consents to perform his duty of vengeance, but only on the terms of a fair duel: and so the evil-doer is despatched, dying with pardon for Clermont and receiving in turn Clermont's forgiveness. Honour is satisfied; the wrong-doer has been fairly punished. The wild justice of Revenge has been overruled in the justice of even combat.

Now, both these plays exhibit clear reminiscences of *Hamlet*. Indeed, in Chapman's case, as modern scholars have pointed out, this is the only play of his which shows an unmistakable debt to Shakespeare. It is at least possible that this major variation in the revenge matter, the debating the issue revenge versus justice, following as it does on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, may demonstrate what Shakespeare's immediate audience and his fellow-dramatists apprehended in the Prince of Denmark—a reluctance to act which springs from a scruple about the justice of revenge. Is it so? There is a capital difficulty: Hamlet nowhere explicitly calls in question his duty of revenge. He loathes it, spurns himself for loathing it, yet nowhere questions it as the deed he is bound to enact. Indeed, after the terrific success of The Mousetrap, as we have seen, Hamlet is hot for blood: he spares the kneeling Claudius only because to kill the king at prayer would not be vengeance. Hamlet is here the true avenger.

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[1] Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

What then shall we say of the cause of Hamlet's delay? If it were a scruple about the justice of revenge, would it not be odd indeed that the dramatist has nowhere made this explicit? Alternatively, is there any reason assignable for the dramatist's making his hero call in question almost every thing under the sun except the duty of revenge?

Let us turn again to *The Atheist's Tragedy* and *The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois*. I think we may see at once what is wrong with these plays. Tourneur and Chapman have made an explicit conflict between the duty of revenge and the demands of justice. In making that conflict explicit they have insensibly destroyed the thematic unity of the revenge kind. For, raise and reiterate scruples about the obligations of revenge, and inevitably the universal issues will be subordinated; the focus of attention will be the point of honour and not the human agent. It is not thus that dramatic intensity is achieved. The power of presenting universal issues is lost; for all is subsumed under a single dilemma. The hero must bring all to the knife-edge of a single question—'How can vengeance be justice?' These heroes openly mouth their horror, indignation, or conditional acceptance of the task laid upon them. For an age addicted to the matter of revenge, this doubtless represents a new and pleasing variation on an old theme: accepting the axioms of the revenge play proper, the contemporary public could perhaps accept with little difficulty this ratiocinative element. But for a later age the situation of Charlemont and Clermont is perilously close to farce. The reason, I take it, is in the dramatists' having made wholly and elaborately explicit the conflict between revenge and justice. But how if they had portrayed such a conflict in the hero, the man on whom the duty of vengeance is inescapably laid, without allowing him to discover the nature of his aversion? In such a play we should surely have a situation which was that of pure tragedy—man condemned to do that which he feels is no true settlement of his wrongs; 'condemned', for example, by the inescapable authority of a father from beyond the grave. How, in effect, if that had already been done; and these dramatists were attempting, with less skill and with an eye to the real 'get-penny' qualities of the revenge play, to re-create such another scrupulous hero as had delayed his revenge upon Claudius, King of Denmark?

IV

If the suggestion has any substance we should look further into the general characteristics of Shakespeare's tragic production; and, more particularly, his handling of the revenge theme. The first of these is the general subject of this book. I therefore make certain summary statements, which are to be developed in other chapters, before passing to the revenge theme in particular.

We may begin by calling attention to that aspect of Shakespeare's art which, in all the vagaries of critical opinion, has never been seriously in dispute—his 'fund of Nature'. However difficult critics may have found it to accept the presuppositions of any given play, the data from which we start, they have agreed that what follows from those data is commonly elaborated in terms of 'universal human nature'. Make what we will of them, then, these are the data from which we are to proceed if we are to proceed at all. Modern criticism has re-emphasized and given a new setting to this acceptance by its insistence on the conventional bases of Elizabethan playwriting. Yet, as I stress in my next chapter, a just criticism will not fail to take account of Shakespeare's great creative power in relating the types and outlines of common Elizabethan dramatic usage to the human nature we know and feel for. If he exacts our willing suspension of disbelief at the outset, he nowhere requires it in the working out of the play. (I mean the major issues with which the play is concerned, and not those minor uses of convention—as, 'Impenetrable Disguise', and the like, which of course abound in him, though to be modified or superseded as suits his unrivalled sense of theatre.) Johnson noted that 'Even where the agency is supernatural the dialogue is level with life'. It is an observation which takes in the widest implications of Shakespeare's art.

It is this which surely compels our attention in his tragedies above all: and, as I suggest in my fourth chapter, even the Fate whose various operations we follow is, exactly in so far as the play's action is concerned, never other than a limitation of the hero's field of choice—a limitation wholly consonant with real experience, compelling the human agent, being such a man as he is, to make the choice that involves disaster. No Shakespearian malefactor is evil 'by a divine thrusting on'. We may start with a high degree of improbability, and may employ accepted convention in the transitions of the play: but nowhere are we dealing with other than recognizable human nature, persons distinguished by their power to accept or reject the choices open to them. That we should feel pity and fear, that the spectator should identify himself with the tragic hero—to bring this about is the tragic artist's aim. But it is achieved only when the course of the drama has seemed to us, sharing the hero's human nature, wholly 'probable or necessary'. One manifest intervention by the dramatist, and our attention is broken; and there is an end of all real interest.

If, then, this 'fund of Nature' is the dominant characteristic of Shakespeare's workmanship, it may be agreed that the revenge matter presents distinct problems. Vengeance proceeds upon simple compulsion: the deed is to be enacted; the rest is contrivance, and is, we see often enough, ingenuity at the top of its bent. It will hardly do to bring a profound knowledge of humanity to bear on the working out of the fable. For the duty of revenge demands a just remove from the 'natural' in the whole career of the successful avenger. If, alternatively, the duty of revenge is to be openly questioned, then all things must be brought to the test of a single question, To revenge or not to revenge? Bring in recognizable human nature, and the thematic unity is ruined; for, ask the question, 'How can I do this thing?' and any audience not infatuated with revenge is insensibly prompted to feel, 'Why do it at all?' For all that, the Elizabethans liked their revenge matter; no playwright whose living was the theatre could mulct them of the sensationalism they loved. If we consider Shakespeare's work in this field we may find that he has gone some way towards at once gratifying this taste and also making it theatrically plausible, towards shaping the matter in terms of his own characteristic workmanship.

I begin with *Titus Andronicus*. Here we have some attempt to present the matter of revenge in terms that do not violate our sense of the 'natural'. We are not delivered entire into a world of inordinate blood-lust, for it is placed at a remove from ordinary human concerns. This, be it noted, is not done by mitigation of horror: Aaron the Moor is flat evil; and Lavinia's entry, 'her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished', spares not even the least refined sensibility. Rather, the reverse is true. Aaron's wickedness is thoroughgoing to an almost Puckish extent. His excesses include those goblin-like activities that vex the countryman; he will

> Make poor men's cattle break their necks;
> Set fire on barns and hay-stacks in the night,
> And bid the owners quench them with their tears.

He is a fiend who gleefully confesses his wickedness—'almost broke my heart with extreme laughter'. His reply to the reproaches of the real world,

> Art thou not sorry for these heinous deeds?

is heartily unrepentant:

> Ay, that I had not done a thousand more.

We must not be like those critics who 'have failed to enjoy him, because they have not noticed how thoroughly he enjoys himself'.[1] But this is not to say that the play is plain burlesque. *Titus Andronicus* remains a 'tragedy in intention'[2]; but it is tragedy attempted in an unusual pattern. I do not think that the close comparison one editor drew between this play and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appeals merely to our curiosity.[3] The evil of Aaron, like the mischief of Puck, is limitless in its own sphere: but between them and the spectator art has placed a *cordon sanitaire.* Aaron's place is not in this world; but, as he himself confesses, in a fiery hell—

> So I might have your company in hell,
> But to torment you with my bitter tongue!

We shall see in a subsequent chapter how Shakespeare represents evil in the real world. Here, there is a dual treatment: where Aaron is wicked, he is given full rein, and wickedness overflows into impishness; but there is also an attempt to give him a credible human stature, in the scenes with his black child. The effect is to assure the spectator that the feigned events are related to the real world; but it is a world which contains the evil of Aaron and is not contained by it. In *Titus Andronicus* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* alike, and by comparable methods, our interest in the monstrous or the marvellous is unhampered, for they are at a safe remove. The supernormal is not presented as having a direct, if mysterious, relation with the world of real human concerns; that is the essential condition of tragic interest. Here, natural and unnatural occur side by side: the unnatural is in one sense quite arbitrary, but in another all too possible. The play's effectiveness depends on our acceptance of the normal and the supernormal existing together. From this point of view, it is true, the disasters that mortals bring upon their heads, by incurring the wrath of the fiends, are almost a kind of bad luck. But who, the play over, will deny that he knows what bad luck is?

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[1] Dover Wilson, Introduction to New Cambridge *Titus Andronicus* (Cambridge, 1948), p. lxiii.

[2] J. C. Maxwell, Introduction to 'New Arden' *Titus Andronicus* (London, 1953), p. xlii.

[3] H. B. Baildon, Introduction to Arden edn. (London, 1904), pp. lxvi ff., acknowledging indebtedness to Crawford, *Jahrb. der Deutschen Sh.-Gesellschaft* (Berlin, 1900), p. 109.

The solution of what to do with the vengeful man which we have just considered is, in effect, to give him full scope; wickedness cannot stop short at one main deed of revenge, but must overflow into sheer and thorough-going malice. In *Timon of Athens* this principle receives its largest extension. The injured Timon becomes a misanthrope: we see the spectacle of human life as it presents itself to him; and as such it makes no strain on our human awareness. Timon is the 'passionate' man of a familiar stage-tradition. It is as natural for him to hate the world at large as it was for Tamburlaine to subdue it to himself; for he is a perversion of our common nature. This the play emphasizes; there is no staying at the lonely eminence Timon occupies:

> Here lie I, Timon, who alive all living men did hate.
> Pass by, and curse thy fill; but pass, and stay not here thy gait.

Between *Titus* and *Timon* there occurs what I take to be a substantial rejection of the revenge matter, *Measure for Measure*. This difficult play has been variously condemned and praised; and it is no part of my present purpose to venture upon particular critical problems. Many critics—by no means all—have found difficulty in the awkward plot and the extremes of characterization, the cold viciousness of Angelo opposed to the inviolable chastity of Isabella. Of this, at least, we can be sure—this flat opposition, as a working method, is strangely unlike Shakespeare's work elsewhere. Not even *Troilus and Cressida*, which is often mentioned with it as a play about values rather than men and women, can compare with *Measure for Measure* in that most irritating device which strains our serious attention—the omnipresence of the disguised Duke. How should we take seriously the predicament of Claudio or Isabella once we know that the Duke is fully aware of these goings-on and will in his good time overrule all for good? Shakespeare is no mere journeyman of the theatre: how then to understand his choosing this strange presentation?

If we glance for a moment at Shakespeare's principal source, we may be better able to formulate the problem. In taking up Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra*, a play at least twenty-five years old, Shakespeare had necessarily to remodel not parts, but the whole—to shift from one theme to another; for taste had decisively changed in that quarter of a century. In Whetstone's play, Cassandra yields to Promos: Andrugio, her brother, spared by the gaoler, lurks in hiding until he comes to plead for Promos when the King has pronounced sentence on him. Now, acceptable as this may have been in Whetstone's day, it surely would not do for an audience habituated to revenge. Andrugio—Claudio—once his sister is shamed, and he released from prison, must become the avenger. It is not difficult to think what Tourneur or Webster would have made of such a plot—the harping on female chastity, Isabella's yielding in passionate shame, the dastardly act of Angelo in none the less exacting the penalty of Claudio's life—all this the very soul of that 'drug-damn'd Italy' which audiences found so enthralling. It is not, I believe, an improbable supposition that Shakespeare, whose very life was the theatre, saw in taking up the old play that if Isabella were to yield Claudio must become the avenger. The play came into existence when revenge was very much in vogue, in transition from its first 'classic' state, owing its main debt to Seneca: now

> Kyd, Marston, and Shakespeare provided them with all that they needed in the way of suggestion, and their work moves freely within the lines of what had now become a tradition of the English stage. The sole task which they set themselves was to vary the pattern.[1]

Mr Percy Simpson goes on to observe that the earliest of these non-Senecan plays, Chettle's *Hoffman*, was acted in

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[1] Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

1602, when the *Spanish Tragedy* was republished with the 'Additions': the popularity of the revenge play was assured. It is reasonable to suppose that, at this time, adherence to Whetstone's fable of Isabella sacrificing her honour would almost certainly call for a revenge treatment; Claudio the avenger would be the centre of interest, and the thematic unity of the story, forgiveness, inevitably overborne. Shakespeare therefore made Isabella utterly inflexible in her chastity—that characterization which is the starting-point of all recognition of the play's peculiar nature—and put it beyond question by making her a novice, so that a willed resolution, which must include the will to forgive, becomes the essential theme. As Professor Muir soundly observes, forgiveness in this play is

> not the forgiveness prompted by sexual passion as in Whetstone, nor even the magnanimity suggested in some of Giraldi's stories, but Christian forgiveness—that is, the forgiveness of enemies.[1]

Shakespeare was faced at once with a further problem: how to advance the play at all? Angelo must be shown as the perfidious wretch he is in all forms of the story, in order to effect the great scene of the play—the wronged Isabella pleading for his life. Shakespeare thus introduces the business of the Substituted Bride, suggested by the plot of a similar play of values, *All's Well*. But how to bring this plausibly in? He resorts to the unsatisfactory trick of the Duke's omnipresence. The world of *Measure for Measure* is one in which it is impossible to get lost. The disguised Duke hovers over all; he 'pulls the strings like a not-too-expert showman of marionettes'.[2] It is a sound complaint that the play thus falls into two irreconcilable halves. It 'changes its nature halfway through'; with the Duke in charge 'Reflection has encroached on reality'.[3] It is brave to claim, as some have done, that precisely this constitutes the play's distinctive appeal—a first part of mortal agency and consequent blunder giving way to a second part of patiency as Providence resolves all difficulties. There may indeed be

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[1] *Shakespeare's Sources*, Vol. I (London, 1957), p. 105.

[2] *Measure for Measure* (Cambridge, 1922), p. xv.

[3] E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays* (London, 1950), pp. 123, 126.

> a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we may.

But it is the dramatist's business to enable us to perceive this for ourselves, not flatly to demonstrate it. It is no wonder that some of the simpler characters cast about for explanations:

> They say this Angelo was not made by man and woman after this downright way of creation . . .

We may sympathize. There is no lack of special pleading that would turn us from the 'downright way of creation'. The trouble is, however, not in the pleas but in a play which, as Croce observed,

> fails to persuade us that it should have been thus developed and thus ended.[1]

If I am not wholly mistaken, Shakespeare has in this play implicitly rejected the matter of revenge as intractable, alien to his characteristic insight and methods.

I have suggested that the matter of revenge was, in general, peculiarly unattractive to Shakespeare as a working dramatist. Nevertheless revenge, properly handled, offers great possibilities: and the greatest is the presentation of the doomed man, one bidden by inescapable authority to certain acts. The intensity this offers is incalculable if the hero is bidden against his own conviction—more, against all desire and longing, if his very nature is revolted by what he must none the less perform. It was earlier suggested that we can detect how the inherent artificiality of revenge struck Shakespeare when we hear Laertes piling Pelion on Ossa over his sister's grave. So, too, we can feel the inherent absurdity that exchanges vast assertion—

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[1] Quoted in New Cambridge edition, p. xxv.

> To hell, allegiance! Vows, to the blackest devil!—

for the black-browed preparedness

> To cut his throat i' th' church;

and the 'honour' that, daring all in 'both the worlds', yet stoops to the fumbling deception of the foils, as something to be done

> with ease
> Or with a little shuffling.

There is no mistaking a Shakespearian standpoint in all this. It links with something of the greatest importance in his universe, to which we must return in each of the following chapters—the status accorded to self-conscious evil. We shall find that there is some correspondence between terrifying language and actions that are dreadfully immature. But what requires our present notice is that by the presence and activity of Laertes, the ready avenger, Hamlet's brooding upon the event is made sympathetic. We may not know the cause of reluctance to avenge. But we see and reject the whole scale of values which bloody resolution entails. So there is brought into unmistakable relief the unique situation of Hamlet, a man commanded to do what he has no assurance is right—the situation of pure tragedy. But in the presentation it is of the highest importance that the hero shall not call in question the duty of revenge. If that is done, the thematic unity is broken; we pass from tragic intensity to controversial ardour. The true solution is to make the hero call in question all things under the sun except the duty that is enjoined upon him; for from that he cannot escape.

This, I submit, is the tragic conflict in *Hamlet*; the hero averse from the deed that is required of him, seeking endlessly the cause of that aversion, calling it by any name but its own, and failing to know it for what it is. Some of the contemporary audience, and, more particularly, certain of Shakespeare's fellow-playwrights, apprehended it, too simply, as a conflict between Revenge and Justice. But the important consideration is that its nature remains unknown to Hamlet. Tourneur's and Chapman's heroes are aware of a conflict in these explicit terms; Hamlet is not. Shakespeare's triumph is to make the hero fail to understand himself. Hamlet gives us reasons enough for delay, causes none; for the cause remains unknown to him, and to us. In so doing, Shakespeare is able fully to meet the contemporary appetite for the sensationalism of revenge while avoiding its greatest peril, that the interest should be wholly of one order—either, in the play of axiomatic revenge, the questions How, and When?; or, in the other sort, a debate—Vengeance or Justice? Shakespeare is able to derive all the force of a mythology from the contemporary audience's acceptance of a central dilemma which the dramatist need nowhere make explicit. They feel, as we cannot, save by the exercise of the historical imagination, that Hamlet has in reality no choice but to work vengeance. They feel a despair which the modern critic too often localizes in Hamlet's temperament rather than his situation. It is not long, as we have seen, before other dramatists make this conflict explicit, because apparent to the hero. Their heroes call in question the very duty of revenge. In doing so, as we have seen, the dramatist must forgo the possibility of universalizing his theme; for the central issue has to be maintained at a wholly rational and therefore limited level. But in Shakespeare's handling of revenge we pass at one stroke from limitation to boundless scope. In the hero's failure to understand himself, we are nowhere localized to a single dilemma. Everywhere, by every resource of imaginative penetration, we are confronted with the eternal issue—Shall man endure this hostile universe? To be is to be the avenger; so all other questions fall into place. 'To be or not to be?—*that* is the question.'

V

If this interpretation is anywhere near the truth, certain episodes and utterances take on a deeper significance. For example, the play-scene: Hamlet's aim here is certainly to prove the authenticity of the Ghost; but more, I think—there is the suggestion of an intellectual's revenge. Claudius is to 'unkennel' 'his damned guilt'. If we see Hamlet as unwittingly a scrupulous avenger, there is the suggestion here of process of law following on the guilty man's confession. We recall Hieronimo's first impulse when the identity of his son's murderers is made known: he will 'cry aloud for justice through the Court'. But this resolve is overborne in Hieronimo; he will be revenged. If we conceive Hamlet averse from the deed of vengeance, the prospect of bringing Claudius to open confession may well loom large in the hopes he entertains of The Mouse-trap. We may therefore interpret the conclusion of Hamlet's soliloquy at the end of Act II thus: the best to be hoped for from the play is public confession from Claudius; and that will be as far as this 'avenger' need go. Law will attend to the rest. But even the least sign of disquiet will be proof of guilt to one already possessed of knowledge. The King is therefore to be watched intently, and in this Hamlet enlists the aid of Horatio. It will be unnecessary labour if Claudius should behave like those 'guilty creatures' Hamlet has heard of who were moved to proclaim 'their malefactions'. But of course it is vital that the least sign of uneasiness be detected. On this, then, Hamlet concentrates, and plans his meeting with Horatio after the play. There is no need to plan what is to be done if the best comes off and Claudius confesses himself a villain before his Court. For that is the resolution of his problem which Hamlet here seeks—the death of the malefactor publicly seen as punishment for injuries at last disclosed. But although only the second best is achieved, the excitement of proof sends Hamlet raging for blood. For the first time, he has acted; and action has 'tented' his enemy 'to the quick'. He becomes the true avenger. But, the fit past, aversion comes back with redoubled strength.

Again, if this view be accepted, there is a greater emphasis and significance for the theme of Death—'the subject of

Hamlet is death', says Professor C. S. Lewis.[1] In the Elizabethan acceptance of revenge there is no escape for Hamlet from his duty, except in death. Being involves only one necessity; so not-being is contemplated with longing, but hopelessly. Thus Hamlet recoils from a world into which it had been better not to be born. He sees humanity as propagated corruption; it is better that Ophelia go to a 'nunnery' than breed sinners. In this play the old tragedy of revenge, 'blood will have blood', comes face to face with the new; 'O cursed spite, That ever I was born to set it right!'

Revenge yet remains the deed Hamlet must spur himself to. Let us turn to his self-examination when put to shame at sight of the Norwegian expedition. Hamlet here makes the best analysis he can of the reasons for his delay:

> Now, whether it be
> Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple
> Of thinking too precisely on th' event—
> A thought, which, quarter'd, hath but one part wisdom
> And ever three parts coward—I do not know
> Why yet I live to say 'This thing's to do',
> Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
> To do't . . .

—'I do not know'. So he makes an end of knowledge, of the search for reasons:

> O, from this time forth,
> My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!

But whatever Hamlet fails to know, we the spectators have some knowledge of Hamlet that will enable us to interpret this tortured self-communing. We know that no 'bestial oblivion' has possession of Hamlet; that indeed the thought of his task will give him no rest. More, we know that Hamlet is no coward in the ordinary sense. He does not hesitate at the fact of bloodshed; not even the grim necessity of despatching his enemies, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, will deter him. Hamlet does not shrink from bloodshed in a fair cause; for it is a necessity of virtual warfare that these two be sent to death. And, most important, there is no hesitation in Hamlet when, engaged as he thinks in fair fight, he realizes that the foils are unbated. Deceived in the 'terms of honour', Hamlet strikes back, blow for blow. His enemies have betrayed him with the envenomed point; he will requite them in the same mode. And among them is that Claudius, King of Denmark, who, paying for his practice at Hamlet's life, pays at once for the greater wrong that has made Hamlet's a life in death. Hamlet's aversion to revenge is overborne in that duel which Chapman seized upon to resolve his hero's dilemma, the duel that in Chapman's play requites the evildoer while honourably acquitting the avenger. The comparison is of some importance. We must ask how far the duel resolves the essential problem in *Hamlet*; and we see that in fact it necessitates one further action before Shakespeare's hero can come to his end.

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[1] 'Hamlet: the Prince or the Poem?', British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1942, p. 12.

Hamlet turns his blade upon the King for his part in the treachery of the unbated and envenomed foils. Immediately he strikes the King with the envenomed point, there is Claudius's death accomplished; but not therefore Hamlet's revenge. Indeed, as we saw when Hamlet spared the kneeling Claudius, an avenger who unwittingly achieved mere justice would have lamentably failed. Revenge tragedy is readily productive of situations in which the engineer is hoist with his own petar. Here would be a new and lamentable variation—to have unwittingly accomplished justice, while allowing the opportunity of vengeance to recede for ever! So now at last Hamlet acts. Claudius is already poisoned to the death for his part in treachery: but Hamlet, publishing the King's deeper guilt, will force the poisoned wine between his teeth. Hamlet thus chooses to be the avenger in the moment when all choice is fast ebbing away, for both he and his victim are hastening to death. Death has come to Claudius by no means that Hamlet had premeditated; Hamlet will therefore despatch the King in obedience to his father's command. Hamlet has not solved his great question; but now that what he was bidden to exact as revenge has been impetuously accomplished as a just return for treachery, he postpones for ever his questioning. It is the last and greatest surprise of the play. If we fail to perceive Hamlet's willed act, we shall continue to think of him as a failure, one who 'does not acquire efficacy', and therefore risks our sympathy by showing 'little enough heroism'.[1] If we miss its quality of desperate obedience, then we are likely to subscribe to some such theory as that of Fredson Bowers, who would persuade us that Hamlet recognizes a heaven-sent opportunity to act as 'minister' and not 'scourge'.[2] The fact is that Hamlet is all but defeated; but out of the jaws of defeat he snatches the spectacular victory that turns mere requital into a conscious vengeance. Hamlet, then, achieves his end; but not 'honourably', as Chapman's fantastic Clermont is to do; for the centre of interest in Shakespeare's play is not in the ethic of revenge, but in the overburdened human agent.

VI

What then shall we say of man as agent or patient? The duel which resolves Hamlet's problem does so by cutting the Gordian knot. Hamlet finds himself the agent of justice, requiting treachery point for point. He finds himself, too, the patient of treacherous 'honour', for he is all but cheated of his revenge, and is thus compelled at last to choose. All choice is slipping from his grasp in the moment that he acts. We can say, if we will, that in the end he is the agent; he chooses to be the avenger. But we must notice, too, that justice makes redundant what he would have done as the avenger; the occasion of Claudius's death is simple requital. Is it not, then, the last irony that Hamlet's vengeance can consist only in words?—the words that proclaim for the first time Claudius as a fit subject for revenge in the moment that no act of vengeance can bring him to death, for he is already hastening there. The words are all: the deed, the forcing the wine between Claudius's teeth, is splendidly in vain. Certainly, then, Hamlet acts in the end. But it is an equal truth that he is brought to obey, to comply with his duty without resolving his search for understanding.

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[1] D. G. James, *The Dream of Learning* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 71, 76.

[2] 'Hamlet as Minister and Scourge', *P.M.L.A.*, LXX (1955), 740-9. It is notable that this theory—of Claudius's killing as 'a ministerial act of public justice'—has to be maintained 'Despite the terrible action of . . . forcing the poisoned cup between the King's teeth' (p. 749). It is surely a major difficulty; for this is the very action that marks Hamlet's last-minute decision to be the avenger.

I think, then, we may see why Hamlet becomes an enigmatic figure to later generations. One kind of failure to understand *Hamlet* may be dated potentially from the closing of the theatres. When they reopen, the wild theme of Revenge demands a more explicit treatment. The axiomatic compulsions of the older revenge code are to be revived for us only by the exercise of the historical imagination. But, when the historical imagination is brought to bear, we ask for data in the hero's utterance, forgetting that what we may think necessary—an explicit questioning—is given by an audience who know what they have come to see: and, more, that an open treatment of the conflict in the hero's soul will drastically limit any capacity of presenting universal issues. The contemporary success of *Hamlet* will mean that other dramatists will be quick to make this conflict wholly and elaborately explicit. Their heroes will openly mouth their horror, indignation and reluctance to obey a revenge code. But in doing so, the dramatist will hopelessly limit the scope of his play: for all issues will be brought to the single dilemma—Justice or Revenge? Dealing with the new and dangerous material of a scrupulous avenger, Shakespeare triumphs: avoiding the peril of making his hero voice his scruples, Shakespeare makes him fail to understand himself. In so doing, he is free to let Hamlet call in question all things under the sun, including, most poignantly, the nature of man, without once bringing to the light the cause of his own aversion. That cause, I have suggested, some of the Elizabethan audience may have apprehended as a scruple about the justice of revenge. It is the beginning of a more serious kind of misunderstanding, the attempt to pluck out the heart of what is designedly mysterious. The vital consideration is not that Hamlet nowhere questions his duty to avenge. It is that he never penetrates his inability to be the avenger. Thus in its first birth, I believe, the enigma provoked 'solutions'—and restatements, of a kind. But, in the last resort, it is not of the highest importance to ask whether Hamlet had any inkling at all of the truth or whether all his efforts at understanding fell hopelessly short. As always in Shakespeare, the human truth is more important than the themes and issues which we love to unravel—if we can. In *Henry IV*, as we saw, the blindness of love was a greater thing than conscious purpose; and a failure to understand the self characterized not only the old, but the young Prince himself. So here (the questioning is a greater thing than the theme of revenge. It is all-important that Hamlet should fail to know why he cannot be the avenger; and, failing, that he should persist in his seeking. Though the wild theme of Revenge has faded for us, our assent is still won to this portrayal of man questioning all things, and understanding nothing, least of all one man's aversion from a duty which must be performed in the teeth of all inclination and desire. To those who find a failure in universal appeal, we must reply that *Hamlet* is the universal tragedy. For, as the beginning of wisdom is self-knowledge, so the universal predicament is that of Hamlet; for all his impassioned questioning, man fails to know himself.)

Chapter Three

ACCIDENT AND DESIGN

I

We have seen in the previous two chapters that as spectators of tragedy we are both 'committed' and 'detached'—neither merely the one nor the other; and the balance shifts constantly and imperceptibly throughout the play. In this way the tragic mystery is inviolate: we are neither detached enough to see all, nor so much involved as to feel ourselves the victims of purposeless force. It is similar with the relatedness of what we witness in terms of act and consequence, the connexion between what we are and what befalls us. We earlier considered Aristotle's observation upon the nexus of events in tragedy—'incidents [which] occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another'. I adapt for my own purposes (that is, without fathering upon Aristotle the full significances with which I am concerned) the two criteria he offers of dramatic coherence, 'the probable' and 'the necessary'.[1] Tragic experience is characterized both by a sense of logic, of true relationship between what we are and what befalls us, the 'probable': and also by the recognition of that which is unexpected but is nevertheless seen to be 'necessary'. We thus have in the close of tragedy an acceptance, the awareness of 'thus and only thus' which is not a wisdom after the event but a recognition that the event is, however unexpected, a declaration of the real: for, as we have seen, it is characteristic of reality to surprise. As the one criterion, the 'probable', relates primarily to the known and observed in the realm of action, so it is linked with man as agent exercising a choice which has real consequences among fellow human-beings, in a world unmistakably our own. The other, the 'necessary', relates rather to that which lies outside the ordinary run of experience, and thus marks the limits of our ethico-moral understanding. In this aspect we see man as patient, undergoing forces ultimately beyond his control, and which, once thwarted or opposed, whether wittingly or not, must assert themselves. This tension between 'necessary' and 'probable' is essential to the tragic experience; the activity of each tragic drama may be said to be, at any given point, an oscillation between these mighty poles. It will of course be evident that there are thus twin pitfalls for the dramatist. The connexion between what we are and what befalls us cannot be merely mechanistic, a cause-effect, act-consequence relationship, without ceasing to be mysterious. Equally, it cannot be truly mysterious if it is merely inscrutable; for it will then be felt as arbitrary or even capricious. Clearly, this is the heart of the tragic mystery; and, little as we may hope to penetrate it, we must in this and the following chapters try to explore it in some of its main bearings.

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[1] The emphasis in Aristotle is not on any distinction between 'probable' and 'necessary' but on the two, taken together, as opposed to the merely irrational —thus excluding 'such things as chance; unrelated events . . . sudden supernatural interventions, and so on' (H. House, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1956, p. 59). For the application to Shakespeare I press a distinction which is well put by H. B. Charlton. 'Aristotle's "necessity" seems generally to refer to the nexus of events in sequence; but even in Aristotle the word cannot divest itself of implications from a more primitive apprehension of reality . . . "Necessity", ἀνάγκη, is a name for something felt to be an ultimate compulsion, a power ordaining inevitably the nature of what is, and controlling inevitably the sequence of what becomes. As Aristotle uses it, it is a scientific or metaphysical term for that *ultima ratio* of tragedy which in a more theological terminology of other epochs may be thought of as "fate" or "destiny"' (' "Romeo and Juliet" as an Experimental Tragedy', British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1939, pp. 7-8).

In this chapter, we shall be concerned with 'necessity', with man as the patient of coincidence and thus the unforeseeable—that which, being pure 'accident' from man's standpoint, can be related only to a design which remains finally mysterious. In the next chapter we deal with man as agent, with the natural consequences of acts known as wicked and entered upon in awareness of such consequence. Our concern there is with human design and the 'accidents' that falsify that design, so that the 'necessary', a design of final reality, is asserted. We are, however, dealing with a balance of apparent opposites. No one truly tragic play, though it may dwell more upon the one aspect than the other, does so at the expense of that other. Each aspect is present to us and essential to our complex experience in any one instance; we shall falsify that experience if we dwell unduly on only one of its elements. It will therefore be salutary if we attempt to assess the weight of the one where the other seems to predominate. For my next chapter I have chosen a manifestly 'supernatural' work, *Macbeth*, from which to illustrate the scope and activity of the 'natural', the issues of human choice in a real world extended in space and time and subject to natural consequence. Similarly, in the present chapter I take for main illustration *Othello*, where all is apparently natural, 'the tragedy', as it is often called, 'of a private man in the real world'.

There is, however, a preliminary question. Our inquiry is into a balance of apparent opposites. But is there not a type of tragedy which deals in singleness of effect, as in those medieval 'tragedies' which demonstrate simply or primarily the subjection of man to Fortune? The question is important, for it is sometimes held that 'the Renaissance idea of tragedy is but a natural development of the medieval idea'.[1] How natural this development may be it is not my purpose to inquire. But if we are to assess the relative weight of Fortune, on the one hand, and the consequence of mortal acts, on the other, we must try to see how distinct these ideas are in the medieval imagination before we attend to their merging. I therefore approach *Othello* by way of another tragic play, *Romeo and Juliet*, where, though all is in one sense natural, yet the persons are plainly the victims of what lies beyond their control. Is any essential of tragic experience missing from their story? If there is, and it can be identified, we shall be better able to assess the relative play of Renaissance and medieval conceptions of tragedy—the relation in our present terms between 'design' and 'accident'—in the specific instance of *Othello.*

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[1] Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion* (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), p. 22.

II

As far as the twin aspects of 'accident' and 'design' are concerned, there is not much doubt where the emphasis lies in *Romeo and Juliet.* Accident palpably plays the largest part; the treatment is decisively in terms of man as patient of destiny. But it is essential to approach this in a right frame of mind. There is a Whiggery of interpretation in literary no less than in political history. We live after the Renaissance, and thus after the triumph in the modern world of Greek emphasis upon connexion between character and calamity—that Nemesis which is such 'a convincing instrument of tragic inevitability'.[1] 'Only connect' is the impulse that is natural to us; and both the triumphs of late nineteenth-century naturalistic art and the disasters of a Shakespearian criticism that would proceed wholly upon the same basis are lasting reminders of our heredity. The 'Nemesis' type of tragedy is among the highest achievements of the European spirit; but we should beware of crediting it with an unargued balance of advantage. Beside it medieval 'tragedy', based upon reversal of Fortune and thus demonstrating the operations of an inscrutable Providence, may seem crude or insubstantial. But, although the 'formula' of the common medieval type is simple, production based on it may be complex. A recent writer on tragedy does well to place beside the too-familiar recipe from the *Monk's Tale*—

> . . . a certeyn storie . . .
> Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
> And is yfallen out of heigh degree
> Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly—

the 'less often quoted . . . passage on Mutabilitie', where we may start with the recognition of Fortune's universal sway—

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[1] H. B. Charlton, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

> This wrecched worldes transmutacioun . . .
> Governed is by Fortunes errour—

but the conclusion is not in hapless determinism:

> Yit is me left the light of my resoun,
> To knowen frend fro fo in thy mirour.
> So much hath yit thy whirling up and doun
> Y-taught me for to knowen in an hour.
> But trewely, no force of thy reddour
> To hym that over himself hath the maistrye!
> My suffisaunce shal by my socour:
> For fynally, Fortune, I thee defye![1]

Fortune is to be set at naught by the brave. Nevertheless, it remains all-powerful; and thus the peculiar excellence of medieval 'tragedy' is pathos. We may recall the ending of *Troilus and Criseyde*, soundly characterized as 'the great example in our literature of pathos pure and unrelieved'.[2] The very fact of the 'double sorwe' of Troilus may remind us that the final effect of pathos proceeds from a complex development. At the end it is vain for Troilus to protest that he has not 'deserved' his lot. Fortune keeps no covenant. But the unarguable fact of her power, so far from diminishing, heightens the human truth. The spectator may find himself, for the moment, seeing through the eyes of Pandarus, and thus unhesitatingly condemning Criseyde:

> I hate, ywys, Criseyde;
> And, Got woot, I wol hate hire evermore!

But it is not so simple for the lover. Troilus cannot find it in his heart to 'unloven' her 'a quarter of a day'. There is, we perceive, a deeper truth of the human predicament than any mere alignment of good and evil prompted by a consequence-fraught universe. Given the consciousness of inevitable doom, the lesser questions of mortal error fall into place.

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[1] T. R. Henn, *The Harvest of Tragedy* (London, 1956), pp. 148-9.

[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936), p. 195.

Wrongdoer and victim are one thing; but the essential situation between Troilus and Criseyde has not changed:

> In corsed tyme I born was, weilaway,
> That yow, that doon me al this wo endure,
> Yet love I best of any creature!

Where consequence, connexion between mortal act and overwhelming destiny, is in play, there is always the danger of a set balance of approval, a final court of appeal. Where Fortune's visitations cannot be related to mortal deserving we have, if the opportunity is seized, a truth which comes home with greater fidelity, mirroring, it may be, 'the very world, which is the world Of all of us'.

This is of course to speak of the greatest example of medieval 'tragedy'. But even in such laborious recitals as that offered by Chaucer's Monk to his fellow-pilgrims we proceed from the merely illustrative simplicity of such 'heroes' as Lucifer and Adam to the entire pathos of Ugolino's situation. It is not, of course, along these lines that we are to look for development from a medieval to a Renaissance type of tragedy. Hapless innocence is one kind of emphasis; the future is with that kind of 'tragedy' which takes some account of the sufferer's contribution to his downfall. But we should not therefore underrate the medieval 'hapless' type. Certainly, we should be on our guard against the larger error of lumping together both main kinds of medieval 'tragedy' and making direct comparison with Renaissance work. Medieval 'tragedy', of whatever kind, is not to be thought of as a stage in painful development towards an ideal Nemesis-type—at worst merely embryonic, at best a half-way house towards the work of 'connexion'. One distinguished scholar makes the essential step in correcting our attention by using the term 'Gothic', as opposed to 'Greek', to characterize pre-Renaissance tragedy: and he rightly reminds us of the width of scope in Gothic work, its concern with 'motion extended sweepingly through time and space'.[1] But for the present inquiry at least we need to make clear the distinction between that medieval work which primarily emphasizes Fortune's sway and that 'tragedy', whether medieval or Renaissance, which pays more than a passing regard to the implications of human weakness. In what follows I use the term 'tragedie' to denote the presentation of man as inescapably subject to the vagaries of Fortune. That is, notwithstanding any indications of culpability, as ordinarily understood, what befalls the sufferer in 'tragedie' is manifestly disproportionate to such failing and linked with it only in such a way as to demonstrate primarily not the consequences of weakness in some men but the overriding power of Fortune over all men.

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[1] Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Oxford, 1956), p. 452.

Where the characteristic preoccupation of the Greek mind is with connexion between what we are and what befalls us, the medieval mind can dwell upon the paradox that disaster may come upon the good: and this is the province of 'tragedie'. Of course, efforts to relate misfortune and desert are at no time lacking. Lydgate dwells not only upon the activities of Fortune as 'welful and perverse', but also, following Boccaccio, on the 'vices' of princes that cause 'ther unwar fallyng'. *A Myrroure for Magistrates* states clearly the two themes that are involved:

> with how grevous plages vices are punished: and howe frayle and unstable worldly prosperitie is founde, even of those, whom Fortune seemeth most highly to favour.

But we must bear in mind that these are two themes, not one; and that whatever man may be able to guess of the connexion between 'plage' and 'vice' in particular cases, all are agreed that it is Fortune who discharges the 'plage' which no man can withstand. The case of apparent connexion is one thing: that of the downfall 'even of those whom Fortune seemeth most highly to favour', is another; and it is the demonstration of unalterable Power. Even Lydgate, the 'impatient moralist ardently desiring, and finding, retribution', has his other mood, in which irrational Fortune is to blame; and for this, too, he has an 'obvious relish'.[1] There can be no question of inconsistency. When the medieval mind considers the operations of Fortune, two sets of instances are clear: and only one admits of easy rationalizing. It is of course not difficult to find theoreticians, in both medieval and Renaissance times, who will attempt a thorough-going rationale of the operations of Fortune. Boethius's *Consolation* is explicitly concerned with experience as 'tragedie' reveals it, mortal subjection to 'the dedes of fortune'. How to reconcile apparent injustice in Fortune's 'unwar strook' with belief in benevolent and omnipotent Deity? Boethius's central position is that happiness is to be found only in virtue; so that the wicked, though in prosperity, are in danger of forfeiting happiness both now and in the life to come. It is an answer which would take us beyond a present in which the good man must learn to endure. So, too, with the absence of apparent connexion between what we are and what we are to endure; Boethius must reply that there is no such thing as chance in a world subject to Omnipotence. Where we are dealing with poets, as distinct from philosophers or philosopher-critics, such 'solutions', however widely respected, are neither the beginning nor the end of the matter, though they may serve considerably in focusing the audience's attention. 'Tragedie' or tragedy, alike—the artist's concern is not with 'solutions' but with what makes the problem permanently enthralling: and the characteristic bent of medieval creative imagination is for the 'necessity', not of causal connexion, but of the unforeseeable—and therefore, truly, the unalterable. For a summing-up of mysterious Fortune as 'tragedie' reveals her, we may turn to the greatest of medieval poets.

Dante learns that Fortune is the presiding Intelligence of our sphere. God, whose wisdom transcends all, allotted 'guides' to every part of His heavens, so that each part shines to each, equally distributing the light:

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[1] Farnham, *op. cit.*, pp. 162, 166.

Colui, lo cui saver tutto trascende,
  fece li cieli, e diè lor chi conduce,
  sì ch'ogni parte ad ogni parte splende,

distribuendo ugualmente la luce.

Similarly, for wordly splendours, He ordained a general 'minister and guide'—

similemente agli splendor mondani
ordinò general ministra e duce—

whose task it is to change empty possessions from one race to another, from one kindred to another—

che permutasse a tempo li ben vani,
  di gente in gente, e d'uno in altro sangue—

and all this is

oltre la difension de' senni umani,

'beyond the hindrance of human minds'.

So her sentence is mysterious,

occulto, come in erba l'angue.

The simile is well-chosen; he who treads on the snake is a dying man in the moment of his realization. We must refer the actions of Fortune to the unsearchable wisdom of Providence. The central lesson is that she is ceaseless in her activities; and she is of necessity swift:

Le sue permutazion non hanno triegue;
  necessità la fa esser veloce.

There are obvious deficiencies in 'tragedie', as we have now isolated it, if it is confused with cause-effect work. The limitations of 'connexion' are perhaps less obvious; but they need not be dwelt upon here. The dangers of a mechanistic naturalism are an old story in the modern theatre; and modern recognition of the scope of the irrational in 'character' (and hence the unpredictable in terms of 'plot') has decisively affected all branches of creative imagination and, indeed, historical inquiry. Since, as a recent writer observes, the modern characteristic is to 'look at our own habits of thought and speech rather than at the external world about us' our approach to the past differs from that of our grandfathers:

> whereas every age is liable to project its own mind unconsciously into the past, it has been left for us to look consciously and anxiously for analogies to our present situation.[1]

The very title of another recent inquiry, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, would have seemed to Victorian scholars almost a contradiction in terms. The tide is running strong; and we may hope that in bearing us from the immediate past it may bring us nearer to an understanding of Shakespeare. As Miss Mahood observes:

> Unlike the Age of the Enlightenment, with its demand for logically clear motivation of character, the pre-Locke and the post-Freud epochs share an acceptance of the seemingly incalculable in human behaviour.[2]

There is general recognition that a non-naturalistic art is capable of reaching us at deeper levels than are accessible to cause-effect representation. The work of a generation of scholars who have taught us to attend to the Shakespearian play as to a poem links with this general perception that correspondence with 'reality' may be better achieved through myth and symbol than through unwavering adherence to 'deeds and language such as men do use'. Naturalism, with its plot-obsessions and its limitations of reality in the interests of 'probable representation' (as, for example, its refusal of simple change of will), has few defenders these days, whether in the theatre or the study. It is a favourable climate in which to plead the cause of 'tragedie', the demonstration of unpredictable Fortune, whom no man can withstand. The lesson that emerges from our survey is clear. Fortune, the mainstay of 'tragedie', is never for long left in isolation from human weakness: but only where it is so removed can it strike with full power. As we have seen, under the hand of a master-poet the sense of haplessness can move our instant recognition. Troilus's unheroic lament is very different from tragic grandeur; but it is not the less penetrating on that account. It looks as though the recipe for the successful deployment of Fortune is to disjoin Fortune from 'deserving'—to have a background in which Fortune lurks (*come in erba l'angue*), and a foreground in which the human creatures act out their roles, and to make no consequential relation between them.

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[1] W. K. C. Guthrie, *In the Beginning* (London, 1957), p. 12.

[2] *op. cit.*, p. 148.

It is of course no critical secret that it is this emphasis upon Fortune's dealings with two young lovers which Shakespeare, so far from palliating, brings into full prominence. All the poetical and imaginative weight is upon it. The lovers are 'star-cross'd', their love 'death-mark'd'; misgiving and foreboding play the largest part in their developing awareness of themselves and of their situation. So Romeo speaks for all subjects of Fortune; they are aware that the time of happiness is limited:

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

Their doom is 'in the stars'; the imagery of light and dark is therefore dominant, and it makes the decisive contribution to the theme of inevitability. As night succeeds to day, so a 'fearful date' draws near; and the very brevity of this imaginative calendaring—day upon day, no longer span—marks, it seems, the very minutes of a 'death-mark'd' love's passing. Thus, after the consummation of love, the night gives place to day. In the outside world it grows light—

More light and light:

but, for the lovers,

more dark and dark our woes.

Their happiness is thus something contrary to all around them, a world which goes on its own appointed and unvarying way. So, too, the imagery of light and dark links with suddenness—in the lightning-stroke that discloses all, but is gone in a moment. Their love, says Juliet, is

too rash, too unadvis'd, too sudden;
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be
Ere one can say 'It lightens' . . .

It is, too, the lightning-stroke that exposes the scale of human affairs, at the mercy of elemental forces. We recall the similar language in which, in comedy, the precariousness of love is conveyed:

if there were a sympathy in choice,
War, death, or sickness, did lay siege to it,
Making it momentary as a sound,
Swift as a shadow, short as any dream,
Brief as the lightning in the collied night
That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth,
And ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!'
The jaws of darkness do devour it up;
So quick bright things come to confusion.

This is the very note of man as patient, subject to 'design'. The scope of Fortune is absolute. A moment after he has killed Tybalt realization flashes upon Romeo:

O, I am Fortune's fool!

Man is a creature caught between heaven and earth, the dimensions revealed for a moment in the lightning-flash. So Juliet must lament that her husband 'is on earth', her 'faith in heaven': and, as in the medieval archetype of man born to endure, pathos is the great achievement. It is an unchanging human lot that Juliet laments:

Alack, alack, that heaven should practise stratagems
Upon so soft a subject as myself!

Death is thus to be welcomed, as a release from unfairlyloaded odds. Romeo looking upon the body of Juliet speaks for all who have learned that Fortune is not to be defied:

> O here
> Will I set up my everlasting rest,
> And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
> From this world-wearied flesh.

The design is almost complete; for this is the last accident, that Romeo should arrive before Juliet's awaking from her potion. Throughout, accident has played the largest part—deriving from the fundamental accident of Montague implacably opposed to Capulet. The 'quick bright things' come to their 'confusion' clear-eyed, forewarned—by premonition, but not otherwise. 'Necessity' makes fortune swift: so the tempo of this play is quick, and images of haste and confusion abound. The old Friar gathering simples early in the morning sees the onrush of day:

> fleckel'd darkness like a drunkard reels
> From forth day's path.

At the end of the scene, youth and age move off together at contrasted speeds:

> *Romeo* O, let us hence; I stand on sudden haste.
> *Friar Lawrence* Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast.

Thus, too, Juliet's impatience for night to come expresses itself in a cry that crowds energy in upon itself:

> Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds!

And, in the last Act, we have the mounting haste that brings Romeo disastrously ahead of time, with the Friar pattering to forestall the train of events—

> How oft to-night
> Have my old feet stumbled at graves!

But all in vain.

What shall we say of this type of tragic pattern, when it has swept to its irresistible conclusion? If our cry is 'Only connect!', if we seek the 'probable' and would admit accident only on limited terms, then we may be disappointed—

though not, I fancy, in the terms in which one critic rejects this 'experimental tragedy':

> Our sentiments were but momentarily gratified. And finally our deeper consciousness protests. Shakespeare has but conquered us by a trick.[1]

It is not, surely, our 'deeper consciousness' that protests. Simplicity of design and intensity of pace penetrate to that region of consciousness which is free of 'the inevitable afterthought and all its obstinate questionings'. If we find *Romeo and Juliet* unrealistic in its play of accident and coincidence, merely 'poetic' in the sense of licensed fiction, we should be careful to note that the setting and all the events are real enough. Here there is neither god from the machine nor implacable Machiavel. There is only time-worn obstinacy, which involves the innocent, making it their crime to be impetuous; for impetuosity would annihilate time. If we feel that an essential of tragic experience is lacking, it is perhaps in this; that in *Romeo and Juliet* there is no evil, no 'malice aforethought'. The disasters the young draw upon themselves are attributable to the folly of their elders; but only in the long run. No one directly purposes the undoing of 'Juliet and her Romeo'. The ending, as all the events, is in a real world; there is shamefaced realization by the elders, and the amendment of life by sad example. Sorrow for a 'death-mark'd love' is shared by all. The Prince speaks no more than truth:

> never was a story of more woe
> That this of Juliet and her Romeo.[2]

III

In *Othello* we have again a love-tragedy; it is, too, the story of 'a private man in the real world'; and again we have a father's authority set aside by a daughter. But now love is to reach across a wider gap than that of opposed houses; this time differences of race are to be bridged. But, before all likenesses, there is the great difference that evil enters upon the tragic scene. It is not an evil which, like that in *Hamlet*, is defensive, trying to consolidate past gains and avoid future consequences. It is an evil which watches its opportunity to break in upon happiness and bring the lovers to a disaster of which one is to be the agent, the other the patient. Thus, the dual aspect of man as agent and patient of forces beyond his control—Fortune, 'Necessity', call it what we will—receives a different emphasis. One man will be the agent of another's downfall; but the sufferer, unwittingly the victim of another man's design, will see himself, even when the truth is revealed, as the patient of forces beyond his control—a final design which he cannot comprehend but can confront with dignity. If Othello in the end can speak of 'these unlucky deeds', we must ask how far this is true in terms of Iago's manipulations. It was not a modern critic who held that Iago displayed a 'motiveless malignity'. But some twentieth-century criticism would reaffirm Coleridge's conclusion, though reaching it by a different path. Works of the Elizabethan playhouse, we are told, do not lend themselves to tests of psychological verisimilitude in terms of individual 'character'. The question is far-reaching and important; it requires something of an answer before we can proceed.

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[1] H. B. Charlton, *op. cit.*, p. 45 (repeated in *Shakespearian Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1948, p. 63).

[2] See 'Romeo and Juliet' in *The Early Shakespeare*, ed. J. R. Brown and B. Harris (London, 1960).

As was said earlier, the debtor side of nineteenth-century psychological naturalism is abundantly evident nowadays. In dealing with Shakespeare, modern criticism rightly rejects alike the elaborate cross-reference within the text that would 'authenticate' the persons of the play in the manner proper to the naturalistic novel, and the consequent special pleadings which are necessary to cover the 'deficiencies' this method reveals. But we must distinguish between the naturalistic and the 'natural' in Shakespeare. As one critic observes, Shakespeare's work evidences both a 'non-naturalistic temper' and an 'unparalleled gift of creating character'.[1]

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[1] F. P. Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-18.

Whether 'creating' is the right word, with its associations of bringing to independent and extended life, is a question I postpone. For the moment, we may observe that Shakespeare's greatest single achievement as a practising playwright is to preserve mythic life, the appeal to his audience's deepest awareness, while satisfying the sense of the 'natural', congruence with the life we share: the 'necessary' and the 'probable' are not at variance. How that is done in *Othello* is the concern of the rest of this chapter.

Modern scholarship has often, and pertinently, asked the descriptive question—How far is this or that 'conventional', part of the stock in trade of the working dramatist and so requiring no special justification? We must rather put the critical question, *Why* is this or that as it is?—Why does it suit the dramatist's purpose now to give a formidable display of theatrical skill, telescoping and foreshortening the circumstantial; and now to place an exquisitely 'natural' touch, so that credibility is subtly reasserted? Here again, as with any assumption of 'simple fatalism' in our approach to medieval 'tragedie', we must attend to the facts, the types and devices of common Elizabethan usage as we find them, and not as we may take them to be—handicaps, limitations of artistic endeavour, or, worse, imperfect forms of naturalism—in that 'progressive' bias which the modern historical imagination has inherited from the natural sciences. In fact, the deft use of 'conventional' resources in telescoping circumstantial detail and stylizing mood and attitude, so far from constraining can energize imagination. The clean leap of creative imagination must touch the extreme limits of the world we know; goodness may reach into the angelic, and evil touch the diabolical, if we are to have 'truth'—truth to substantial human nature, conformable with but not to be constrained by the life we consciously take as real. The truth of 'representative probability' is one thing, and a very great thing; but this other is 'truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion'. The 'conventions' from this standpoint may be thought of as marking the vertical axis, the upward reach of creative imagination, where the natural, the 'probable', with all its touches of indeterminacy, forms the horizontal. So we may think of the 'conventions' primarily as affording glimpses of design in apparent accident. But when we plot the curve of imagination—the clean leap, as I have called it—we find that its position at any one point is to be expressed only by its co-ordinates; neither the 'natural' nor the 'conventional', separately considered, will serve.

Othello is peculiarly interesting in this dualistic light, the activity of apparent opposites which is essential to tragic experience. It differs from the general run of Renaissance tragedy in that it deals with persons of no exalted state. No kingdom's fate turns upon Othello's decision. He and Desdemona are persons of consequence; but no more. *In tragoedia reges, principes, ex urbibus, arcibus, castris*, runs the precept; but here all is plainly authentic—the life of the garrison, the deliberations of a Senate, the language of the barrack-room, the protests of disappointed old age, the worldly wisdom of shallow good-nature as well as the shrewd calculation of disappointed and vindictive ill-nature. So, too, the storm is spent before the tragic crisis begins. It is all real enough: and yet there is diabolic hatred in Iago and angelic innocence in Desdemona; so that the victim can end by consoling himself as 'one that lov'd not wisely, but too well'. Mr Eliot characterized this as *bovarysme* on Othello's part, 'the human will to see things as they are not', finding in it a proof of Shakespeare's truth to life. That this is a view in which Mr Eliot was anticipated by so unreliable a Shakespearian as Tolstoy does not discredit it, as one critic seems to suggest.[1] We need not ask that the whole tenor of the drama should justify Othello's judgement. The essential consideration is that there should be some basis for his view of himself as a man whose 'deeds' were 'unlucky'; so that while it may not be the whole truth we must feel it has decent validity as an attempt to interpret what is finally mysterious. Varying voices are raised as *King Lear* nears its end, offering interpretations which are equally simple, and, we may feel, over-simple. But we do not regard either Gloucester or his son as merely deluded because their explanations fail to satisfy. True, they, like Othello, are interested parties, and as such may be thought to concentrate unduly on that part of the evidence which concerns them directly. But the spectator is under no such limitation; all the evidence is before him: and he may not find it easy to give judgement. In *Othello*, the question we might wish to ask is frankly put:

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[1] Peter Alexander, reviewing New Cambridge *Othello* in *Review of English Studies*, N.S. ix (1958), 192.

> Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
> Why he hath thus ensnar'd my soul and body?

—but there is no answer from Iago, save that we should cease our questioning:

> Demand me nothing.

The audience are the privileged ones; but all we know is what the play declares: no more—

> What you know, you know.

There is no further evidence, no final disclosure:

> From this time forth I never will speak word.

Shall we conclude that in this play there is an unresolved tension between the real and the unreal, between the accidents that have brought Othello to this pass and a design that is spirited away from us in Iago's obstinate silence? If there is, we are back at the tragedy of haplessness; there has been no true advance from 'tragedie'. I approach the question of how 'real' the 'supernatural' is by way of an ambivalence the dramatist has fostered in the whole play. If we find an effective tension between 'real' and 'unreal' in the full context, then we shall be on firmer ground when we confront our main question.

The 'real' is abundantly evident in the prosaic, often monosyllabic, language which is the dominant element in the play's orchestration. It is signalized at the climax in Emilia's outburst, when, striving to grasp what the honourable Moor has done, she vents insult upon base insult. We pass from

you, the blacker devil—

and—

her most filthy bargain—

to

O gull! O dolt!
As ignorant as dirt!

And, when the company has assembled and Othello is distraught with grief, we hear the stinging contempt of

Nay, lay thee down and roar!

Thus the majestic figure of the Moor, an honourable avenger in his own intention, is diminished into commonplace stupidity—

O thou dull Moor!—

and only the simplest language will serve for commentary:

What should such a fool
Do with so good a wife?

So, too, one sentence serves to condemn Othello for ever, imprisoning him in a line that begins and ends with his name, as his course had begun and is now ended with his own folly:

Moor, she was chaste; she lov'd thee, cruel Moor.

This flatly prosaic level is the very language of the authentic. With it we must link the iteration which is so noticeable in this play. We may recall Wordsworth's insistence upon 'the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation'. In our tradition such a language is distinguished not merely by its vocabulary (where the monosyllable predominates) but by its structure; it is laconic in phrase, and it is highly repetitive. The iteration so prominent in Iago's dealing with his intended victims strikingly establishes his 'character' (and, as Morozov has noted, achieves the highly effective dramatic development of infecting the victim, so that Iago's ascendancy is marked by Othello's using Iago's imagery).[1] Iago's taunting of Roderigo, at the end of Act I, with its repetition of 'Put money in thy purse', is thus important for our first impression of his characteristic method, his power to encircle the victim with the single strand of unvarying statement, so that all other consideration is excluded. Similarly, when Cassio is to be blackened, we have the repetition of 'knave' to the same destined prey, Roderigo. Each of these instances of Iago at work precedes a soliloquy. There is thus no danger that we shall underestimate the practical schemer when we have seen the efficient tempter at work. The most familiar scene of all (Act III Scene 3) must be glanced at again; for in any familiarity with dramatic story there is always the danger of a wisdom before the event. Knowing the eventual success of Iago's plan, we may come to underrate the skill with which he unfolds it.

The use of 'think', 'thought' that grows from a pin-prick to a blade thrust into Othello's heart has been commented on often enough. But in our knowledge of the outcome we should not overlook Othello's rounding on Iago, which first shows itself in the terrifying threat,

> Show me thy *thought.*

The word is taken consciously from Iago and levelled back at him. Iago's quick rejoinder—

> My lord, you know I love you—

is a deft attempt to turn aside the weapon he has himself put into Othello's hands; he would shift the emphasis from

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[1] 'The Individualization of Shakespeare's Characters through Imagery', *Shakespeare Survey*, 2 (1949), pp. 86-8.

'thought' to 'knowledge'. But Othello will not be diverted: and it is immense power that speaks in the even words:

I *think* thou dost.

Certainly Othello is using Iago's imagery unconsciously by the time Iago's plan has begun to succeed. But his consciously turning Iago's word back upon him at this first stage is proof of the risk Iago runs. There is such a thing as an even-handed justice; in making an end of habitual trust, Iago may teach Othello too well.

To offset these monosyllabic probings a principle of contrast is at work, and it is used to mark the uneasiness beneath Othello's composure. He roundly cries out against

exsufflicate and blown surmises.

The mood of defiance fails in the moment it seeks expression; the monosyllabic 'blown' is fatal to a defensive arrogance. It is the same contrast that meets us in Iago's gloating contempt as, with the handkerchief, the 'proof', now in his possession, he watches his victim approach:

Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world—

there is the past, the secure and inviolate. The present reality is born as all treatment fails: with the word 'medicine' we pass to the monosyllables of measured finality—

Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou owed'st—

when?—

yesterday.

The tranquillity of the past is lingered upon in the moment that it recedes forever. Most notable of all is the vocal scoring of the last scene, where Othello tries to speak plainly to the plain-spoken Emilia. What he takes to be the brute facts are out: but in her incomprehension we see the world of Othello's illusion contrasted with simple reality. We begin with Othello telling her to ask her husband for an explanation:

ask thy husband . . .
. . . Thy husband knew it all.
Emilia My husband!
Othello Thy husband.

It is a master-stroke, as Othello waits to be understood and sympathized with: and then with growing irritation realizes that he cannot communicate what he takes to be plain truth.

Thy husband—

he continues; and so on. The word 'husband' is repeated four times more, until Othello cries with tortured levity:

I say thy husband; dost understand the word?
My *friend*, thy *husband*, *honest*, *honest* Iago.

The whole realism of the tragedy is there, in the titles of trust and obligation. Othello's 'dost understand the word?' is finely placed. One more moment and the net of words will be severed. Othello will know that Emilia has understood the word. He will know, too, that she cannot grasp that he, a husband, has so little understood not a word but reality, the 'fair wife' who lies dead.

There is then no lack of realism in the very context of the play. What of the 'supernatural'? It appears as bottomless evil; the language of Iago's soliloquies is charged with diabolic hatred; 'hell', 'devil', 'damn'd', 'pit'—these are terms which in due season colour Othello's thoughts, as he seeks in vain for an explanation:

I look down towards his feet—but that's a fable.
If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee.

Realization gives insight; and it is perhaps evidence of a true insight into Iago's character that Othello should now use with detachment the language of Iago's self-communing. The devil in Othello himself has been cast out. Something like 'transference' had taken place as Iago's plan began to work; Othello's imagination, as we saw, was infected with Iago's imagery. We may recall, too, the identity of image as jealousy, burning in Iago, is kindled in Othello. Firstly, Iago is consumed by the suspicion that the Moor has cuckolded him:

> the thought whereof
> Doth like a poisonous mineral gnaw my inwards.

Then, watching the approach of Othello in the first workings of suspicion, Iago can say

> The Moor already changes with my poison—

and it is true, for 'dangerous conceits' in a little while

> Burn like the mines of sulphur.

'Transference', we might say, takes place; and that in no obvious way. How real, then, shall we say Iago's 'devilry' is?

IV

Those who swing to an extreme of 'historical realism' are not much troubled with such questions. But they are in danger of overlooking such vital details of dramatic realism as Iago's 'My lord, you know I love you', countered by Othello's 'I *think* thou dost'; and thus the whole cut-and-thrust of which it is a part. Indeed, they would sometimes appear to forget such explicit utterances as that about Cassio,

> the Moor
> May unfold me to him; there stand I in much peril.
> No, he must die.

An unrepentant critic of the 'psychological naturalist' stamp therefore does well to warn us against underrating Iago the 'superbly skilful and opportunist tactician'. Iago's progress is indeed 'immeasurably more exciting' when we follow its actual course. But even so, we should not fall into the opposite error of minimizing the devilish hatred which is announced in his first soliloquy, at the end of Act I, and which gladly fastens upon a plot which promises 'a double knavery'. We are promised not a mere scheme for Othello's unhappiness, but nothing less than a 'monstrous birth' presided over by 'hell and night'. As Kenneth Muir has remarked, some critics of Iago 'seem to have believed much of what he says in conversation, and to have disbelieved everything he says in soliloquy'.[1] Is there not a danger that we shall concentrate on the means, the skilful and terrifying 'vengeance' which Iago enacts, and forget or minimize the declared end? The naturalistic critic I have referred to, accepting Iago as a man of originally limited aims, sees him favoured by an outward appearance as

> an example of one type of regimental sergeant-major, competent, bluff, assuming a crudely effective bonhomie when it suits him, equally without subtlety or any fineness of instinct or perception, and ambitious for a commission.[2]

There is one picture: and the other?—

> Hell and night
> Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.

These words set up only one kind of reverberation; it is the Machiavel who speaks:

> Once more, and now to be treated as what he is, a symbol, not as what he is not, a human being, there comes upon the stage the terrible man according to Machiavelli, with his deliberate and self-conscious choice of evil to be his good, and his superhuman resource and efficiency in shaping all events towards the realization of his diabolical end.[3]

Is that the whole truth? Certainly the facts of the case, what Iago does, are beyond dispute; his is an absolute ruthlessness, overtaking and perverting 'honour' at lightning-speed. To this, the 'probable representation' of time is, when appropriate, subordinated; *necessità la fa esser veloce*. But does a similar doctrine apply without reservation to 'character'? Has Shakespeare withheld a credible and consistent motivation of Iago's villainy? I would base an understanding of Iago on the words that precede the 'engendering' of his 'monstrous birth'. Standing as they do in the key position, the soliloquy at the end of the first Act, they are prime evidence from the dramatist to the audience. And there we hear, firstly, what we have heard before—

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[1] 'Shakespeare and the Tragic Pattern', p. 155. *cf.* Bradley's warning: 'One must constantly remember not to believe a syllable that Iago utters on any subject, including himself, until one has tested [it] . . .' (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, London, 1906, p. 211).

[2] M. R. Ridley, ed. Arden *Othello* (London, 1958), pp. lxi, lxii; lxiv-v.

[3] E. K. Chambers, *Shakespeare: a Survey* (London, 1925), p. 220.

I hate the Moor—

and then—

it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets
'Has done my office.

Now to the conclusion:

I know not if't be true;
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety.

Here we have the Machiavel, proclaiming not only hatred and delight in hatred, but something more—his acting gladly upon what is *known* to be suspicion. This is the delight in double knavery with which we began; and it is equally the silence in which we end:

What you know, you know.

Is he then non-realistic, 'a symbol' as Chambers would have it, 'not . . . a human being'? I think not. The truth about Iago's character is I believe twofold; and it marks Shakespeare's highest skill in dealing with a vigilant and subtle wickedness. On the one hand we have the deft touches of 'natural' cause—Iago's bitterness at being thwarted in his professional standing, and the suspicion of adultery, linked with sexual jealousy. But, on the other hand, these measuringrods by their very inadequacy give the impression of a limitless evil. There is a ground bass of discontent, of thwarted power violently mixed with jealousy; but there is too an upper register of diabolic hatred. The combination is, or should be, a powerful deterrent against merely mechanistic explanation, our tendency to limit the scope of our dramatic experience by direct and perpetual equation with reality. A recent critic observes acutely that 'the myth of the devil' enters the play 'as an added dimension, a collateral presence that makes us sense the inclusiveness of the fable'.[1] I would only add that the 'myth' is conveyed in strikingly prosaic terms. We remember the vengeful Aaron of *Titus Andronicus*:

> Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things
> As willingly as one would kill a fly.

The evil of the wholly vengeful man, as I have suggested in the second chapter, can have no foreseeable limit. In Aaron it overflowed into a mere mischief of cattle-stampeding and rick-burning; in Laertes honour was swept aside in one fury of assent to Claudius's leading. Now in a new Machiavel we see again that destruction once set afoot can know no bounds: it must break, burn, destroy all that lies in its path. This truth surely comes home to us, if in an appropriately quieter mood, at the beginning of Act II, the first Cyprus scene, where we wait for Othello to come over the horizon, knowing what neither he nor Desdemona knows. To fill the waiting-time we have Iago amusing Desdemona with his catalogue of female failings. The construction of the scene is beyond all praise.[2] Desdemona's mind is on the arrival of her lord; and so in the very moment that she encourages this apparently stock raillery, she must be sure that there will be no delay in the news reaching her:

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[1] R. B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web* (Lexington, 1956), p. 96.

[2] But not, it appears, beyond total misunderstanding. 'This is to many readers, and I think rightly, one of the most unsatisfactory passages in Shakespeare. To begin with it is unnatural. . . . Then, it is distasteful to watch her engaged in a long piece of cheap backchat with Iago, and so adept at it that one wonders how much time on the voyage was spent in the same way. . . . Perhaps the passage was just a sop to the groundlings, for whom otherwise—the clown being negligible—there is little comic entertainment. . . .' (M. R. Ridley, *op. cit.*, p. 54.)

Iago O gentle lady, do not put me to 't;
For I am nothing if not critical.
Des. Come on; assay.—There's one gone to the harbour?

What is masked as good-natured scorn for womankind is in reality an undeviating hatred of all simplicity, a contempt for goodness that finds for the 'deserving woman' no more suitable task than

To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.

And even so it is delivered to one who only half listens. Innocence is wholly unaware of the evil that despises it; Desdemona's thoughts are only for her husband's homecoming.

It is with the Machiavel of stage-tradition as with the old tragedy of revenge; a great potential is available to the master-dramatist in that very material which a stricter judgement would dismiss as least capable of natural effect, irredeemably 'theatrical'. The tragedy of 'blood will have blood', we saw, offered a distinctive vantage-point upon humanity. The destined avenger, caught between earth and heaven, might well hesitate to accept his lot; for what lies across the boundary from inaction is answerable to no natural restraints. The tradition of the Machiavel, the cool schemer moving from one tactical success to another in steady furtherance of his aim, offers a complementary truth. Here, too, we see that evil, for all its resource and efficiency, can know no certain limits. It must be the implacable enemy of all that is ordered, submissive and co-operating, 'whatever is begotten, born, and dies': and in this lies its fatal weakness. Even in the most far-reaching of the tragedies, when a cunning and proficient evil is given its greatest opportunities, it still shows itself merely individualistic, incapable of combination save for severely limited ends. Conversely, goodness in the Shakespearian universe is distinguished not by any splendour of remoteness from life but chiefly by the fact of human solidarity, the willingness of human beings to work and suffer together. In Iago the correspondence with the life we know is surely in terms of that hatred, inexplicable but unalterable, which it is the privilege of human beings to feel for one another. There is the 'malignity'—an emotion as inexplicable as love at first sight, and entirely as unyielding. Everything else in the relationship of Othello and Iago is superadded—the difference of race, the 'sense of injur'd merit', the suspicion of adultery, the burning sexual jealousy: all are real enough; the malignity is not 'motiveless'. But all come after the fundamental and unalterable collision, the unchangeable difference between an Othello and an Iago. Shakespeare's play is not drama plus poetry, a realistic situation artfully heightened by rhetorical and theatrical tricks. It is poetic drama, the break-through of a limitless evil into the world we ordinarily know. That is the design, the 'necessity'. It is played out in the accidents of domestic and military life, the petty tyrannies and ambitions as well as the burning hatreds and consuming desires, the clash of races and the opposition of codes—and, beyond all, in the great accident that brings together an Othello and an Iago.

V

I choose one such 'accident' to show the exact but unobtrusive balance in Shakespeare's art; and I thus take up a question proposed earlier in this chapter—How far can we speak of his 'creating' character? In Shakespeare there meet an exquisite sense of theatre and a gift for character-creation —rather, let us call it actualizing character, giving the natural touch at particular moments of intensity. So the twin poles between which the drama is a continuous oscillation— the theatrical, the web of contrivance, and the 'human', the life recognizably our own with which we identify ourselves —correspond very directly with 'design' or 'accident'. But what happens when these two major requirements of the drama threaten to collide? If we take an instance from comedy, we may recall Lewis Carroll's '"Hero-ic" puzzle'. In *Much Ado*, the witty and resourceful Beatrice is oddly silent when her cousin Hero is vilely slandered:

> Why in the world did not Hero (or at any rate Beatrice on her behalf) prove an 'alibi' in answer to the charge?

—and, examining the evidence in the play, Carroll concludes:

> With all these excellent materials for proving an 'alibi' it is incomprehensible that no one should think of it.

With all allowance made for the fun of the thing, the question is pertinent. It is not enough to reply, with George Gordon, that

> such objections are vain cries from another world altogether, with which the world of the play has no treaty relations.[1]

What *are* the treaty relations between these two worlds is a question we find ourselves asking if we are to interpret our play-experience. And what may be a mildly entertaining puzzle in comedy can vex us at deeper levels in tragedy. In *Othello*, Iago walks the tightrope: his risks are terrifying; but all risk lies between him and Othello. Iago may well fear that Cassio may 'disclose' him with the Moor: but the dramatist must ensure that there is no fear of Desdemona controverting the charge against her. All must lie in the 'proof', that once revealed to Othello will make an end of all hesitations:

> on the proof, there is no more but this—
> Away at once with love or jealousy!

In achieving this concentration between tempter and tempted Shakespeare can of course rely upon his audience's acceptance of the convention of 'Believed Slander'. They will not be balked by a situation in which once female chastity is impugned there can be no adequate defence by the victim.

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[1] *Shakespearian Comedy* (Oxford, 1944), pp. 24-5.

But the full rigour of any convention must not be allowed to show. The fabric of the play will stand only one set of tensions—those between Othello and Iago. What pulls in any other direction risks not passing distraction but full-scale diversion of attention.

In Act IV Scene I we first see Desdemona suffering—that suffering which seemed to Bradley 'the most nearly intolerable spectacle that Shakespeare offers us'.[1] It is a scene of eavesdropping, of 'evidence' gladly snatched up, but accepted wholly upon the appearance of things. Tension between the eavesdropper's gullibility and the true worth of the evidence, which is known to the audience, is easily set up—and, with it, a danger of unreality, if the dramatist proceeds for too long on simple error. Othello is persuaded by Iago to eavesdrop: firstly, on the meeting between Cassio and Iago (when Cassio's amour with Bianca is misinterpreted by Othello as adultery with Desdemona); secondly, on the meeting between Cassio and Bianca, when Othello's handkerchief, the 'proof', is contemptuously handed back to Cassio. Now all is settled; Desdemona will die:

> Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damn'd tonight; for she shall not live.

On such slight proof the irrevocable verdict is given.

There now enters Lodovico, the envoy from Venice, and with him his hostess, Desdemona. Thus there begins a third eavesdropping episode, as Othello stands reading the despatch Lodovico has brought, while Desdemona talks innocently to Lodovico. Every word she utters is of course overheard; and every word is 'fire and brimstone' to Othello's inflamed thoughts. Her reference to 'the love I bear to Cassio' brings Othello to one brief outburst; but her relief at the news Othello is to be recalled breaks all measure of his patience. The third eavesdropping episode ends as, enraged, he strikes her, with the word 'Devil!' There is Iago's plot all but accomplished; there, too, is the play all but done—for this assault is the prelude to the final act of violence to be carried out the same night.

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[1] *op. cit.*, p. 179: *cf.* 'I confess that, do what I will, I cannot reconcile myself with it' (p. 184).

All but . . . and in this lies danger for the dramatist. At the moment when all is ready for the end, with Desdemona marked as hapless victim, there is a pause. Skilled theatrecraft has spun the web of contrivance up to this point. Othello has hurled Desdemona from him—on what sure ground? For the moment the rigour of contrivance—not so much the particular convention of 'Believed Slander' as the whole skilful shaping of means to ends, of which it is inseparably a part—is in danger of exposure. Now, if ever, Desdemona must speak.

Shakespeare covers the moment of uncertainty by a decisively natural touch. Desdemona is 'obedient': there is a denial—

I have not deserv'd this—

and then she takes her leave—

I will not stay to offend you.

Looking after her retreating form Lodovico murmurs in amazement:

Truly, an obedient lady.

It is an emotion that displaces his first reaction of incredulous horror; and it does the same for the audience. 'Obedience' supplants every other consideration; and now Desdemona can be made to come and go at Othello's savage bidding without further thought on any poor defence or denial she may make. We end with a tirade from Othello which sweeps to a bitterly double-edged conclusion. He plays upon obedience for the last time, making himself and Desdemona one in supposed pliancy:

Sir, I obey the mandate . . .
Cassio shall have my place.

The dramatist has restored the balance of his play. Now Othello is master of the situation, his final resolution taken; and it is a last irony that the 'damnable iteration' which had characterized his teacher can pour from an Othello in whom Iago's design is complete:

> Sir, she can turn, and turn, and yet go on,
> And turn again; and she can weep, sir, weep;
> And she's obedient, as you say, obedient,
> Very obedient.

Where so much has been said of 'skill' and 'craft', we must not fail to notice, in conclusion, what is more important than all—the organic quality of the Shakespearian imagination. The natural touch that covers the rigour of theatrical design is no sleight of hand; Desdemona's 'obedience' is not an attribute plucked from the air and dazzlingly fitted to the character. 'Obedience' comes home in full measure: for now we realize what a trap has closed around Desdemona. In marrying the Moor she had rejected the authority of a father. When Brabantio put the question to her before witnesses—

> Do you perceive in all this noble company
> Where most you owe obedience?—

it was in fact the fateful choice. Desdemona perceived 'a divided duty', but 'challenged' her right to obey her husband. Her father's warning to the Moor goes deeper than anyone can foresee:

> She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.

The theme is sounded again as Desdemona takes her leave of Othello and Iago in Act III Scene 3, when the temptation is about to begin. She professes obedience in words charged with dramatic irony, for Iago is about to play upon Othello's 'fancy':

> Be as your fancies teach you;
> Whate'er you be, I am obedient.

What Othello is to become under Iago's teaching will exact Desdemona's obedience in the ultimate degree. She has chosen her obedience beyond any shadow of turning; and now, as we have seen, even in the public shame of assault and rejection, she must

> turn, and turn, and yet go on,
> And turn again.

Her dying words thus contain the deepest truth of her predicament. Whom are we to seek as the author of her wrong?

> Nobody. I myself.

She dies as she had lived, 'Truly, an obedient lady'. Yet obedience, in the end, ceases to serve the ends of deceit and illusion. The theme has its last treatment in Emilia about to reveal the truth of Iago's machinations. He, a husband, would exercise that authority over a wife which had made all possible—

> What, are you mad? I charge you, get you home!

But the death of one wife releases another from the bond of obedience:

> Good gentlemen, let me have leave to speak.
> 'Tis proper I obey him, but not now.

Shakespeare's, we see, is a mode in which accident and design are most skilfully interwoven. The conventional usages of the Elizabethan playwright, so far from constraining, in fact release creative imagination for its reach into hyperbole. Thus the evil in this play is given full rein and sweeps all before it. But, equally, Shakespeare is no mere illusionist. 'Obedience', a deft touch that eases the stretched fabric of the play at the point where the first assault is made upon a hapless victim, reveals a sure and steady hand. It is a natural touch, making a whole world kin; here, as throughout, the region of Shakespeare's consistent design and the wide area of our accidental, unpatterned, experience are at one.

Chapter Four

NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL

I

In *Othello* we saw the realistic tragedy of man-in-this-world overthrown by limitless evil, focused in the irreconcilable clash between an Othello and an Iago. 'I do hate the Moor'; so the lesser irreconcilables, of 'primitive' and sophisticated, of submissive innocence and vengeful honour, fall into place; there is acceptance of what is taken to be proof and blindness to what is not admitted as evidence. In the end, Othello's best attempt at understanding—the honourable man deceived by appearances—is set against Emilia's utter incredulity that anyone could be so great a 'gull', a 'dolt As ignorant as dirt'. We finish with two hapless figures, Desdemona dead in obedience and acceptance, Othello dying in protest against his destiny. The instrument of evil, Iago, is conscious only of final failure; there is no repentance. Evil has been emergent in Iago, that is all we know. But now we turn from victims of evil, Othello and Desdemona as acted upon by Iago, to those agents of evil who knowingly, of set purpose, would deal directly with the dark powers, the 'spirits That tend on mortal thoughts'. In such a case where will the balance of accident and design, the probable and the necessary, lie?

We must notice, first, that the deed Macbeth and Lady Macbeth contemplate is known to be not merely evil but impious, a violation of all natural feeling and duty. In the crime premeditated against Duncan there is involved a breach of sacrosanct loyalties—between monarch and subject, between guest and host, between kinsmen. All this is voiced by Macbeth in his soliloquy in Act I Scene 7; the sheer impossibility of the task daunts him—to do once for all that which can never be said to be done, so far-reaching are the connexions between the would-be agent and his victim. It is not murder, simply, which is in question; it is murder 'most foul, strange, and unnatural', a deed known to be monstrous. The supernatural is involved, and it is known as such—whether half-defied, half-minimized, or accepted in outright submission. We thus enter a region which lies outside ordinary experience. As habitual sanctions do not apply to the act which is contemplated, so ordinary assessments of success or failure are inadequate; all is beyond the natural:

> This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill; cannot be good . . .

Thus a career of equivocation is entered upon by the human partners in crime; and this pattern of equivocation lies inside a larger one, sounded by the witches from the outset:

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

An equivocation greater than any Macbeth can swear against is set in motion. 'Necessity' rather than 'probability' is involved; and it is not only the necessity that impiety shall be expunged, that the career of crime shall end, like Iago's, in failure. Nor is it simply that a repentance—lacking in Iago—shall be exacted. Repentance is for those who perceive and recoil from the nature of evil. In *Macbeth*, an evil which has begun by knowing itself as evil must in the end know itself deceived.

We are dealing with a play, something to be bodied forth on the stage before an audience, not a dramatic poem designed for the unrestrained compass of the individual reader's imagination. In such a play, the essential requirement is to keep the 'natural' alive and cogent, to penetrate at every turn the extent to which man is the agent of his own undoing. Choice and the agonized consideration of choice will play the largest part. The dramatist must therefore confront a great question. If man is to go to his doom, how far does he exercise a choice which is recognizably free? Related to it is another question. If reality in a final sense (the 'frame of things' that will not be wholly 'disjointed') is to assert itself, how will it differ from what man on the threshold of action foresaw? Looking ahead, the attempt to guard against possible consequences, is to be prominent; as such it must be realistic. But the fact of final illusion is to be maintained even when man is fully conscious of the evil nature of the deed and desperately alert to its possible issues.

The notion of man as a responsible agent, freely choosing disaster, is essential to all tragic experience; for it is the foundation of that fortitude in the chooser which answers to the spectator's sense of man as 'splendid in his ashes'. This is, we may feel, the authenticating mark of tragic experience —the power of transmuting that which in any other form of communication might be merely distressing or horrifying. Because there is this connexion with an apparent freedom of the will, some writers have, perhaps hastily, concluded that the main reason for the dearth of modern tragedy lies in the shift of emphasis away from man as responsible agent towards man as in some degree the product of forces beyond his control, notably those of heredity and environment. It is true that a thorough-going determinism would preclude tragedy altogether; for in so far as the 'hero's' actions were determined, the development of plot could only be the progressive disclosure of pieces of evidence. But in matters of this kind we are dealing with imaginative apprehension of philosophical doctrine; and though there may be arguments that lead out of the dilemma of determinism (as, if my thoughts are determined, what guarantee can I have that any of them, including this of determinism, is true or false?) imagination is not easily able to work by constantly correcting its ordinary impulses. We are perhaps as unlikely to meet an imaginative writer thoroughly imbued with determinism as we are to meet a thorough-going determinist thinker. But, for all that, nineteenth-century 'fatalism' is a real enough shift. In the nineteenth century's dominant form, the novel, as I have suggested elsewhere, a developing *réalisme* has consequences which make moral praise or blame gratuitous.[1]

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[1] 'Radical Satire and the Realistic Novel', *Essays and Studies, 1955* (London, 1955), pp. 58-75.

Without going far afield for our present purpose, we may take Hardy as a powerful witness to the fallibility of ordinary notions of the 'significant' in human action. We cannot, perhaps, truly respond to the ruling notion of his Epic-Drama, 'an unmaliced, unimpassioned, Nescient Will'. But Hardy surely touches the nerve of modern consciousness in the conclusion of his novel upon Henchard, that 'man of character'. All our imaginative inheritance brings us to respond to the truth that 'happiness' is 'but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain'. It is a view in almost every respect unlike the late-medieval acceptance of the universe as the work of benevolent and omnipotent Deity, fashioned originally for the lordship of man, and lastingly capable in all its parts of moving the double response of intellectual curiosity and imaginative wonder. But in one great respect the modern and the Elizabethan are not far apart. 'Happiness' as 'but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain' may not be unshakeable doctrine. But it is very like life as human beings encounter it in every age. So the older serious drama, 'tragedie' and tragedy alike, may still speak to us with the note of the authentic. Men must endure; the necessity of playing the Stoic; even the lesson of fortitude rubricated for us in the old tragedy of 'blood will have blood'—all seem to us to partake of the real. Pathos is certainly a dominant characteristic of Elizabethan imagining—the presentation of man as in some measure doomed. But, equally, we are never far from the resolution that if man is tied to a stake then he must 'fight the course'. Thus apparent opposites meet. The strength of Shakespearian tragic work in particular is that it offers no easily established relationship between what we are and what we must endure. It, least of all, need fear any diminution of power over a modern audience. The freedom of the tragic chooser is no mere doctrine for philosophical scrutiny; rather, Shakespeare's penetration into the mind of his choosers is part of the evidence on which any doctrine of choice in the real world must be founded.

It is perhaps not a little remarkable that it should be so:

for a late-medieval world fraught with consequence might all too easily sway the balance arbitrarily to the side of man as patient, making the wicked appear

> villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforc'd obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.

For the working Elizabethan dramatist the macrocosmic setting of mortal choice is not an uncovenanted gift. The tragic artist must seek, in Bradley's phrase, 'the power of dilating the imagination by vague suggestions of huge universal powers working in the world of individual fate and passion.'[1] The presence and activity of a 'correspondent' universe may displace those 'vague suggestions' and tempt the creative artist to play arbiter, President of the Immortals, to his persons. Alternatively, there is the tendency to inflate the persons of the drama so that they bestride their narrow world. It is a scale favourable to hyperbole and rodomontade, to the tirade and the set-pieces of rhetoric, with the protagonists as pasteboard figures—mouthpieces, above all. As a recent student of Elizabethan thought observes, 'the arrogant superhuman figures who thundered across the popular stages were an almost blasphemous travesty' of a humanist ideal. So, too, the theologians in their turn might have complained that 'the dramatist's usual picture of man gave a ridiculously exaggerated notion of his strength and natural capacity'.[2] In the play we are now to consider there is ample evidence that dangerous unreality, an utter disproportion between role and actor vividly reflecting departure from the natural, touched the Shakespearian imagination at the deepest level.

In *Macbeth*, the natural, the sense of man as agent, is to be asserted. How? I take the problem for the working dramatist as threefold. Firstly, there is to be a clear distinction between the operations of Fate and those of the human will; and there is to be a cogent freedom of the will. Secondly, if the principal persons of the drama are to enter upon a career of evil with open eyes, they must be endowed with realistic hopes and fears. What they foresee and contrive must turn out to be false; but the margin between desire and accomplishment must be narrow if the disaster is to be felt as real. Lastly, against a background of the 'supernatural' both immanent and emergent, the perspectives of human action—the dimensions of man-in-this-world—must be maintained without loss of reality. Through the 'fog and filthy air', and in all the operations of 'Fate and metaphysical aid', we must yet see steadily the overburdened human agent.

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[1] *op. cit.*, p. 185.

[2] James Winny, *The Frame of Order* (London, 1957), p. 11.

II

If, firstly, we are to speak of free-will in the drama, we must mean the activity of choice, for drama is a doing. We are therefore to distinguish between the power of choice and the field of choice—between ability to choose and the things there are to choose from. Even where the centre of attention is in the refusal of choice, 'the pale cast of thought' under which the name of action is all but lost, man must, as we have seen, still search earth and heaven for reasons why. For choice is proper to man; not to choose is not to be. Dramatic characterization can therefore be thought of as operating in two phases; firstly, the character must be introduced as a particular sort of chooser, one more disposed to certain choices than to others: and secondly, he must be established as such, given a past field of choice in the evidence of confidants, acquaintances and the like, from whatever standpoint (whether of approval or not) they speak. This second 'phase' makes great demands upon skill; as it is the only kind of heredity and environment the character needs, so it is vital that it be lodged both effectively and, for the most part, indirectly, with the audience. It will be necessary to scrutinize the play in some detail, beginning with the early part, the means by which Shakespeare introduces Macbeth.

The first scene sets in a dozen lines the whole atmosphere of the play—an unalterable meeting between Macbeth and his destiny. The Witches are to meet with Macbeth. There follows—and, so potent is the opening scene, it almost seems a glance aside—a statement of the 'main action', which declares the valour of Macbeth, and announces his reward, the thaneship of Cawdor. Thus Macbeth is foreshadowed first as patient—the one who is to meet the Witches in a doubtful encounter, where

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair—

and secondly as agent, the 'brave Macbeth' for whom 'all's too weak', the one whom we hear of 'Disdaining fortune'. It is fit preparation for this play that we do not meet Macbeth until the third scene; and that as he comes to meet us, we, with the Witches, have more than mortal knowledge—the thaneship of Cawdor is already prepared in our minds for him. Something of the simplicity of Macbeth, his suitability for others to mould, and thus something of a dangerous immaturity, is already present in the manner of this introduction. With the threefold greeting by the Witches we know at once that all is not well with Macbeth; and here, as before in Shakespearian tragedy, the method of simple character-contrast is employed. There is a Hotspur to reveal a Hal, a Laertes for a Hamlet; so now it is through Banquo's reaction that we sense Macbeth's deviousness:

> Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
> Things that do sound so fair?

He is 'rapt'. When Ross and Angus bring confirmation of the thaneship of Cawdor, he meditates: 'The greatest is behind': and there is something of the child in Macbeth as he tempts Banquo with the question:

> Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
> When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
> Promis'd no less to them?

It is a kind of 'dare'; but Banquo's answer gives the conclusion Macbeth himself will soon come to—the promise,

> trusted home,
> Might yet enkindle you unto the Crown.

Banquo's warning that even if it is true the prediction is to be suspected is the cue for the first soliloquy, in which Macbeth reveals his wish to temporize, to hold alternatives indefinitely in balance. He knows well enough the prediction cannot be good; for its effects, already, are unnatural:

> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
> Against the use of nature?

There is no course of action that will allow him to preserve the appearance of honour while harbouring murderous thoughts; inaction is the only possibility:

> If chance will have me King, why, chance
> may crown me,
> Without my stir.

Let things take their course; time may be his ally:

> Come what come may,
> Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

So he will temporize; and 'at more time' he and Banquo will speak their 'free hearts each to other'. The association of 'time' and 'freedom' is striking. For Macbeth, uncommitted, time appears to confer freedom: but it is a false freedom, the prospect of endless vacillation. If 'Time and the hour runs through the roughest day', time may bear Macbeth, whether he will or no, beyond his present point of inactivity, poised between alternatives.

We thus have a Macbeth whose thoughts are ruthless but whose inclination is to wait and see. It is this Macbeth who enters Duncan's palace, with the first stroke of the dramatic irony which is to abound in the play. The traitor Cawdor, whose action has opened a path to the Crown for Macbeth, has gone to execution

> As one that had been studied in his death
> To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd
> As 'twere a careless trifle.

His concealing the terror of death under indifference reminds Duncan that he had earlier disguised treachery under the appearance of loyalty. The King must conclude

> There's no art
> To find the mind's construction in the face—

and at once we have Macbeth entered upon the scene, successor to both Cawdor and the King.

The King's proclaiming Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, in direct succession to the Throne, oversets the balance Macbeth would maintain. Desire for the Crown momentarily overcomes the horror he feels for the deed; or, to speak precisely, horror not for the deed but for the doing. We end with the impossible desire, the third term between doing and not doing, seeing and not seeing, which, it is now plain, is Macbeth's deepest wish:

> Let not light see my black and deep desires.
> The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
> Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

So he leaves the King, to prepare a royal welcome in his own home. Macbeth has been introduced; and we know him to be one who will temporize.

Now the establishment of the character is to be prepared. As it is Macbeth's desire to temporize, so the impossibility of temporizing is brought home in a scene full of urgency, where events follow fast upon one another, and decision is taken instantly at each fresh turn. We should note, too, that this establishing serves a double function—we are made to feel the difference between Macbeth's knowledge of himself and the truth as it appears to this shrewdest of observers, his wife. But also we are to see the beginning of complicity, the working of a partnership which aims at 'greatness'. We meet one who knows Macbeth better than he knows himself. Yet the starting-point of her 'interpretation' is the evidence we have already been given; for with Macbeth the evidence is all on the outside. There *is*, it later appears, an art to find the mind's construction in the face:

> Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
> May read strange matters.

This in Macbeth as a potential conspirator constitutes a danger; and her reading aloud Macbeth's letter deepens the effect we had first noticed in Macbeth's late introduction to the audience. He is a creature to be fashioned by others—in his own interest. The imagery of 'the milk of human kindness' links the child in the mere man of action with the purposeful fiend in the woman who offers her 'milk for gall'. Certainly, she knows how ambition and fear are balanced in him; and her analysis establishes its own authority by returning us to the 'doing' and 'not doing' with which we had heard Macbeth conclude—the impossible 'third term' of Macbeth's desiring:

> wouldst not play false,
> And yet wouldst wrongly win.
> Thou'dst have, great Glamis, that which cries
> 'Thus thou must do' if thou have it;
> And that which rather thou dost fear to do
> Than wishest should be undone.

It is almost as though she had overheard him, so accurate is this an echo of Macbeth's own thoughts; and it fitly ends the recapitulation of the evidence to date. We are now ready for the next phase—the pressures brought to bear upon Macbeth.

With the decision to bring Macbeth to the Crown there is news of the King's coming—that very night. The message itself is breathless:

> So please you, it is true. Our Thane is coming.
> One of my fellows had the speed of him,
> Who, almost dead for breath, had scarcely more
> Than would make up his message.

Once again, decision is immediate; and the breathlessness of the human messenger gives way to the hoarse croaking of the raven, as we begin the most terrifying act of deliberate purpose in Shakespearian drama. Macbeth is outwitted; he is now to be outnumbered. Lady Macbeth will ally herself with the 'spirits That tend on mortal thoughts'. It is the most direct and explicit instance of something that is of the highest importance in the Shakespearian scheme of things. The incalculable force of natural affection is a mighty current. While it runs, however faintly, there is the chance of it leaping unimaginable gaps. Old wrongs righted, the lost found, the dead brought back to life—nothing is impossible while there remain unobstructed the 'compunctious visitings of nature'. To make possible the tragic waste, all occasion of tenderness must be decisively rejected; the current must be finally earthed. So Ophelia is thrust from Hamlet's path; so, too, Lear is separated, by his own decree, from his natural daughter. Once the 'natural' is excluded, we are sadly confined within the range of the possible; and that limitation points only one way. Only one course is open, the assertion of 'I am I', the descent from the illusion of power to self-destroying powerlessness. It is a profound truth; and here it is enacted with a special significance. Lady Macbeth offers herself empty, swept and garnished for the entry of devils, as the castle itself is to be prepared for its royal guest. Well may its Porter come to call it Hell Gate. So, too, the sterility that offers itself to nurture devils is a barrenness that, now merely literal, is soon to become the all-pervading ironic truth of Macbeth's universe. But that is in the future, beyond 'This ignorant present'. Lady Macbeth's cry of inhuman resolution rings out to put a period to all hesitation:

> Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
> To cry, 'Hold, hold!'

It is a shout which modulates into the hail of triumphant greeting:

> Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!

for he will assuredly be

> Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!

We end the scene with the decision to bind time. Lady Macbeth feels 'The future in the instant'. There will be no 'to-morrow' for Duncan; and time and dissimulation are now joined in the one resolution:

> To beguile the time,
> Look like the time.

The next scene takes up this contrast of appearance and reality, and links it with the theme of barrenness as against fertility. Duncan, deceived by the appearance of Macbeth's castle, is echoed by Banquo, through whose eyes we see the 'temple-haunting martlet' and its choice of site for 'pendent bed and procreant cradle', as against the raven that had croaked Duncan's entrance in Lady Macbeth's ears. It is a decisive opposition of natural and unnatural; and the Act ends with Macbeth's admission of failure. All the unnatural aspects of the deed are present to him; and the 'naked new-born babe' of pity speaks of that universal condemnation which he cannot face, when the 'horrid deed' shall be blown 'in every eye'. Now the images of immaturity and irresolution come together. The newness of garments—

> Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
> Which would be worn now in their newest gloss—

unites with the greenness of inexperience—

> And wakes it now, to look so green and pale?—

and there must be an end of any 'third term'. Macbeth must come to his maturity, all in a moment; alternatives are plain and one is to be chosen. There can be no more of

> Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'.

We advance from the 'babe' to the 'cat i' th' adage'; and thence to the 'beast' that would undertake the deed: and so Macbeth is taunted into a perversion of manhood. Once more Lady Macbeth pledges herself and her woman's nature to the unnatural. Tenderness—the 'tender' love of mother for child—is negligible beside being 'a man'. Macbeth's last words to her are the culmination of this theme: her barrenness has come to an end; let her

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

Now all is 'settled'. We embark upon the desperate attempt, a contradiction in terms, to unite time and dissembling:

Away, and mock the time with fairest show;
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

From this point forward there may be irresolution on his part, but there can be no turning back. Macbeth has been established for us.

What in fact has been achieved? Macbeth was introduced as one who will vacillate; but with Lady Macbeth's first words after reading the letter we know that vacillation must now have an end. I spoke of the establishment of the tragic chooser as implying a past field of choice. We knew that ambition was Macbeth's dominant characteristic: now we know that in the past ambition has had toys to play with. He has been

not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.

Now a pathway has opened to the summit of ambition, the Crown itself. The whole universe has narrowed to a single choice—to have the Crown; or—and it is the impossible alternative—to cease to desire it. All proximate objects fall out of sight; Macbeth, being such a man as he is, cannot cease to desire, for with him to cease to desire is to cease to be.

What part have the Witches had in this? For us, as spectators, they have enormously heightened the atmosphere in which this development takes place. The human agents are well aware of the impiety they would undertake: but its full momentousness as well as its futility are held steadily before the spectator. The Witches exist primarily for our understanding of the ambiguous dealings with Fate, the paltering 'in a double sense' which grimly reminds Macbeth that profit and loss are not to be so easily reckoned as at one time he had hoped. Their role from the standpoint of choice is to show that double-dealing, the tactics of the would-be equivocator, means inevitable disaster. And we respond to this truth in human terms, recognizing the sheer impossibility of what I have called the third term. Macbeth must either achieve the Crown by murder or cease to be the creature he is 'in desire':

Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire?

It is the inescapable choice. Lady Macbeth's playing on the word 'man' (an inversion of the natural sense which we shall meet again in *King Lear*) is a taunt. The real truth is uttered by Macbeth:

I dare do all that may become a man
Who dares do more is none.

To go beyond the limits of humanity (and this again we shall see in *King Lear*) is to place oneself outside the sphere of humanity. It is, in fact, the ironic fulfilment of Lady Macbeth's invocation to the dark powers; she and Macbeth both are to be made unnatural. But although Macbeth here speaks the truth, it is a truth he does not yet know. For Macbeth, characteristically, the real can only be recognized in the realm of action. When practical failure is evident, then he would grasp at a savage immediacy of thought and act:

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it.

It is an attempt to reach beyond the human condition. We see what a progress man may go, once launched on a journey which, answering to no ordinary criteria of the natural, can offer no true choice; so that

Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

To the question what is Fate? we can make no adequate answer. But our question is simpler. How can the dramatist represent Fate without impairing his character's power of choice?; and to this we may now attempt a reply. Fate must be shown as a limitation of the character's field of choice—not, be it emphasized, his power of choosing, but the things there are to choose from. His whole universe must be narrowed to a single 'either-or'; and the 'or' must represent what he cannot do without ceasing to be the character introduced and established for us. In this light we may see afresh the relevance of Aristotle's two great characteristics of tragic experience—'pity' and 'fear'. The introduction of the tragic chooser shows him to have a failing; and this failing is endemic in humanity. It is common in a thousand cases; and it is commonly of no moment. Here is the 'natural' brought home to us, the life we recognize because we share it. And in the establishment of the tragic chooser we see that what is commonly of no great consequence is for once disastrous. On this one weakness or failing, this lack of 'adjustment', this flaw—however our varying understandings of human nature would categorize it—there descends for once the vastly disproportionate weight of the universe. This failing is to be made an offence against high heaven. Why? We do not know. We know only that the demand comes with an imperative force. Philosophy will answer all questions, could we but tease them out; very well, but you must avenge your father by killing your King. Credulity is of little moment; then believe your wife to be a wanton. Ambition is a weak thing; now reach out and take a Crown. So the pity is full and unrestrained; for in this human truth we meet the sacrificial aspect of tragedy, the hero as victim, called to pay for our habitual accommodations and our easy compromises. The tragic is the extreme case; it is the *experimentum crucis*, the rarely required proof of essential principle. So, in this aspect it is not very like 'There but for the grace of God go I'. That, I believe, has an objectivity that is more like real experience and less like the play-experience, where the bond of intervention, the taking of sides, is cancelled. The play-experience compels that sense of 'having to do with the unconditional', in Kierkegaard's phrase, which can hold no comfort: for

> Man has a natural dread walking in the of gloom—what wonder then that he naturally has a dread of the unconditional?[1]

From this side, then, is the 'fear' Aristotle speaks of—fear at the disproportion of the penalty to be exacted, the magnitude of the disaster the tragic chooser draws on himself; and this is inseparable from the awe with which we see what is finally mysterious disclosed in part of its working.

III

What is brought home to us as spectators is one thing. But what comes home to the persons of the play? The better we know the play the more careful we must be to approach this question in strict sequence with the developing action. The dramatist is to ensure that the tragic chooser is credited with realistic hopes and fears at the outset; and deepening awareness of plans miscarried and thus impending disaster must be similarly realistic, so that we, with the chooser, may arrive at the true reckoning:

> Nought's had, all's spent.

Our question must fall into two parts, though they are finally inseparable. What are the dominant hopes and fears with which Shakespeare endows Macbeth? and how do these relate to the punishments the malefactor begins to undergo?

Macbeth, as we have seen, covers the ground of many possibilities. As the tragedy develops, we see that he is bent on an endeavour to immunize himself from consequence. A career of murder is necessary to secure his kingship; every head of potential rebellion is to be lopped. The barrenness of Macbeth's sceptre is equal with the cleared area he would make around him, a dead zone, in which nothing can move against him for nothing lives. What, then, goes wrong? Shakespeare conveys the futility of Macbeth's undertaking in terms of a great unalterable—

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[1] *Journals*, quoted in *The New Christian Year* (London, 1941), p. 125.

Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

Time is in motion; it is not to be arrested in a present that, stabilized for ever, would abolish the future. Lady Macbeth, on the eve of the original crime, is confident. She is, she says, 'transported'

beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

But it is illusion. Time will not be bound; and Macbeth himself comes to realize that so far from binding time he has unwittingly entered upon a new era. Thus, where so much of the play—its 'beginning'—has been prospective, an attempt to

look into the seeds of time
And say which grain will grow and which will not—

the middle and end become retrospective. Macbeth recalls the time past of natural feeling—

The time has been my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek—

and is sadly aware of the time present of old age,

the sear, the yellow leaf,

a maturity which is of the season only, not of true human growth, for it lacks

honour, love, obedience, troops of friends.

Now he knows too well that time is successive. The earlier fears that 'surcease', end of an action, would not guarantee 'success' were well-founded. They had linked in their turn with the 'succession' granted to Banquo and denied to himself, so that Banquo's issue are the inheritors of Macbeth's kingdom. Thus, with the succession of figures in the Witches' Cavern, the line threatens to stretch out 'to the crack of doom'; for the end of Macbeth's hopes and the worst of his fears come together as a Last Judgement. This moment of realization is a turning-point. It is marked as such; now Macbeth knows that time cannot be abridged:

> Let this pernicious hour
> Stand aye accursed in the calendar

There is to be no more hesitation, which is a lagging behind time:

> Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits.

Now no intervals will occur:

> The very firstlings of my heart shall be
> The firstlings of my hand.

It is a desperate endeavour, impossible of fulfilment; but his insecure kingship depends upon it. Only thus can he hope 'to crown'—wry image—his 'thoughts with acts'. Now Macbeth will seek to collaborate with time—where earlier he had sought, in an equal absurdity of desperation, to

> mock the time with fairest show.

But time is in the natural order and brings about the natural succession. The child grown up returns to avenge the father: and in the end

> The time is free;

all things will be set to rights

> in measure, time, and place.

Illusion is at an end.

In the gathering of forces around the rightful heir, Malcolm, we see one of the permanent Shakespearian truths, the capacity of the natural to combine, to work together, albeit slowly and painfully, against the unnatural. At the end of Shakespearian tragic drama we find the principal agents of evil alone, solitary, realizing the waste they have wrought in their being cut off from natural affection. Here again we meet the unwearied Shakespearian sense of the endlessly fruitful possibilities of the natural tie: and it brings us to the second part of our question about the 'reality' that comes home to the persons of the play as distinct from the spectator. We have seen that their hopes and fears were realistic; what of their punishments?

Some twenty years ago, R. W. Chambers entered a powerful protest against any significant classification of Shakespeare's work into 'periods' related to Shakespeare's own imagined moods, by drawing attention to the continuity of his creative imagination.[1] If we consider Chambers's principal examples, we may see an aspect of that continuity which is very relevant to our present theme. In the Shakespearian scheme of things the secondary agents of evil suffer as their major punishment the torments of hallucination. It is the aiders and abettors, those who instigate and assist, who cannot shake off the nightmare vision of the innocent whom they have given to death, now risen to torment them. And this punishment is constant in Shakespeare—though with of course great increase in power—from the death-bed of the rascally Cardinal Beaufort of *Henry VI*—

> Comb down his hair; look, look! it stands upright,
> Like lime-twigs set to catch my winged soul—

to Lady Macbeth walking in the night, lamenting the murderous hand that all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten. The primary agents of evil may also suffer from the *revenant*; but their major punishment consists in something less lurid, though, we may feel, not less terrible. It is to realize the waste they have wrought in finding themselves friendless: and this again is constant, from Richard on Bosworth Field—

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[1] In 'The Jacobean Shakespeare and *Measure for Measure*', British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1937, expanded in *Man's Unconquerable Mind* (London, 1939), pp. 250-310: see particularly pp. 257-8.

There is no creature loves me;
And if I die no soul will pity me—

to Macbeth awaiting the avenging English army, aware that his old age is barren of 'honour, love, obedience'. For Macbeth, this realization, as we have seen, is a doubly ironic fulfilment. His attempt to mock time ends in the fact of solitary old age; and the 'fairest show' under which he would have done it—the pretended loyalty and generous indignation that sent the 'murderers' of Duncan to their deaths—returns upon his own head, in an even-handed justice. Instead of the natural respect and trust due to age and kingly estate, he must have

Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

The great development from a Richard Crookback to a Macbeth is to penetrate the nature of this exclusion. Richard, we hear from his own mouth, is denied even self-pity. None will lament his fall; and he is the first to know why—

I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself.

The circle of 'I am I' is complete in the reiterated 'myself'; there is no way out of the self-love that must now acknowledge self-hatred. This, a desperate hardness of heart in Richard, is transmuted in Macbeth, to become an insensibility to all natural feeling. Macbeth's is an awareness of irretrievable and furthest-reaching loss. In *Richard III* and in *Macbeth* alike, the knowledge granted to the evil-doer as his end approaches is a knowledge of ironic fulfilment: the world of self-sufficient evil has been achieved—and it is evident in the deep swath cut between humanity and the one who has reached beyond humanity. Isolation is thus one aspect of exclusion, the malefactor's plight seen objectively; and as the dispossessed assemble against the usurper this is the slope down which the play gathers final momentum. Richard is fitly the 'bloody wretch' whose death heals England's wound; and Macbeth must be a 'dead butcher' before his country can live again. The other aspect of exclusion is the death of realization that comes to the malefactor; and here we have the dramatist's opportunity, if the groundwork of characterization has been truly laid. In *Macbeth* the mature art of Shakespeare is to show this realization as the fulfilment not of a planned course of evil—a determination to prove a villain—but of an original infirmity of purpose. Macbeth, knowing no settled ground between 'I dare not' and 'I would' must become the weaker partner of an inhuman resolution. The images of immaturity and dependence have led to an old age which is of time's making only, and which in its unnatural emptiness knows itself ready for dissolution. Macbeth's awakening to life comes in the moments of a realized and unalterable separation from it. His is thus an insight which can reach beyond the disillusion and despair proper to imminent defeat, to the loss of human nature itself. He must wish the very 'estate of the world' 'undone'; he must ask the unanswerable question, 'Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd?' The attempt to bind the future has failed: now repeatedly we turn back—to what is unchangeably past, but is seen with longing as the might-have-been of untroubled nature; an innocent sleep, an ordinary sensibility to fear, an honourable old age.

Macbeth's is thus, if we concern ourselves with the justice of the play, a punishment as strictly related to offending as was Richard's. But in this would-be equivocator brought to accept an unlooked-for present we have a characteristic emphasis of the Shakespearian imagination. If man would impose illusion on others, he may himself become illusion's victim; he must then be brought to see the naked self. It is a consequence that was apparent, though in a milder light, for the former Hal in *Henry V*; there, too, insight came on the eve of final battle, and all illusion was finally laid aside. We see it again in Lear when, a royal outcast, he begins to perceive the truth of man 'unaccommodated'. The dramatist penetrates to a bond between man and man which, we see, is no convenient assumption of story-telling but the deepest truth inherent in all experience. As such, it transcends any moralized design, not by conflicting with it—and thus creating an area of sympathy for the sufferer as patient of an arbitrary fate—but by showing forth a natural order which, against all attempted violence, will 'close, and be herself'; so that the wrong-doer must certainly know himself as one cut off, cast out, unchangeably set apart from his fellowmen. Perceptions of this order come fittingly from the tragic sufferers; placed at the limit of common experience they can speak profoundly of the human estate from which they know themselves disinherited. This, in its degree, holds for the innocent as well as the guilty: Hamlet, bound by inescapable command, is set upon the frontier between life and death; so he surveys all. Where the tragic sufferer is in some measure culpable, his 'punishment' is yet in terms that call forth abundant pity. He must know his state as unnatural, an isolation he would willingly end: and the realization comes with deepest insight into the natural as something unattainable by the mere asking. The stature of a Macbeth, murderer, tyrant, usurper as he is, is thus not comparable with that of a Richard Crookback. Like Hamlet or Lear, Macbeth has cause to speak of the natural as a blessedness beyond his reach. Lear recovers, to make his way forward, as he purposes, into that haven. Hamlet passes beyond our sight, in a last freedom of action. For Macbeth there is no return; the natural is unalterably removed from him. He thus attains a tragic stature which is distinctive and, in Shakespeare's practice at least, unique. Himself 'a walking shadow', he stands upon the further side of our experience, to contemplate the life we know with a longing which is without hope but can never be without desire.

For the secondary agents of evil, too, punishment and the offence are well-matched. The illusion to which the planners are subject goes well with the hallucinations they incur. What had been 'solved' as a problem—at the hands of others—returns to take on unending life in the planner's brain. The special application to Lady Macbeth needs no pointing. It was she who had ridiculed Macbeth's torments as

> flaws and starts—
> Impostors to true fear—

for she had been confident that

> The sleeping and the dead
> Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
> That fears a painted devil.

Yet even she had been daunted by the resemblance between the sleeping Duncan and her own father. But the fact that this, while deterring her from the deed in her own person, did not deter her from inciting Macbeth preserves not only complicity (Macbeth and his 'dearest partner of greatness') but also the sense of profound transgression. It is a kind of parricide; and this, too, she wills as a means, having willed the end. The enormity of the deed is essential to the sense of the 'necessary' as the action proceeds—to the descent of Macbeth from the honoured host and 'worthiest cousin' of his victim to a figure cut off from humanity, united for the last time with his wife under the title of their common crimes, a 'dead butcher, and his fiend-like queen'.

This, then, the fact of unalterable isolation, comes home to Macbeth as the simple consequence of the original desire—for 'solely sovereign sway and masterdom'. Our last question must be: How is it brought home to us? What perspective is given to human action so that we see at once the scale of the offence—the enormity that, in the murder of Duncan makes

> a breach in nature
> For ruin's wasteful entrance—

and at the same time the plain reality, corresponding with the life we know, the consequences of choice in the real world? The question is to be approached by way of the dominant imagery. Is there any one master-conception underlying this varied but interlocked imagery of desire and act, outward appearance and inward purpose, the clothes that fit another and thus cannot be borrowed, time and the moment of timelessness, the pattern we would impose on time and time's freedom from our contriving?

IV

However neglectful the past may have been, there would appear to be no danger of modern criticism neglecting imagery, and, more generally, word-play in Shakespeare. We can now look with tolerant affection upon so prejudiced an observation as that of Johnson:

> A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth.[1]

What once seemed distinctive proof of Shakespeare's 'want of judgement' is nowadays repeatedly dwelt upon as a striking and indeed primary aspect of creative power. As one writer points out,

> Whereas Coleridge could not recall a single pun or play on words in *Macbeth*, with the exception of the Porter's speeches which he thought to be an interpolation of the actors, the play's most recent editor discovers them in almost every scene.[2]

We had better begin by asking what is the function of the dramatic image, and noting any differences from the image in the poem designed primarily for the silent reader.

The dramatist's distinctive task, the principal undertaking which we have been following in this chapter, is to give cosmic dimension without inflating or diminishing human status. We have seen how tragedy offers us a dual vision: knowledge and mystery; insight and detachment; the probable and the necessary; the natural and the supernatural; man as agent and patient—these apparent contraries are finally inseparable in our tragic experience. This, as more than one critic has noted, would suggest that one characteristic of the dramatic image is the capacity to reinforce at one and the same time both 'theme' and 'character'. The reference of Banquo's images of nature and peace as he stands upon the threshold of Macbeth's castle is not only to his own innocence (and thus, by contrast, the devious character of Macbeth) but also to the theme of sterility, as opposed to succession by birth, that is of decisive importance in the whole play. In this way a character can speak more than he knows. We should therefore in any assessment of dramatic imagery take as a fundamental consideration the degree of conscious control over metaphor by the speaker. This will, I believe, give us a fresh approach to Shakespearian technique in communicating the dimensions of tragic experience. Let us briefly examine one passage in a play which most readers and spectators would take to be less tragic than exemplary, a 'play of values', to adopt a useful categorization.

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[1] *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Walter Raleigh (London, 1925), p. 24.

[2] Mahood, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

I choose from *Timon of Athens* a passage where we are indebted to the pioneer of image-study, Walter Whiter, for an effective restoration of the text. It is from Act IV Scene 3; Timon has taken to what we may call the life of 'unaccommodated man'. Here of course we have one of the permanent sets of contrasts in the Elizabethan mind, meeting us on its lighter side in Arcadian romance and pastoral comedy. The winter and rough weather of external nature are set against the artifice and flattery of 'civilized' life, especially the life of courts. As, in comedy, we have a melancholy philosopher in Jaques to oppose any over-simple enthusiasm for this life of 'nature', so in tragedy we have another sort of Fool—to counteract obsessive madness in a royal master who would believe the elements exempt from the general charge of unkindness. The example from *Timon* thus comes readily to our hand, between the extremes of *As You Like It* and *King Lear*. And in *Timon*, too, we have a 'philosopher', in Apemantus—a churlish one who upbraids Timon for mere folly:

What, think'st
That the bleak air, thy boisterous chamberlain,
Will put thy shirt on warm? Will these moist trees,
That have outliv'd the eagle, page thy heels
And skip when thou point'st out?

Whiter's perception of the association that leads from the aired shirt to the unaired 'moist' trees safeguards us from following the editor, Hanmer, who would read 'moss'd' trees, limiting the epithet to mere description of outward appearance. Once we have 'moist' restored to us, we can see a telling play of paradox. There is a primary contrast made between age and youth—between the unbending and immemorial (the trees 'that have outlived' the long-lived eagle) and the youthful agility of the dependent ('page' and 'skip'). The simple contrast is, however, completed in paradox: the trees are old, but they are full of vigour. 'Moist' is no doubt suggested by 'the bleak air' (the trees themselves are 'creatures'

whose bare unhoused trunks,
To the conflicting elements expos'd,
Answer mere nature).

But the word itself crowns the image-pattern by turning the common opposition of youth and age to a final contrast in which human posturing is set against the perennial indifference of external nature—an indifference that grows from opposition to greater forces than man can muster. The paradox thus reinforces the unsparing 'argument' of the play as a whole. The trees are not like 'These old fellows' that 'Have their ingratitude in them hereditary'; for of old men, but not of old trees, is it true that

Their blood is cak'd, 'tis cold, it seldom flows.

Being both old *and* vigorous the trees witness the inadequacy and fallibility of human affairs. We see that these are the concern of creatures drastically subject to time and change; and this is a lesson that Timon must learn.

The point goes deeper than an isolated question of emphasis in interpretation. Suppose we look for a moment at Shakespearian practice in terms which at first glance seem alien to it. In his Preface to *The Rival Ladies* Dryden offers us, concerning what we should call 'the creative activity', the statement of a writer for whom 'judgement' is the supreme faculty. His play, says Dryden, was designed for his patron

> long before it was a play; when it was only a confused mass of thoughts, tumbling over one another in the dark; when the fancy was yet in its first work, moving the sleeping images of things towards the light, there to be distinguished, and then either chosen or rejected by the judgement. . . . And, I confess, in that first tumult of my thoughts, there appeared a disorderly kind of beauty in some of them. . . .[1]

Beauty of a kind, a 'disorderly kind', is allowed by Dryden before the clear light of judgement is brought to bear. The whole conception may serve to remind us that in Shakespearian drama there are varying degrees of movement 'towards the light' in the imagery disposed by the dramatist's characters. The major necessities of dramatic characterization and of thematic structure—to say nothing of a whole range of effect less immediately classifiable—are met in a variety of ways. The critic's problem in interpreting imagery is to place the particular passage in its own distinctive relation to 'the light', to allow it to exhibit its own degree of clarity. Shakespeare's mind and his executing hand must be allowed to go together. Thus, the word-play in Apemantus's speech is very different from the ironies which abound in Banquo's endorsement of the statement that Macbeth's castle 'hath a pleasant seat'. There, the 'interpretation' which Banquo places upon external nature is disastrously mistaken.

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[1] *Essays of John Dryden*, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), I, 1.

What he speaks has therefore the fullest value as irony. Each of his fully conscious metaphors turns against him—guest, safety, heaven, courtesy, peace: these, as expectations, are to be cheated. Apemantus, on the other hand, is, we may say, in the right of it. His interpretation of external nature, 'churlish philosopher' as he is, is 'true'. The two passages therefore seem as fully distinct as is possible—the one plain and emphatic, the other wholly invested with far-reaching irony. The images employed by Apemantus, while vividly and compellingly doing their work, offer no hint of undertone, no suggestion that the speaker says more than he knows. Yet even in such relatively plain cases there is a contribution to the thematic structure of the play. The paradox that is conveyed in 'moist' may have been suggested by the sense of 'moist' we meet in those who, like Falstaff, would set down their names in the scroll of youth, but are unmistakably 'written down with all the characters of age'—which include 'a moist eye'. In the distinct sense of the word—vigour (as applicable to the young) and rheum (as evident in the old)—we may have the lead to paradoxical reconciliation. Certainly, if we miss the force of paradox in 'moist', we shall fail to see the activity of image-play which it sets in motion. In the lines that follow those I have quoted, the unyielding 'moist' trees are equated with 'the cold brook Candied with ice', which in its turn is contrasted with the soothing warm syrup of ministering sycophancy. No doubt the image of 'page thy heels' has linked with the notion of spaniel-flattery, and thus precipitated into consciousness the sweetmeat-glitter of 'Candied with ice'. The association between flattery and the feeding of sweetmeats to dogs at table has long been recognized as distinctively Shakespearian. The *locus classicus* is that passage in *Antony and Cleopatra* to which Whiter, again, drew attention:

> All come to this? The hearts
> That spaniel'd me at heels, to whom I gave
> Their wishes, do discandy, melt their sweets
> On blossoming Caesar.

We note Timon's reference, later in the scene, to 'The icy precepts of respect', contrasted with 'The sug'red game'. He has, he says, had 'the world' as his 'confectionary'. Apemantus's paradox thus has a direct reference to the whole scale of values with which *Timon of Athens* is concerned. His speech is noteworthy because, for all its play of imagery, it is a relatively 'plain' speech in dramatic terms. The 'churlish philosopher' interprets external nature correctly (and thus touches off the contrasts with the world of men), and this interpretation defines and limits the setting for a play concerned less with any complexity of human nature than with certain single and dominant aspects of it.

In this light, we may have a better understanding of Shakespearian technique in the 'play of values'. There, thematic structure is reinforced through the individual character's conscious word-play. The persons of such a play as *Timon* are the agents of their destinies: the mistakes they make consist in inadequate understanding, measured by a clear standard, not painful incomprehension of what remains for all men mysterious. By contrast, full tragic dimension is entered upon and sustained when men are the patients of a design that remains finally undisclosed. So Banquo's metaphors, as we have noted, are invested with deepest irony. But here we may observe something like the converse of the technique seen in Apemantus's speech.

> This guest of summer,
> The temple-haunting martlet, does approve
> By his lov'd mansionry that the heaven's breath
> Smells wooingly here; no jutty, frieze,
> Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
> Hath made her pendent bed and procreant cradle.
> Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd
> The air is delicate.

Banquo, of course, speaks other than he knows. The innocent expectations are to be cheated. But the equally innocent conclusion of his speech, the fertility that is designed to complete his description, has its own vivid relation to the central themes of the play. Sterility, barrenness—actual and metaphorical—and the babe-figures, come together to widen the spectator's apprehension, not to delimit it. We are made aware not only of Banquo's impending fate, but of the unnaturalness of Macbeth's desiring, and of Lady Macbeth's dedication to evil. We are about to exchange the open air for confined space, where something excluded from daylight and 'the heaven's breath' is to take place in defiance of all natural expectation. Nothing could so well wrest from us the temporary *stasis* of dramatic irony—our mere knowledge that this castle is a place not of hospitality but of death. In the moment that we possess it we are given a deeper taste of the enormity of evil.

We see, then, that in the 'play of values' those values are affirmed or denied largely by the conscious word-play of the characters; but in tragedy a larger theme of order/disorder is echoed almost continually in those significances which, being unconsciously uttered, pertain less to any particular human being than to the universe all inhabit. In either case, we notice a technique of developing or affirming thematic structure, in the one instance by delimitation of meaning, in the other by extension. The extension in tragic practice may approach full ambiguity, so that we are hard put to it to determine primacy of emphasis. The classic instance would appear to Macbeth's 'Banke and Schoole of time'. Here, as one critic has pointed out, acceptance of Theobald's 'shoal' need not involve us in outright dismissal of 'Schoole': more, the ambiguous meanings of 'bank', on the one hand, and 'school'—'shoal', on the other, reinforce each other, so that we 'experience one of those phantasmagoric impressions of enlarging and shrinking which are so much part of the total nightmare effect of *Macbeth*'.[1] We may write 'bank and shoal' with reasonable confidence that Shakespeare intended 'shoal' (whether written 'Schoole' or not), provided that we perceive in the working of Shakespeare's imagination something like the activity indicated by Professor Muir—'by an unconscious pun "bank" suggested "judgement" and "schoole" suggested "teach . . . instructions . . . taught" a few lines below'.[1] Our perceiving this connexion, impossible now to communicate in theatrical performance, will enable us to experience more immediately, and thus more nearly as an imaginative unity of our own possessing, the enormity of the crime and the incalculable issues that attend it, when Macbeth is at once an inattentive schoolboy and a prisoner on trial, and goodness reaches from a dusty classroom to the vast prospect of eternity. 'Forms and figures of speech', we may remember, are merely 'the adopted children of power': and the greatest power, if we take Shakespeare as evidence, would seem to consist in conferring freedom upon adoption, a freedom that exists beyond the limits of verbal autonomy.

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[1] Mahood, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

Is there, then, any master-conception which sustains the varying imagery of this play without subordinating any one set of meanings to another? Let us return to the notion of dramatic imagery as the image in the mouth of the player, and consider that moment when Macbeth, the principal actor, speaks his last major soliloquy, acknowledging the fact of time. We may, with very little trouble, be made rationally aware of the diminished capacity of the modern theatre to transmit the Shakespearian 'score'. Even a slight acquaintance with the physical shape of the Elizabethan playhouse will begin to reveal limitations which are known, if not to every schoolboy, at least to every professed student of Shakespeare. But a naturalistic tradition has a lot more to answer for than the errors we can confidently nail. The act of imaginative apprehension does not keep pace with rational knowledge; what we have long been schooled in we show by our involuntary responses.

> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,

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[1] Arden edn. (London, 1951) *n. ad loc.*

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

This soliloquy has often enough been praised for the picture of futility it conveys—the unending sequence of days stretching before us, marked only by the successive halts as each mortal life ends. The pathos is reinforced by the 'poor player', allotted his all too brief interval of time, condemned to final obscurity; and is concluded by the deeper pathos of meaninglessness as the end of all effort. But is this in fact what Shakespeare offers, or is it what our modern imagination too readily constructs?

Firstly, the linear succession which haunts the modern imagination—the unending series of days—is perhaps not the conception which the soliloquy in fact offers. The actor's movement upon the platform of the Elizabethan stage, within the 'wooden O' of the playhouse, could instead convey a different notion of futility, and, it may be thought, a deeper one—of man going round and round in his tracks. The 'walking shadow' of mortal life moves in the same circuit as the heavenly bodies; and, I would suppose, what is in Shakespeare's mind is the moon attendant upon the sun, with all the deep implications that the 'sublunary' has for the medieval and Elizabethan—a realm finally subject to Fortune and to Nature, to cruel insignificance and to temporal change culminating in death. We need to remember that where our imaginative response on this plane tends to the linear and serial, the Elizabethan is cyclic and repetitive.

So, too, the human being as 'player' upon this 'circular' stage of life is not invested with exactly the pathos that a modern imagination would readily give. Pathos there is, most certainly; but not, I think, in the player *qua* player—the pitiful human lot that we must counterfeit roles that are too high or too hard for us—but in the player as an incompetent performer. The pathos lies not in the fact that we are cast, all without our choosing, for the role of actor, but in our inability to perform the role with competence. It is Macbeth who speaks; in his bitterness he must believe that what he has made of his own part is humanity's inevitable lot. The kind of failure he would believe us bound to make is distinctively Shakespearian in emphasis—we are bad actors of the fustian kind, those who 'tear a passion to tatters': and in this play's setting of noise and pretence Macbeth's perception of his own failure at once springs from and reinforces the thematic unity of the whole. We are offered not dignified pathos, but the sober realization of undignified posturing. The keynote is failure, incompetence, bungling; not a mellow and ennobling resignation, but the bitterness of humiliation. The actor who is 'heard no more' deserves his fate; for he has striven against all decorum to rend his hearers. The actor who 'struts and frets', and delivers his tale 'full of sound and fury' belongs to the company Hamlet detests, those who

> have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

Need we be reminded of the only theatre in which Shakespeare could place his imaginings? As late as 1740 Colley Cibber laments the shrinking of the forward platform which he had known in his youth:

> The Voice was then more in the Centre of the House, so that the most distant Ear had scarce the least Doubt, or Difficulty in hearing what fell from the weakest Utterance: All Objects were thus drawn nearer to the Sense; . . . A Voice scarce raised above the Tone of a Whisper, either in Tenderness, Resignation, innocent Distress, or Jealousy suppress'd, often have as much concern with the Heart as the most clamorous Passions. . .[1]

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[1] Quoted in F. P. Wilson, 'The Elizabethan Theatre', *Neophilologus*, XXXIX, 53.

It is truly the 'idiot' actor who 'struts and frets', and fills his 'tale' with 'sound and fury'. And where does his circling in his tracks bring him? He remains within the round O itself —the zero, the 'nothing' that is all his part can signify. In the world Macbeth has created there can be no place for true art. To enact the truth—'to show virtue her own feature' and 'scorn her own image'—man must 'o'erstep not the modesty of nature'.

If this interpretation has any substance, we may look again at both the immediate context and the play as a whole. If we take the scene in its entirety, we notice that it begins with the image of a building, self-sufficient and flaunting its banners to the general gaze. But undercutting the sense of self-sufficiency is the knowledge that existence is precarious —the hostile world outside is reinforced by 'those that should be ours'. The act that would be decisive is rendered impossible: there is tension in the feeling that the odds are unfairly weighted against the performance that is to take place. So Macbeth's reaction to the cry of women heard off-stage is that of the hardened spectator: already 'sound and fury' signify 'nothing' to him. There is a similar preparation for the most striking reaction of all. On the news

> The Queen, my lord, is dead—

Macbeth's reply is

> She should have died hereafter;
> There would have been a time for such a word.

Her death, to him, is a piece of mis-timing. Nothing could so forcibly convey the bitterness of potentially competent performance gone awry. Throughout the play, we remember, Macbeth sees himself as unlucky, one whom all the odds go against. Thus the *Exit* of his 'dearest partner of greatness' is stubbornly accepted as one more manifestation of the world's unfairness. Mis-timing, the cue anticipated, means that the possibility of successful illusion is destroyed. There follows the soliloquy, in which Macbeth exerts to the full his characteristic detachment from humanity. From actor he has already turned spectator: the role is given us on unfair terms, and he therefore disclaims individual responsibility for the ranting nonsense we make of it. So from actor to spectator, and then to man of action is his progress—the man who will stand to his arms against his encircling enemies, and will 'bear-like . . . fight the course'. It is thus that he rounds upon the Messenger, another speaker with another 'dismal treatise' to relate—

Thou com'st to use thy tongue; thy story quickly.

Since the 'tale' of human existence, both as narrative and as total, signifies 'nothing', words are to be dispensed with as far as possible. Yet Macbeth must receive one further proof of the unfairness of his lot; appearances are ruthlessly deceptive—the wood is coming to Dunsinane. Now all other considerations give way; for better or worse the final performance is to begin. It is the last and greatest irony that as Macbeth takes up his final role of man of action the noise of the alarm and the call to arms raise once more the sound and fury that are known as meaningless:

Blow wind, come wrack;
At least we'll die with harness on our back.

The theme of counterfeited appearance and reality, as we have seen, runs throughout the play as a whole. Professor Muir has soundly commented on its special aspect of 'contrast between *desire* and *act*'.[1] I would suggest that the theatrical sense of 'acting' is at times more prominent than we may notice; especially so, for example, at the end of the Banquet scene, where Macbeth expresses his resolution:

Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

There is not time to con the part; it must be put into performance at once. Throughout the play we have potent reminders of the stage. Macbeth's castle is Hell Gate itself; the iterative imagery of ill-fitting clothes—'a giant's robe Upon a dwarfish thief'; the 'painting' and 'counterfeit' which link in their turn with *naïveté* and inexperience—the 'eye of childhood That fears a painted devil', 'the very painting of your fear'; the realization that 'We are yet but young in deed'; the counsel given in its turn to the 'lily-liver'd boy',

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[1] Arden edn., p. xxxi.

> Go, prick thy face, and over-red thy fear

—all contribute to a complex experience in which the dominant element is a desperate attempt to

> mock the time with fairest show;
> False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

We thus reach the master-conception that informs the whole. The central isolation of Macbeth, prompted and rehearsed in his part and launched upon his career by Lady Macbeth, seems to have touched off in Shakespeare's deepest imagination the central isolation of the actor, alone against a potentially dangerous world of observers, with his brief span of time in which to succeed or fail, and the actor's sharp awareness, spectator-fashion, of the limitations of his art. So the sense of a failing performance grows as the expectations roused by the 'happy prologues to the swelling act Of the imperial theme' begin to be falsified. So, too, Macbeth descends in the scale of public spectacle from a dominant actor playing a King's role to a bear tied to the stake, a process paralleling his putting-off of humanity, the scornful refusal to 'play the Roman fool'. It is thus that an element of the morality-play is skilfully woven into the theme, from the Hell Gate of Macbeth's own threshold, through the 'shows' of the Witches, with their symbolic tableau-effects, in the Cavern, until Macbeth, losing all individuality, is destined for mere exhibition

as our rarer monsters are,
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit
'Here may you see the tyrant'.

The putting-off of humanity is finally expressed in the mere title given, the name of the part, not of the actor himself, as the false face is displayed for the last time—

Behold, where stands
Th'usurper's cursed head—

and the conclusion is in the unargued terms of morality-spectacle, as the land is freed from a

dead butcher, and his fiend-like queen.

Macbeth is simplified, de-personalized, and placed forever in past time.

V

I conclude, then, that attention to dramatic imagery may help us, as perhaps nothing else will, to share the authentic Shakespearian experience which we may easily and involuntarily distort. If we interpret Macbeth's soliloquy as I have suggested, we shall be safe from importing standards unguessed-at by the dramatist. It is not merely that we shall not fall into a Bradleian insistence upon the natural dignity of man—as here, the assertion of 'a gleam of his native love of goodness, and with it a touch of tragic grandeur'.[1] Against this, we shall perhaps see how an infected will has brought Macbeth inevitably down in the scale of creatures, so that his progress from humanity to beast is ineluctable. We may perhaps see in this an imaginative extension of Hooker's great conception of Law: if man freely chooses to disregard the laws made for his guidance as a rational creature, he will find himself compelled to obey those designed for the lowest orders of the Divine creation. The descent from man to beast, from agent to patient, from creative power to self-

[1] *op. cit.*, p. 365.

destroying powerlessness, has its own warrant in the continuing tradition of late-medieval speculation. But what is finally more important is the poetic and imaginative life of such a conception, its power to bring home to us at the deepest level a mode of awareness which differs from our own habitual associations. If we understand that Macbeth at this late stage is incapable of distinguishing bad acting (the 'sound and fury') from good, if we apprehend the wicked as condemned to go round and round in a pathless waste, instead of having the power to contemplate with sad resignation what we take to be the unending linear succession of time, we shall be nearer not only to an Elizabethan conception of man and the inescapable nature of the universe he inhabits, but to a conception which has power to challenge us imaginatively, so that we are for the moment released from the prison of habitual assumption. Here we may find the truth of Shakespeare's 'power of dilating the imagination'. We can look afresh at what we had taken for granted not in art merely, but in reality. For in this play, where the supernatural is abundantly deployed, the stress is upon the reality of choice, on the steady descent from agent to patient once the bound of the natural is overstepped.

I have suggested that it is the art he knows best which enables Shakespeare to achieve this, his closest penetration into the mystery of man as acting and being acted upon, of assuming power and finding it a losing cause against an encircling world of spectators. I hope it will not be thought trivial to suggest that what we have here is perhaps the night-side of his imagination as a practical dramatist. It is, as a distinguished American scholar has reminded us, a pretty but unrealistic biographical flight which would return Shakespeare prematurely to the flowers of Stratford, away from the London playhouses. Shakespeare's 'garden' was indeed 'a field of upturned faces'.[1] *Macbeth* demonstrates the failure of illusion, a realized incapacity to sustain the role. And who would know better than Shakespeare that once the actor ceases to be the agent of his part he must become the victim of it? The central truth of the play, we know, was spoken by Macbeth. In his merely defensive rejoinder to Lady Macbeth's taunt upon his 'manhood' he speaks for all those who in Shakespeare's dominant conception, whether in comedy or tragedy, would take the fatal step that leads beyond the human condition:

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[1] Harbage, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

> I dare do all that may become a man;
> Who dares do more is none.

So the progress of this play is from 'doing', a would-be self-sufficiency against the world and time, to the grim realization that

> What's done is done.

The time is free only for the good. Past time binds those who choose wrongly. And this in its turn means loss of choice. Where alternatives are equally balanced and equally bad, then, we have seen,

> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

This equal balance of alternatives in fact nullifies choice. It is the longed-for third term between alternatives which Macbeth had earlier desired; and in the end it is known as fulfilment of an equivocation sounded from the beginning:

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

Thus, time is not mocked. The morality element which is so powerful in this play is founded upon a sense of transgression which is wholly realistic, consonant with universal experience. In all sin

> there is an element which we may call 'unripeness'; man's attempt to pluck flower or fruit before its season, to forestall the natural maturity of man, woman or event.[1]

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[1] Henn, *op. cit.*, p. 162, referring to L. A. G. Strong.

It is a profound truth: and the demonstration comes with all the authority drawn from Shakespeare's own craft. He speaks, we may say, with inside knowledge: for what is time but 'the playwright's discipline as space is the painter's'?[1]

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[1] Arthur Sewell, *Character and Society in Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1951), p. 143.

Chapter Five

THE TRUTH OF IMAGINATION AND THE IDEA OF JUSTICE

I

In each of the last two chapters, where we have been considering the varied balance of the 'probable' and the 'necessary', we have seen act and consequence play the largest part. In no sense have the tragic choosers been overruled; theirs is the initial failing and so theirs is the weakness under strain, when reality forecloses. But this has revealed no mechanistic universe. Whatever the status of the transgressor, the ultimate sanction is seen to operate not against exceptional but against common failing. None can claim immunity; there is no clearly defined region of safety. Hence the mythic power of tragedy is preserved—the sense of the hero as victim or scapegoat, a substitute-figure for the spectator himself. Thus the notion of man as agent is inextricably linked with that of man as patient: when the strain comes there is nothing to do and all to endure. So we turn to a final question. Granted the dyke cannot hold, whence comes the flood? Man must accept; but is there a rationale in the demand? Tragic experience must in the end prompt the question of justice. But it is a question that cannot be put externally—as, is this system, here seen in part of its workings, just? In truly tragic experience all possibility of intervention is cancelled at the outset, and in the development there is, as we have seen, no 'divine' thrusting on to an arbitrary doom; reality is therefore accepted by the spectator. It is the tragic experience which becomes the criterion when we seek for final explanations. Our question takes the form not, is this just?; but, the tragic experience accepted, what do we now make of 'justice'? We thus return to our starting-point, the connexion between what we are—which, we have seen, includes what we can know of ourselves—and what befalls us. 'Only connect . . .'; there is no final escape from the counsel.

We have seen that connexion is not mechanistic, merely cause-effect in its workings. What then of its justice? Is it arbitrary, selecting from among the inescapably guilty (for the failings we see in tragedy are universal in humanity) the one who is to discharge the penalty? If so, the seeking appears to be at random. We have seen the great accident that brings together an Othello and an Iago; we know that Cawdor's treachery, opening a path to the Crown, is as great a surprise to Macbeth as it is to all others. Is the tragic predicament, then, a 'cursed spite'—that some are born to this destiny, summoned without their choosing to set the balance momentarily right? Or, to put it another way, is humanity at large the prey of final reality, which waits for the least error and then forecloses with terrible disproportion? It is perhaps even worse: for any circumspection from which we might hope to gain a measure of freedom is of no avail. The heaven's stroke falls without regard to the greater or less in moral wrong. We have seen it to be so in medieval 'tragedie'. Is it so in *King Lear*, by common consent the most searching of Shakespearian tragedies? If it is so, it is assuredly no accident. For, as Johnson's magisterial utterance reminds us:

> Shakespeare has suffered the virtue of Cordelia to perish in a just cause, contrary to the natural ideas of justice, to the hope of the reader, and, what is yet more strange, to the faith of chronicles.[1]

So great a challenge to our habitual expectations demands that we take stock of the truths which we have apprehended in Shakespeare's tragic plays, thus far, concerning the connexions between what we are and what may come upon us. What is the reality—that 'mystery of things' which tragic experience enables us to confront—expressed, so far as it can be, in these terms? We may consider too, with each of our findings, any implications it has for our study of these plays, so that the weight of the evidence they afford shall not be ignored or minimized.

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[1] *Johnson on Shakespeare*, p. 161.

II

We have seen that reality is free, free of our covenants and prior arrangements, and therefore productive of surprise. So we cannot predetermine reality, however 'realistic' our fundamental assumptions or outright planning. Even the intention to collaborate, to submit the self to predestined authority, constitutes no contract with reality. Falstaff's unshakeable conviction—that all men are or would be as he is—and Hal's willed reformation both fall short of reality. Falstaff will not be sent for 'privately', 'at night'; and the King must learn from 'private men' and 'in the night' that the basis of his planned reformation, the change of outward seeming which he wills, is as nothing beside the reality that is thrust upon him—utter isolation and endless vigilance. For us as latter-day readers of Shakespeare there is this significant lesson: that as reality is free, and thus productive of the unexpected, so no one pattern of interpretation will serve for our understanding. Indeed, to contrive such a pattern may be to leave the dramatist's work to be done again: if surprise is the great characteristic, how foolish we should be in claiming to foresee the end from the beginning! For the dramatist the blindness of love is a greater thing than the licensed holiday of misrule; and the planned career of an heir apparent a lesser thing than the moment of truth which comes to a politic Bolingbroke in final isolation—

I am a King that find thee.

In this light, too, we have seen that it is not granted to man to know himself. Not even a search that ranges as widely as Hamlet's can uncover the central truth; for it is the very condition of this wide ranging that what lies nearest home should remain inscrutable. In *Hamlet* we see man inescapably caught: a door closes behind him, and all retreat is barred. The focus of search is therefore, not, as in other tragedies, upon the mystery of things; it is on the mystery of man himself. But since the nature of man remains impenetrable, in the end it is a mysterious reality that confronts us, so that we shall be hard put to it to say whether Hamlet's revenge is accomplished by his own act or by his instrumentality at the hands of Fate.

Again, the reality that retains its capacity to surprise is not to be closely bound to any Nemesis-type of expectation that would confine attention 'to the action that immediately brings catastrophe and . . . let the audience feel all other motion indirectly'.[1] The Elizabethan serious drama is heir not to the Greek but to the Gothic pattern. Connexion there undoubtedly is between 'character' and calamity; but it is not of a merely cause-effect kind. Accident and coincidence will play the largest part, even in the most realistic settings. Man may in truth be glad to

> shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
> From this world-wearied flesh.

And if he seeks the cause of emergent evil he may well reject the too-simple explanation of devilry:

> I look down towards his feet—but that's a fable.

What is no fable is the hatred that would gladly act upon suspicion, knowing it to be suspicion, but acting 'as if for surety'. There may be disproportion in tragic punishment; but there is a proportion in Shakespeare's art between the natural and the inhuman which keeps the mythic life in the drama by forestalling any too-easy reference to either 'real life' or 'the theatre'; and which may send us away from the theatre with a fresh awareness that it is 'real life' we can conventionalize by habitual inattention. It is not only in the theatre that hatred is bottomless and remains unrepentant. There is thus a lesson of proportion to be observed in our studies. We must pass beyond the merely descriptive question, How far is this or that conventional, how far naturalistic? to the critical question—Why is it so? Why does it suit Shakespeare's purpose now to give us a formidable display of the 'conventional', now to strike with utter simplicity the note of the natural? The first step is to distinguish the naturalistic from the natural—to realize that what touches us directly need not have been established by circumstantial detail. In doing so, we shall be taking our first step away from inherited prejudice, our tendency to regard Elizabethan 'conventional' usages as so much limitation or plain obstacle; or, worse, as half-way measures towards naturalism. If we respond to the actual movement of creative imagination in the work before us, our study must be the extent to which it is made possible by brilliant reliance on dramatic illusion, suspending where necessary the 'facts' of time and space—and those laws of 'probable representation' which relate directly to them—only to restore the sense of the actual by deft touch at the moment of critical intensity. A study of Shakespeare's dramatic art in these terms might be well worth the making. For the present, we may content ourselves with recognizing Shakespeare's power of penetrating us at levels inaccessible to the merely realistic. The explosive hatred of an Iago for an Othello is an absolute situation; it thus touches regions of subliminal terror, as well as the sober certainty that it lives and walks the earth.

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[1] Farnham, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

Must we then conclude that final reality is predominantly supernatural—beyond our understanding and waiting for the least weakness on the part of its destined victims? Shall we say of man that in the last analysis he is more patient than agent? Yet in *Macbeth*, where the 'metaphysical' is fully deployed, the true centre of interest is realistic, coming home to all men's business and bosoms. Equivocation by the Witches answers to equivocation first in the heart then in the act of man. Macbeth's is a willed downfall; and the progress of the tragedy is the infection of that will, a disease which is best diagnosed as impatience with time, a lack of 'ripeness' which proves fatal. And time itself, we see, holds no absolute mystery; the young grow up, the guilty grow old. There comes a new season to offer a fresh start—a beginning of things

> Which would be planted newly with the time.

Here we may learn that the Shakespearian play is not drama plus poetry; and more, that the essence of the poem we attend to is the image in the mouth of the player. We may, too, observe Shakespearian technique in the matter which is life and death to the serious artist, the creation of characters who move freely to ends of their own choosing. And there is certainly a lesson for any attempts of our own to grasp the problem of the 'old world's debate', Fate versus Free Will, in the clear distinctions which Shakespeare's drama offers between the power of choice and the field of choice. There is no unreality—of 'choice' operating in a vacuum—in the Shakespearian universe. The tragic alternatives are final; the height of ambition, the depth of credulity, the mere fury of bloody resolution—this, or ceasing to be the creature the chooser is. The path to disaster lies open.

We may conclude, then, from all we have seen that there is no clear cause-effect relationship between what man is and what may confront him, whether he would seek to placate or evade it. The logic of tragic suffering escapes us, for each instance is a unique demonstration, where the only constant is the inter-relatedness of apparent opposites, those extremes which I have suggested it is the nature of tragic experience not so much to reconcile as to reveal. It is thus that truth is maintained; and this truth is the solid foundation of all our studies. Our energies will be misdirected if we cast about for corroboration of this truth, whether outside the play, in the thought or art of the period, or, within the play, by over-curious scrutiny that would test for minute consistency of detail. For this is to approach the truth of Shakespeare's art as though it were a truth 'standing upon external testimony'.

There remains the relation of this truth to the notion of justice. The final characteristic of tragic experience is 'rightness', a sense that what is done, though it may be surprising and may well seem disproportionate to the offence or weakness to which it is related, is nevertheless acceptable. In this light, as we have suggested, it can be ennobling; for whatever the doom the human creature has gone to, he has not been overruled. What was (and may remain) sordid and distressing outside the tragic medium—however heightened, it may be, by imagination—is in that medium not merely acceptable but even inspiring. The universal value-judgement is upheld: better for man to choose destruction than to have happiness chosen for him. So we are sustained as, in the usual pattern of tragic development, realization of inevitable destiny comes late. The choice made at the outset is irrevocable; sides are taken and all is set unwaveringly to the end, the death which cancels all debts. But in the play we are now to consider, suffering by the tragic chooser seems to purge guilt; awareness grows of things too little heeded; and—most marvellous of all—forgiveness is asked and is freely given. We have the extraordinary sight of a King and father kneeling to the daughter he had wronged; and of his being raised by her. The merely human wrongs are set to rights; and it is then that utter disaster comes.

What are we to make of this unusual demonstration? As *King Lear* appears to state a 'truth' which we do not discover elsewhere, it will be as well to compare, point by point, what we find in *King Lear* with what we have seen in other plays. And since our concern is with 'justice', it will be appropriate to marshal our observations under heads appropriate to justice. If there are to be trials, let us bring to bear all the evidence of Shakespearian tragic insight.

III

Firstly, justice is concerned to interpret evidence; it must penetrate beneath the surface of things. But justice is, not only in effigy but in reality, blind. This play opens with a glimpse of a headstrong and unrepentant parent—in Gloucester, not Lear. So brief is this opening action and so tempestuous what immediately follows that it is often overlooked.[1] But the distinctive note it sounds is vital to all that follows. Wilful old age is there, certainly; and, too, the legitimate against the illegitimate. But more important than these is the fact of act and consequence easily accepted and put in place. Gloucester readily admits that 'the whoreson must be acknowledged'. But the parent is in control; the son

> hath been out nine years, and away he shall again.

It is a world where authority is firmly entrenched; the young, living by favour of the old, are disposed of accordingly. This we next see at the seat of authority, in the decision of the King to divide his kingdom. The royal father who misunderstands his own resolution confronting him in his child is one with Bolingbroke, blind when face to face with Hal. But this father draws on himself disaster:

> Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.

The comparison with Henry Bolingbroke reaches further. Just as Lear's choice is the unnatural daughters, who give him the world of wish-fulfilment in the appearance of affection, so Henry had longed vainly for Hotspur as his son—the Hotspur who deceived no one, least of all the true son, Bolingbroke's 'unthought-of Harry'. So the fact of illusion is unsparingly conveyed; the human will to have things as they are not is inseparable from our blindness to things as they are. As Lear curses his loyal daughter, so Bolingbroke brushes aside all protestation from his son, and sweeps to his terrible conclusion. Harry the true son is 'like enough' to show himself 'degenerate'. After that, as we have seen, nothing will serve but the solemn avowal of Harry upon his knees:

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[1] As it is, for example, by D. G. James, who sees the play beginning 'with more of the abrupt, unquestioning beginning of a fairy story than of a play which is to satisfy naturalistic requirements: "Once upon a time there was a very old and foolish King . . ."' (*op. cit.*, p. 101).

> This, in the name of God, I promise here.

Cordelia's choice is silence.

So, too, penetration beneath the surface of words must link with penetration through outward shows, both the acts and the garments that may conceal real purpose. In *King Lear*, as in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, the theme of 'ceremony', outward show, both in demeanour and in clothing, must run its full course until we reach man 'unaccommodated'. Lear's 'lendings' are wrenched off by his own hand: King Henry V came to his maturity in discarding all disguises, including that of clothed 'ceremony'. He learned that final authority is not in

> The intertissued robe of gold and pearl,
> The farced title running fore the king.

Lear, too, comes to his realization, and thus his full stature—'every inch a King'—in his solitariness. But he comes to it in madness; and this too had been foreseen. Isolation had begun with Kent dropping the forms of civility, and thus withdrawing open allegiance from any 'sanity' that would divide authority and banish the natural daughter:

> Be Kent unmannerly
> When Lear is *mad*!

The only hope lies in undisguised word and act.

Secondly, justice is concerned with trial and sentence. So in this play we meet those 'trials' which, entered upon in savage mimicry or in outright madness, in fact bear directly on the central situation, the reality of Lear's predicament. For there is a natural correspondence between blindness and that mime or play-acting which, although in one sense 'illusion', must nevertheless imitate a true situation. And if in the true situation normal values and roles are plainly inverted, then the performer may act more truly than he knows. We may recall the Chinese box-like world of *Henry*

IV; once more—though with how much greater consequence—it is a matter of penetrating an old man's arrogant blindness.

The most moving of all scenes in *King Lear* is prepared for by this means of inversion. In Act IV Scene 7 Lear the penitent is raised from his suppliant's kneeling by the daughter he has wronged. In Act II Scene 4 Lear, incensed by Goneril's actions, had heard Regan's counsel:

> Say you have wrong'd her, Sir.

Lear's reply is incredulous:

> Ask her forgiveness?—

and it is followed by an action of savage mockery:

> Do you but mark how this becomes the house—

as he kneels and mimes the petitioner:

> 'Dear daughter, I confess that I am old;
> Age is unnecessary; on my knees I beg . . .'

What he acts out in contempt of absurdity is in fact true of his own predicament. It does in sober reality 'become the house' that in the long run the father must kneel to the daughter: for the house has been turned upside-down by Lear himself. In the end Lear will kneel, against Cordelia's wish—

> No, Sir, you must not kneel—

to·ask forgiveness for his 'unnecessary' age, for being

> a very foolish fond old man.

In a play abounding in sharp and painful inversions of natural order, each a 'side-piercing sight', there is for once a beautiful inversion. And nothing less will serve; for a world 'turn'd the wrong side out' must be set to rights. We have come back to the true pattern when the daughter asks to have the father's hand held over her in blessing:

> O, look upon me, Sir,
> And hold your hand in benediction o'er me.
> No, Sir, you must not kneel.

One of the most striking proofs of Shakespearian insight, his sense of the significant in the material coming to his hands, is his seizing upon this ceremonious kneeling and rising which in the old play of *Leir* makes the scene topple 'over into absurdity'. He indeed 'realized the inherent pathos of the scene, and transmuted it for his own purposes'[1]: for it is integral to his own habit of creative imagination. We recall Falstaff and the Prince holding their mock Court in the Boar's Head, as Falstaff successively obeys the Prince's commands—

> Do thou stand for my father—

and then—

> Do thou stand for me.

In the history play there is a close texture of dramatic irony, as befits a drama of purposes apparently identical, in reality divergent. We have, for example, the playing upon what men know and what they think they know. Thus Falstaff, as Prince Hal, admits he has heard of Falstaff—

> My lord, the man I know—

and the Prince, as both himself and as King Henry IV, replies

> I know thou dost.

Whereupon Falstaff hurriedly plays upon the mime-situation:

> But to say I know more harm in him than in myself were to say more than I know.

It is a reply which holds the central human truth of the play. Falstaff, playing the Prince, claims that their offences are equal, and equally unimportant: thus identity of aim and purpose is implied—the conviction from which we never see Falstaff moved. Within the whole play 'knowledge' must therefore run the gamut from the words of recognition, 'I know you all', to the words of rejection, 'I know thee not'. Similarly, the Boar's Head 'play extempore' can come to only one conclusion. To the confident appeal that the world cannot be banished, the Prince replies that it can and will be:

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[1] Muir, Arden edition (London, 1952), p. xxx.

> I do, I will.

In *King Lear* we see another old man as petitioner: but this time it is a powerful one who would be both judge and prosecutor. Lear asks the profound questions that relate to the play as a whole; but he is not always aware of their true relevance. It is a point we must reserve for the moment; but the integral relation of pretended 'trial-scene' to reality is sufficiently clear. When Lear in his madness arraigns his evil daughters, he puts the pertinent question:

> Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?

There is no answer, immediately or ultimately. But this pretended trial is followed by the actual and barbaric 'trial' of Gloucester for treachery; and there the speculative question is postponed while we have an answer sufficient for the grim present. All restraint upon the hard-hearted has been weakened. Now they know their freedom—

> our power
> Shall do a court'sy to our wrath—

for they know that men

> May blame, but not control.

If these themes take up what has been uttered before in tragic statement, they do so with incomparably greater power. This time illusion, hitherto a metaphorical blindness, is carried to the stage of real blindness. In the monstrous punishment of Gloucester all illusion is contemptuously thrust aside. We see that this 'trial', too, is a pretence: but it is a pretence in the real world; and the mockery of justice is made explicit in Cornwall's ruthless play upon the word 'see'. Gloucester, the helpless captive, yet clings to the certainty of retribution for his captors:

> I shall see
> The winged vengeance overtake such children.

The answer to this puts all illusion aside, the lesser—the superstitious credulity on which Edmund had played—as well as the greater, the faith in a retributive justice to be made manifest among us. Whatever superhuman power there may be to behold Gloucester in his torment, it is certain that Gloucester will not see its operations:

> See't shalt thou never . . .
> Upon these eyes of thine I'll set my foot.

It will not be easy to talk of 'seeing' in the long run of these disasters. Men will have to be very sure of the truth if all flight of speech is denied them.

Similarly, the theme of outward show, the act and garment that conceal true nature, is raised to a level of intensity we had not known before. There is Lear's varying sight, his changing apprehensions of those who appear before him: in the end he must confess that his eyes are 'not o' the best'. There is actual disguise in those around him, in both Edgar and Kent. And in the climax, never to be equalled, there is Lear stripping himself with the great cry

> Off, off, you lendings!

We thus reach the literal truth of 'unaccommodated man'. In one and the same scene (Act IV Scene 6) we have the disguised son proclaiming to a blinded father the reality behind appearances—

> in nothing am I chang'd
> But in my garments—

and, crowning all, to them both

> *Enter* Lear, *fantastically dressed with weeds.*

It is in this very scene, fittingly enough, that the pathos of illusion is developed as never before, in Gloucester's supposing himself divinely saved from certain death. There is no single episode in Shakespeare which so conveys the haplessness of man, clinging to the illusion that the gods intervene in our affairs. It is, indeed, a sort of play within the play, with the audience twice-privileged; in as much as ours is always a position of vantage upon the persons of the play, now we share it with a son unknown to his father. And what we see is that having made his surrender and, miraculously, escaped', Gloucester is prepared to

bear
Affliction till it do cry out itself
'Enough, enough', and die.

He is resolved upon endurance; but how we, with him, are humbled! Is *this* all the evidence man needs to accept the merciful lie restoring habitual conviction—that we are the endless concern of

the clearest gods, who make them honours
Of men's impossibilities?

It is a shaft which goes deeper than any.

The theme, then, of illusion, the will to see what is not, coupled with blindness to what actually confronts us, links in turn with the garments that disguise or conceal—'Robes and furr'd gowns hide all'—and which must be torn away before we reach the truth of 'unaccommodated man'. 'Raggedness', however, as distinct from 'robes and furr'd gowns', will be a step forward. For raggedness is 'loop'd and window'd', and thus affords glimpses of reality to the one who is warned at the outset that he must 'see better'. Pomp begins to see—and take—its physic.

Thirdly, justice is concerned with plain speaking, with the evidence unclouded by rhetoric. We may fitly compare with *King Lear* the orchestration of *Othello*, as we have examined it, in its contrast of short, stabbing thrusts with the high-built words of unquestioned honour and obligation. But here again it is the advance in power that is the notable characteristic. The very first scene, once Lear is enraged, is a remarkable demonstration of vocal 'scoring'. The theme of entrenched authority, quick to pronounce sentence, is heard in the polysyllabic storm that, for all its ferocity, sounds the very note of illusion. It is opposed to the quick monosyllabic thrusts of plain sense and natural feeling. After the explosive denunciation of Cordelia Kent attempts to intervene; at first, with due regard for the King's majesty—

Good my liege—

and, again, in the same submissive terms—

Royal Lear,
Whom I have ever honour'd as my king,
Lov'd as my father, as my master follow'd,
As my great patron thought on in my prayers . . .

In this ceremonious language there is every appeal to authority to be mindful of its dignity, and thus its responsibility. But it will not serve; and so it must give way to plainer words:

Be Kent unmannerly
When Lear is mad.

Kent speaks with appalling bluntness: for there is nothing left. The coarse 'thou' utters contempt of authority, as the 'old man' does of majesty:

What wouldst thou do, old man?

We come to the truth about the tyranny that has just asserted itself; and it is, too, the first warning of the New Order that this tyranny has unwittingly set up. Lear's former kingdom will be a world turned upside-down. The good man, we shall see, will be thought clean contrary to all that is normal:

What most he should dislike seems pleasant to him;
What like, offensive.

Kent, in this first scene, pronounces the epitaph on Lear's rule. It is the plain truth, plainly told:

Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here.

In the same mode are the very great utterances of this play those phrases that match the 'side-piercing' sights of our common humanity and, once heard, find lodging forever in the memory: 'I'll go to bed at noon'; 'Bear free and patient thoughts'; 'a very foolish fond old man, Fourscore and upward'; 'Pray you undo this button'. These are heard against the thunderous rhetoric of majesty dispossessed: and, even where the tide of speech seems to make all one way, some element of utter naturalness is never wholly lacking. So, in the curse pronounced upon Goneril—

> Hear, Nature, hear; dear goddess, hear.
> Suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend
> To make this creature fruitful—

the harsh, contorted phrases—'derogate body', 'thwart disnatur'd torment', 'cadent tears'—throw this savage and unnatural fury into relief. But, as always, the truth is brought home; the hyperbole is rooted in a moving simplicity. We come to the veritable torment, 'sharper than a serpent's tooth',

> To have a thankless child.

It is the unmistakably Shakespearian touch. Who can doubt that this is punishment indeed? The pattern is thus familiar; but in the full orchestration of this play we have elements that go beyond the common contrast of high speech and prosaic realism. We have the babbling of Poor Tom to make strange discords and stranger harmonies:

> Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill

and

> I smell the blood of a British man.

Again, and most boldly handled, we hear the Fool's falsetto snatches, counterpointing the wholly pathetic utterances of Lear, so that a heartless world is never forgotten. It is thus that perspective is gained upon Lear's sufferings; we may dwell on no one of his injuries—and so we must feel all. Let

Lear shout, in the torrent of his misery and in the pitiless downpour—

> Off, off, you lendings!—

and we hear the Fool's babble—

> Prithee, nuncle, be contented; 'tis a naughty night to swim in.

Or let Lear cry to his welling sorrows—

> O me, my heart, my rising heart!—

and we hear the Fool respond—

> Cry to it, nuncle, as the cockney did to the eels when she put 'em i' th' paste alive . . . 'Down, wantons, down!'

This pattern of versicle and response establishes as perhaps nothing else could the co-existence of Lear's misery and that of his followers; and when he begins to heed this, he is beginning to see better:

> How dost, my boy? Art cold?
> I am cold myself.

As awareness of the plight of others begins to awaken in his master, the Fool's task is done and he may go to bed betimes. His labour 'to outjest' Lear's 'heart-struck injuries' is not in vain. In this play vocal orchestration has advanced from the penetrating simplicity of *Othello* to a great complexity.

Fourthly, justice is concerned with manifest and declared evil, with 'malice aforethought' as well as with weakness, mere lapse, or inadvertence. In *King Lear* as in *Othello* we have the Machiavel, with his 'self-conscious choice of evil to be his good', and thus his being permanently at odds with all natural impulse. But here again we go one stage further. Edmund steps into a society where the illegitimate is given its full sway. No longer is it for the Machiavel to contrive incessantly, pitting his skill against a dangerous world.

Edmund is given the rarest of all opportunities: a world where all is 'turn'd the wrong side out' is a world in which, inevitably, 'the base Shall top th' legitimate'. Again, in this play as in *Othello*, credulity is abroad for the wicked to work upon: but now it is doubly available—in 'the excellent foppery' of Gloucester's easy determinism, and in the 'nobleness' of Edgar's nature. The task is thus immeasurably easier; the gods themselves seem to respond to Edmund's call:

> Now, gods, stand up for bastards!

More, the world of evil, given its greatest opportunity, is also given collaborators. No longer must a scheming evil work alone; Edmund's designs fall in readily with those of Goneril and Regan. But here the great difference in this play's exploration of evil begins to show itself. Evil turns out to be self-destroying; the world of 'I am I' is incapable of combination. Lear has created a world of naked individualism, and so sides must form; Lear's little company is set over against the collaboration between Goneril and Regan to stint their dispossessed father. But, for the wicked it is a world of individuals; and as such it must divide to its own destruction. In the ghastly 'loves' between Edmund and the two sisters we have the ultimate in the world of 'I am I', and thus its final weakness. This is contrasted with the loyalty of Lear's little company to a common purpose; and, above all, with that love of father and natural daughter which, once they are united, is prepared to bear it out to the edge of doom. There is difference enough: but we still have not finished with the difference between this play and all we have seen before. There is, before the end, the greatest change of all; evil itself relents. The 'self-conscious choice' is reversed:

> Some good I mean to do,
> Despite of mine own nature.

But it is too late.

Justice, again, must relate to what we can discover of 'natural justice', any law of nature. It must take heed of man as animal, and probe the limits of his nature. Here, too, we meet a distinctive characteristic of the Shakespearian imagination. In *King Lear*, as in *Macbeth*, the world of man is contrasted with that of the beasts. There is the same wicked appeal to go beyond the limits of what man may do; and the imagery of the beasts in this play is too well known to be detailed here: Lear's evil children are 'Tigers, not daughters'; they are 'dog-hearted'; Goneril's is a 'wolfish visage'; and so on. But this time we reach a deeper truth. The daughters have done something which no animal, even an animal made preternaturally savage by ill-treatment, could do. They have made mad

> A father, and a gracious aged man,
> Whose reverence even the head-lugg'd bear would lick.

When man falls he falls below the level of the beasts. We thus reach a full understanding of what Lear's New Order entails. And it is irreversible, a matter of certain fact not fearful conjecture: without direct and supernatural intervention

> It will come
> Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
> Like monsters of the deep.

We go right down the scale: not now the familiar terror of bear, tiger, serpent, wolf. Comparison must reach to the dimly apprehended monsters in the great depths; for these, like the horrors to come, we cannot name, having never looked on their dreadful shapes.

Nothing less than the limits of man's nature is under scrutiny. We therefore see man not only as the clothed animal, 'accommodated' to a world of appearances, but man as a creature of time. In *King Lear* as in *Macbeth*, the notion of what is less than human is inseparable from man as subject to time; but here it has only one issue. Man as subject to time is in plain fact man to be moulded by other men, in a present which it is for the powerful to make—though unmaking may be a different matter. Edmund speaks to the Captain of the Guard which is to take Lear and Cordelia to prison:

> Know thou this, that men
> Are as the time is; to be tender-minded
> Does not become a sword.

The masters who set other men on to their tasks would make those men beasts; as the Captain says, of the charge given him:

> I cannot draw a cart nor eat dried oats;
> If it be man's work, I'll do't.

We may be reminded of Macbeth's contempt for those hireling murderers who 'in the catalogue' 'go for men'. Once again, as often before in Shakespeare's tragic plays, we have a world where the unnatural is in the ascendant, and confusion abounds; 'Chaos is come again'. But we begin to approach an unshakeable truth when we recall that the author of 'the time' is Lear himself. What 'the time' does to man is in reality what some men do to others; and of all men the King must bear responsibility for the time.

Lastly, then, we must ask if there is any escape-clause. If justice is contractual, is it possible to contract out? If we are sorry and the injured party grants forgiveness, may we not hope that the matter ends there? It is the great question, and here 'poetic justice' would have its say. Lear, most would say, has been redeemed; indeed, Bradley would thus entitle 'this poem'.[1] We have seen Lear come to awareness of what he had taken too little care of; and this, moreover, in act as well as utterance. Care for the sorrows of his followers is practical:

> In, boy; go first . . .
> Nay, get thee in—

and it is the beginning of new life for Lear:

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[1] 'Should we not be at least as near the truth if we called this poem *The Redemption of King Lear*?' (*op. cit.*, p. 285).

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

The Lear who kneels to Cordelia is making no momentary profession of repentance, however heartfelt. He has indeed learned; he is certainly forgiven; and, equally certain, he later accepts with perfect resignation the refuge of a walled prison with his Cordelia. He is confident in the efficacy of human blessing and forgiveness:

When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness.

He happily contrasts this secure life with the pettiness of the world's concerns, the brief duration of

packs and sects of great ones
That ebb and flow by th' moon.

The metaphor is well chosen and surely indicates that he is fully restored to sanity: the former King can see Court life for the lunacy it is. And, certainly, too, Lear is confident that acceptance on his part will be accepted in its turn. It is a 'sacrifice'; and on it

The gods themselves throw incense.

Lear and his Cordelia, at last united, will never be parted. But as they leave the scene we are reminded that they are living in a world of men; and the nature of man admits of no wide conjecture. Whatever may be true of the gods, 'men Are as the time is'. Lear has repented and been freely forgiven: now indeed he sees better than ever before. But what is that to the process he has set in motion? To be sure, Lear's terms have shrunk immeasurably. He no longer asks for

The name, and all th' addition to a King.

His demands have dwindled to life in a walled prison with his Cordelia: and in its way it is fulfilment. Cordelia, we remember, was the one he 'lov'd most'; it was 'On her kind nursery' he had 'thought to set' his 'rest'.

The demand has been incalculably reduced. But it is still an attempted covenant with reality: and the fact is that there is no loophole in all the universe for Lear. To put the matter beyond doubt, evil itself will relent. But it is too late: and Lear dies, as he had lived, in illusion. The illusion that Cordelia lives matches the ineradicable illusion that reality is answerable to our contrivings: and that repentance and forgiveness, the cancelling of the purely human wrong, will undo the process of time. Lear's confident appeal to the gods is certainly upheld by his fellow human-beings in the audience. Critics readily approve his 'awareness . . . of superhuman beings upon whom men may call'; for it there not 'despite all the horrifying chaos of phenomena, a substantial universal order upon which men may rely'?[1] It is, I believe, a question which Shakespeare has not left wholly unresolved. But it is perhaps Shakespeare's greatest single achievement, the most striking instance of the truth of his wide-ranging imagination, that in the close of *King Lear* we do not need to search for high destiny and inscrutable purpose. Accident has played its part; the message of release came too late. But it is no accident that men are as the time is. The world is as Lear made it: he opened the gate that let this folly in.

If ever Renaissance tragedy, in its concern with persons of estate and issues of an obvious importance in secular society, were to be tried in terms of truth to life as all men encounter life, it would find justification here. *Le Roy le veult*; that is the situation at the end as it was at the beginning. But what any man has done cannot of his simple volition be undone—the monarch least of all. As in *Henry V*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, where 'great ones' go about their business, the world is no mere back-cloth to pick up and flatteringly or terrifyingly enlarge the shadows in the foreground. Choice has consequences, and those consequences, being in a world of real men and women, pass beyond our control. If we seek for lessons, the true lesson is that

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[1] R. B. Heilman, *This Great Stage* (Baton Rouge, 1948), pp. 269, 151.

> Men must endure
> Their going hence, even as their coming hither.

It is, it appears, not the repentance but the ripeness that is all.

IV

Is this to say that *King Lear* is pessimistic? I have tried to show that in the detailed execution of this play there are characteristics we have met before, and can thus recognize as Shakespeare's authentication. But in each instance they are carried to a further point of development. So, in its final assertion, *King Lear* offers the most compelling demonstration of what we had seen first and last in our survey. In the tetralogy that ends in *Henry V* and in the last of the major tragedies, *Macbeth*, we had learned that reality is free of our contriving and thus productive of surprise, whether for good or ill. It is free as the time is free—the time that in *Macbeth* brings fulfilment of good; here, the time that brings home upon the innocent head of his daughter the direct consequence of the 'nature' Lear himself had unleashed. We must not complain that things move to their appointed conclusion if it is we ourselves who have appointed it. For the impossibility of binding time, as Macbeth would bind it, is equal with the impossibility of living unto the self. The proposition 'I am I' is incapable of moderation; thus a world of individuals is in the last resort a world which destroys itself. To choose 'I am I' is finally not to be. This, so far from being pessimistic, is substantial ground for hope. The play abounds in images of long-suffering and fortitude, in Kent, Edgar and the Fool no less than in Cordelia and a truly humbled Gloucester and Lear. Time has brought the slow undoing of the unnatural, the self-destruction which evil left only to itself will inevitably mean. There is a 'madness in reason' as well as reason in madness.[1] Not all men, we may recall, will collaborate with a perverted time. As against Edmund's Captain there are Cornwall's uncorrupted servants; and, too, that good old man—for not all the old are headstrong—who brings a blinded father to his son. There is no ground of despair—if we will only abstain from the pleasing fiction that reality will answer our bidding.

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[1] Heilman, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-53.

The reality that declares itself in the close of *King Lear* is thus not to be called arbitrary. Act and consequence have played the larger part, and this again is consonant with all we have seen of Shakespeare's tragic universe. Evil designs may be already afoot; accident may precipitate the consequence: but no more. The train is already laid: 'The bow is bent and drawn'; we must, if we can, 'make from the shaft'. Here, too, we touch upon Shakespeare's 'fund of nature'—inevitably, in a play profoundly concerned with what we are to mean by the 'natural'. With this understanding, we may say that *King Lear*, so far from being pessimistic, preserves justice by refusing poetic justice. There is, as always, manifest disproportion between the 'offence' and the disaster that follows from it. It is a disproportion which banishes any facile notion of the tragic victims as 'deserving' what befalls them. In this light, questions of a retributive justice, alike of deserving and of proportion, pertain rather to the region of fiction, a merely poetic justice. In reality, we may feel, here too

> high Heaven rejects the lore
> Of nicely-calculated less or more.

Act and consequence are clear: and what is above all clear has nothing directly to do with repentance and forgiveness, and will take place even when evil itself relents. The Shakespearian insight thus may warn us to make some correction of our habitual standpoint. We are very ready to give action a lower place than intention, to conclude that

> Action is transitory—a step, a blow,
> The motion of a muscle—this way or that—
> 'Tis done . . .

What we have willed in action we have set in motion in time; and it is not to be arrested by our mere turning back. Words and desires are one thing: but action is another; and when we work upon men we cannot certainly choose a time when we will turn all back to the beginning. We must not, then, 'in the after-vacancy'

> wonder at ourselves like men betrayed.

In this light, too, we may look again at another lasting question. Is man agent or patient? He would have himself the agent in all that he possesses, rules, and claims as his own, for authority and for honour alike. Conversely, as we have seen, he will plead himself the patient of all that goes against his intention, counters his hopes, and diminishes him in revealing the limits of his power. But the spectator may see what Lear himself, like Hamlet, does not see: that man is the patient of what he would ignore or evade. It is acceptance that confers freedom; truly, the 'Ripeness is all'.

We may say, then, if we steadily confront the terrible ending of *King Lear*, that justice is not and can never be the ultimate question in tragic experience. Illusion, we see, is the permanent condition of humanity. How, then, should we talk of 'punishment' for those who fail to achieve realization? Where the offence is, let the great axe fall—that is sound law; but it assumes knowledge by the offender. The great 'punishment' that comes to the conscious and primary agent of evil, is, as we have seen, the realization of the waste wrought by the separate existence he has willed. 'Honour, love, obedience, troops of friends'—these Macbeth must not look to have. But Lear is, paradoxically, let off; if we are to talk of 'punishment', let us be sure that he escapes punishment. No *final* realization comes to him of the waste he has wrought: for after his repentance his conviction is as it was in the beginning—that he can treat with reality. Lear's is a walled prison—for two, indeed; but it is none the less a willed isolation. And when the last blow has fallen, Lear dies in illusion still. But it is not so with the spectator. With Lear the great illusion dies, and with it go the lesser illusions—that justice is merely retributive—

> The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us—

or that there is no justice but only capricious cruelty—

> As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods—
> They kill us for their sport.

No one confirms and no one denies these suppositions. They come, we may say in all truth, from 'interested parties'. It is for the spectator to interpret this whole experience in the light of all the evidence. What tragic experience offers is not less than unique: we are given the opportunity to take upon ourselves

> the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies.

We must not, in the end of the tragedy, turn aside, involuntarily, so that the demonstration fails of tragic intensity and slips imperceptibly into mere pathos, drawing our quick tears. We all know what that has meant in the stage-history of this play. It is easy to ridicule the simpleton who would intervene to arrest Othello from his murderous act. Let us beware of a final inattention in this tragedy, which might not be less disastrous. I have suggested that we sometimes miss the actual beginning, the first thirty-odd lines in which the theme of illusion, fancied immunity from the consequences of the past, is sounded with an easy negligence in Gloucester that well conveys the quality of habitual assumption. Gloucester is sorry; there is an end. In these matters, he is a realist, as Lear is; is not the world made for our managing? Let us attend, then The tragic experience truly entered upon sustains us in the moment of unbearable loss; for a mighty principle is at work:

> However painful may be the objects with which the Anatomist's knowledge is connected, he feels that his knowledge is pleasure; and where he has no pleasure he has no knowledge.

We must not avert our gaze, thinking the ending 'shockingly capricious',[1] or hastening to defend Shakespeare from an imputation of 'misanthropy and despair'.[2] Tragic experience is the blessed transformation of our merely defensive capacity to bear the ills of others. For once we are wholly exposed and yet perfectly exempt. So we may indeed look—and, it may be for the first time, see.

V

It is in this light that I find myself differing from what I take to be one of the profoundest essays on Shakespeare's 'reason', his exploring imagination, to appear in our time. In *The Dream of Learning* D. G. James concludes taht Shakespeare in the end

> saw evil still, and suffering; but he also saw a certain power in human nature to overcome the world and to make the world fade in our imaginations and leave not a rack behind.[3]

The difference will be clear. I take the lasting emphasis to be upon a characteristic failing of human nature—having our own responsibility for evil and suffering at last made manifest, we would withdraw in horror and unfeigned repentance; and are therefore confident that all is changed. It is indeed characteristic of us 'to make the world fade in our imaginations'; but we do not thereby stop it in its course. So I must place the emphasis differently when comparison is made with Bacon. Mr James's argument is that, against the common notion, held by Bacon, of 'poesy' as fiction, representing 'the successes and issues of actions . . . more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence', Shakespeare offers us 'a candid exploration' which exhibits the 'limits . . . of our human experience as they are reached by souls of surpassing excellence and beauty'.[4] It is an illuminating contrast. Certainly the candour of Shakespeare's exploration—its 'freedom from antecedent and determining belief'—is beyond question, and so, too, is the play as demonstrating a 'reason' in no sense inferior to the Baconian instrument of knowledge. On the evidence of *King Lear* above all, 'poesy' is not to be confined to the region Bacon would assign and which we, without overmuch reflection, ordinarily accept. So much is common ground. But has Shakespeare in fact provided 'a knowledge which [is] also a power'?[1] James maintains that Shakespeare sees, beside evil 'from which he promises the world no escape',

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[1] Helen Gardner, 'The Noble Moor', British Academy Shakespeare Lecture, 1955, p. 16.

[2] Bradley, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

[3] *op. cit.*, p. 126.

[4] *ibid.*, p. 121.

> also, and principally, the wholly good, suffering indeed, but also altogether proof against all that is brought against it.[2]

It is, I believe, 'principally' not so. Certainly Cordelia's love is proof against all: but the centre of attention is Lear; and Lear dies as he had lived, in the illusion of control over his destiny. Has he not repented? and does he not ask in all humility for infinitely less than he had demanded before his suffering and repentance? Who then can deny him the blessedness he seeks? These are the very questions which are evoked from us; but they are not rhetorical questions. What we see beyond any doubt is our common confidence with Lear that all is now settled; and do we not feel, a moment later, when the last stroke falls, our obliviousness of all that had gone before? Repentance and forgiveness are the greatest goods; but it is act and consequence that play the decisive part: and with both sets of terms we are made to turn away, for once, from the gods above to man on this earth. We live in a world of illusion while we project upon reality the unargued conviction *Hoc volo, sic jubeo*. It is in this aspect that *King Lear* may be seen as challenging Baconian calculation and pragmatic sense with an unequalled simplicity of reference to fact. Subject and King alike, man is not to be separated from man; and men cannot be taken out of time.

Perhaps, too, the significance of *King Lear* as 'candid exploration' goes further. It, too, like Bacon's *Advancement*, arises from the contemplation of an old order in the moment of its passing: but here scrutiny is made of the human truth of belief in supernatural beneficence—not, indeed, the doctrines of revealed religion, but the unchecked assumptions of habitual belief, religion as men commonly hold religion. All who have attended to this play have remarked upon the absence of specifically Christian reference—which, of course, as James observes, is not to say that 'there is nowhere in the play implicit Christian feeling'; only that it designedly lacks 'any fraction of a Christian context'. It is I believe only in such a setting that we can see clearly what even vaguely Christian association might prohibit us from seeing at all. What we see is the rooted conviction that to be sorry is to terminate a course of events; that it is possible and, in these terms, natural to usurp upon divine purpose, to make some sacrifices that are thought veritably binding upon deity:

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[1] *op. cit.*, p. 122.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 124.

> Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
> The gods themselves throw incense.

Nothing in the Shakespearian universe that I know of offers any contradiction to the truths of the Christian religion. But his province as a dramatist, the distinctive scope and purpose of his 'poesy', is in the last resort 'deeds and language such as men do use'. There is in *King Lear* nothing to impugn any doctrine of repentance and forgiveness. We see only what our unthinking acceptance of such a doctrine may mean, and—save for the Saints, we need not doubt—has commonly meant, the illusion that we have made an end of the offence when we have repented the offending. It is thus not only on each other that we visit 'the perpetual coxcombry of our moral pretensions'. Immunity is a contract we would lay upon 'the gods'. This, of course, so far from constituting any divergence from Christianity, might be called a profoundly Christian truth; the guilt of sin and the fact of sin—wrong-doing as carrying consequences for our fellow-men, creatures set like us in time—have ever been held inseparable in practical Christian teaching. We know, too, that individual dealing is all. Lear may claim immunity for his daughter; but we have been told that 'no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him'. Yet any assessment of *King Lear* in these explicit terms would be beside the essential point, its 'candid exploration'. Shakespeare's subject is illusion, and in Lear it is shown as an incurable condition. It is in these terms that *King Lear* is Shakespeare's contribution to knowledge, to that true 'history' which Bacon imperfectly distinguished from 'poesy'. It is for once the turn of 'poesy' to speak unfeignedly of what is, 'the successes and issues of actions' as they must be, and not as we might wish them to be, conformable with 'retribution' and 'revealed providence'. Shakespeare preserves truth by refusing the fiction in the soul. Whatever the other worlds man may aspire to, he is indissolubly a part of human society, which in this play is veritably 'a vital complex' of relationships.[1] So we can have nothing to say of 'retribution' and 'revealed providence' as high matters; the justice Shakespeare reveals is emphatically not a poetic justice. But the Law thus implied has nothing of mystery; it has only the large simplicity of what we would endlessly overlook. It is not normative, but descriptive: and it comes with the perfect clarity of what we, in a world that for better or for worse owes much to Bacon, have come to regard as the expression of observed certainty. 'Men Are as the time is'; 'Let go thy hold when a great wheel runs down a hill'—this we call physical law.

One last point. Shakespeare's play is justly characterized as an exploration of the limits of human experience. But some notion of unreality, of straining the evidence, may be conveyed if we accept James's view of the dramatist's working method, his 'abstractive imagination'. To speak of Shakespeare abstracting 'character from circumstance', 'removing virtue away from efficacy',[2] may mislead. The great achievement of the play is to hold steadily before us con-

[1] Sewell, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

[2] James, *op. cit.*, pp. 110-11.

creteness, the circumstantial reference which all action must have in reality but which it commonly lacks, in greater or less degree, in 'poesy'. That precisely is why Shakespeare has 'dealt hardly with his material', the story as it came variously to his hands. But it is possible to be over-curious in finding the 'unnatural' in this dealing. Are Edgar and Kent unnatural in delaying the disclosure of identity?—Edmund in forgetting to disclose the order against Cordelia's life?—Cordelia and Edgar in being made to stand forth in the close as fighting figures? These objections seem a shade unreal, as is the case made on the other side, the 'pure and unmitigated evil' against which the good characters are pitted. *King Lear* indeed evidences the dramatist's 'creation of extreme simplicities of both good and evil'; and this is a primary truth. But it is not less important to observe that among the evil there are touches of good—even, most remarkable, in Goneril,[1] as well as in Edmund, which James perceives; and among the lesser persons of the play, as we have seen, there are those whose goodness shines forth, goodness of a more humble and quotidian kind than that of a Cordelia or an Edgar. Indeed, the truth of Shakespeare's method in this regard is that there is an 'admixture of good with evil' which is 'both proof and product of the fact that, morally, we are members of each other'.[2]

VI

There is yet one more thing to be said, and it is certainly not of the least significance. The last thing we see in this play is not the dead and the dying; and the last word we hear is from those who must live, however briefly and under however dark a sky. At first we may think this a mechanical tidying-up, at best perfunctory, at worst a fumbling concession to the necessities of the playhouse and thus a dull return to ordinary awareness. We have seen that disaster may come from a sky apparently clear: we can talk no more of retribution. But there falls upon Albany the task of pulling

[1] Sewell, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-16.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 114.

these fragments into order once more; and it is fitting that it should be so. Although the question of justice has not the first place in our attention it is none the less the basis of habitual expectation; and what we have seen must not go entirely unrelated to this ordinary framework of reference. So it is appropriate that Albany now takes control: for his had been a faith in retributive justice no whit less assured than Lear's, and it had had some apparent warrant. He had prophesied the intervention of 'the heavens' against the 'vile offences' performed by child upon parent; and Cornwall's death had, it seemed, justified him:

> This shows you are above,
> You justicers, that these our nether crimes
> So speedily can venge!

So, as events draw to the last climax, he can receive unmoved the news of Goneril's and Regan's deaths; for it is manifestly, in his system, a 'judgement of the heavens'. But when Albany must behold Lear bent over the body of his loyal daughter there is no more to be said of justice from above. We see, through Albany, that there is no question that men *do* rely on 'a substantial order'. But in face of this we cannot say that they have any warrant for that reliance. Yet life must continue: and so it is for Albany, who had so often looked above, to show that in the world below, the world of men and time, the only thing we can proceed upon is retributive justice:

> All friends shall taste
> The wages of their virtue, and all foes
> The cup of their deservings.

There is no contradiction; only, once more, we are required to look upon life as we encounter it, not as we would shape and then disregard it. Now for the first time we are to see the ordinary state of secular society. We had begun with Lear's reign, where 'nature' had asked more than 'reason' could give. Lear's demand and the response of Goneril and Regan alike went beyond the bond of reason into excess, as Cordelia's remained merely within it. In the New Order thus brought into being we stayed well clear of 'reason'—on the one hand in the savage excesses of the wicked, on the other in the self-forgetfulness of the good. Now we must struggle painfully towards a new beginning. If we are ever to advance there must be a sound, and thus an elementary, start.

It is the only assumption on which man can proceed. Tragedy is, as always, the exceptional case, coming with sacrificial demand. We may well ask with Albany that all should end. But the heavens will not 'Fall and cease' when we would have it so. Men live still; and so 'the King's government must be carried on'. The necessities of the playhouse are thus inseparable from Shakespeare's deepest imaginings. The play ends, and the bodies of Lear and Cordelia are to be borne off, for the stage must be left cleared. So, too, life goes on. In a play where the authentic has been the only reality, where men are the instruments other men would use, and where the natural and the unnatural reside in the same breast, life does not reform when Lear is repentant—any more than life ceases when Lear would have it so:

> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
> And thou no breath at all?

Reality is intolerable if we would subject it to the question, Why? But what Shakespeare offers us is in the last resort not brutal or horrifying. It is a profound view of the human condition. If we are outraged by this spectacle, let us remember Edgar's pain at the sight of Lear 'fantastically dressed'—

> O thou side-piercing sight!

It was a cry from the heart. But it was characteristic of majesty in madness, in its peremptory and irrelevant fashion, to answer directly though all unwittingly any such distress. When it is a matter of side-piercing sights let us remember that

> Nature's above art in that respect.

It is, perhaps, the highest function of tragedy to hold steadily before us those 'realities we should like to forget, if forgetting would abolish them'.[1]

In the end, there is an unswerving truth; but it does not preclude tenderness. For as Lear's is, we now see, an unchanging condition, to him at least forgetfulness is granted, and reality thus abolished. It is fitting, too, for he is in his death once more 'old majesty', in possession of an absolute power; and should not absolute power include a share in common illusion? In tragic experience we cannot intervene: and in the last action of this play, where Nature is so far above art as to make the comparison seem finally inapplicable, Edgar is wrong in attempting a kindness. We, too, must not try to raise Lear's head to the heavens—

> Look up, my lord.

Lear dies as he had lived. In the moment of his passing he sees only what he would see:

> Look on her. Look, her lips.
> Look there, look there!

* * *

I conclude that Shakespeare's greatest contributions to tragic experience, the distinctive emphasis the tragic has in his working imagination, are on the side of the natural. The bedrock of understanding is in shared experience; an apparent remoteness, even a violence of departure from the natural, yet returns us to deep awareness of the life we ordinarily undergo rather than experience. We may think, for example, of the characteristic ending of his conscious agents of evil, the bitter realization that they are excluded from humanity, alone. The mere terrors of hallucination, that primary resort of the theatre, are the principal torment of the secondary agents, the aiders and abettors. With this we may link the insecure status of each would-be tyrant of his small world. Evil is predominantly apprehended as a dreadful simplicity that plots unwittingly its own destruction. So the skilled contriver of other men's harm, the Machiavel of stage-tradition, becomes one whose mischief cannot be confined to any single object or any limited area of operations. The outstanding characteristic of the evil-doer, whether primary agent or busy manipulator, is a fatal immaturity. Like the wicked child, too clever to submit to a world run by grown-ups, he is yet not clever enough to see his own dependence on others, and thus his inevitable downfall. His most notable endowment is therefore cunning, allied with energy: energy, above all—for he must destroy all that confronts him as evidence of a world of interlocked obligation, in which he has that worst affront to conscious dignity, a place. This surely is real enough. What I have called the clean leap of creative imagination reveals as wholly 'natural' a world of determinedly inverted values; and this, we see, is what we must mean by a world of individuals. So, more generally, however vast the periphery of the Shakespearian universe, the macrocosmic concomitants of disturbance in the little world of man, the centre of attention is always the humanity we know, the overburdened mortal creature for whom there can be no escape from choice. It is thus as agent not patient, however great the load to be borne, that the human figure is decisively apprehended. When man falls from this plane he falls below the level of the beast; and then we see that it is also natural to man to seek undeviatingly his own interest. We reach a world in which humanity preys upon itself.

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[1] Peter Alexander, *Hamlet, Father and Son* (Oxford, 1955), p. 171.

All this comes to a final truth; and it is a truth which is the most real or 'natural' imaginable. We have seen that tension between apparent opposites is essential to tragic vision; and so we have examined a shifting balance of real and apparent, agent and patient, accident and design, natural and supernatural. But these have all revealed the inadequacy of man setting up on his own. As the greatest punishment is isolation, separate existence, so the greatest good is the holding of the natural bond, especially the gravely tender relation between parent and child. This is the foundation of that naturalness which his most determined critics have yet found in Shakespeare. And as it is the most profoundly 'real' thing in him, so it is fitly vested with supernatural power. We look beyond his tragedies to the last plays, those 'comedies' where the natural tie holds; and there nothing is too high or too hard for love. The lost are found, the dead brought back to life; the magician returns to the real world and the wedding of his dear daughter. Shakespeare's greatest single gift is an unwearied sense of the natural tie—the utter punishment of separate existence, on the one hand; on the other, the endlessly fruitful possibilities once the human circle holds. No man seems to have responded more fully to natural affection as an irresistible power—a mighty current, as I have called it, that must be ruthlessly earthed before final disaster begins to be a possibility; and which, given only an ordinary room, can leap unimaginable gaps. The power of the natural bond is the only final reality; and as such it illuminates and sustains all else. Only, it must be entered into fully and freely, without reservation or self-interest. We saw that Falstaff's bond with Hal was complete in terms of natural affection; but it was not without the ineradicable illusion that all men are or would be as Falstaff is. So, too, Lear's bond with Cordelia is complete; but with reality, the world of men and time, it is not. In the mirror Shakespeare holds up to nature we see a mystery that is yet no mystery. It is not evil that, as Bradley thought, is incalculable; it is natural affection. This, I believe, is Shakespeare's deepest apprehension, the very nerve of his understanding; and we may perhaps best characterize it in Albert Schweitzer's phrase, a 'reverence for life'. Shakespeare, too, we may say, from our reading of these tragedies, attains that power of reflective insight which enables man 'to distinguish between what is essential in civilization and what is not'.[1] In the end it is one truth that is manifest, though it has been communicated in the tension between apparent opposites; and as it lies deepest in the dramatist's understanding so it transcends, too, the greater differences of tragic and comic. Through all Shakespeare's 'rough magic', the wide-ranging fictions of his 'so potent art', comes one truth, and one truth only. Only thus could apparent opposites be sustained; for, we know,

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[1] Albert Schweitzer, *My Life and Thought*, tr. G. T. Campion (London, 1948), p. 189.

> The Truth is one and incapable of contradiction;
> All knowledge that conflicts with itself is Poetic Fiction.

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