The Shakespearean Ethic

John Vyvyan

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The tradition of modern thought presents philosophy as asking at the outset of its task three vital questions: What can we know? What ought we to do? What may we hope? The second of these is recognised as the fundamental problem of ethics.

Ethics, NICOLAI HARTMANN

Mind, from the supreme heights a kindred mind calls to thee, that thou be a dividing mean betwixt the low deities and Jove.
Lose not thy rights; nor, downward hurled and falling to the depths, plunge to the waters of black Acheron.

To His Own Spirit, GIORDANO BRUNO

TO
MY MOTHER

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Publishers' Note

THIS IS AN ENTIRELY NEW edition of John Vyvyan's insightful book in that the entire text has been reset, but without alteration except for the addition of chapter titles to indicate the content.

However, some additions have been made which we hope will enhance the usefulness of this edition. Having been educated in Switzerland, John Vyvyan was clearly familiar with the great literature of Italy, France and Germany and has sometimes made a point by quoting from Goethe or Dante, for example, in the original. For the benefit of readers less familiar with these languages, we have added translations as footnotes. We appreciate that translations can never be as apt as the original but we hope they will be useful.

Vyvyan illustrates his argument with many quotations from Shakespeare's plays. To assist in finding where they appear in the respective plays, we have listed the first line of the quotations at the end of the book and relied on the Oxford University Press edition of The Complete Works for the references. There is also a short list of the books to which Vyvyan refers. Finally, the index has been considerably enlarged.

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1

Principles of Construction in the Tragedies

IT IS STRIKING that Shakespeare’s tragic characters are continually asking themselves questions. In their soliloquies, they weigh up alternative courses of action, and the question is implicit, What ought I to do?

In the opinion of some critics, however, for us to ask such a question is illegitimate. The critical argument is, that since what Hamlet or Brutus actually did was dramatically excellent, it was therefore, within our terms of reference, right. That is true, from its own standpoint; but it has this flaw: by limiting the problem to aesthetics and the theatre, it leaves out Shakespeare. From the evidence of the sonnets alone, which were probably not intended for publication, we see that Shakespeare was himself a ‘perturbed spirit’. He was not satisfied with conventional answers; yet he needed answers, for his own peace, in terms of life. And his plays are part of his quest for them.

Why do we enjoy tragedy? Partly, as Aristotle suggests, because it helps us to ‘gather the meaning of things’. A modern audience seeing, let us say, *Macbeth*, is unlikely to be much stirred by pity or terror. But we may feel that something from the deeps has been revealed; and it is not only Macbeth’s soul that we then know better, but our own; because the figures of the drama are not unlike transformation symbols between the conscious mind and the unconscious. But if seeing a tragedy has helped us to

understand ourselves better, that is because it has brought over to consciousness things that our unconscious already knew. It is like Plato's doctrine of reminiscence: what seems like new knowledge has, in fact, been brought out of ourselves.

If an audience has this experience, it is far more intense for an author; and it is the curious fascination of bringing forth wisdom from himself that chiefly impels him to write. A poet does not write to set down things he clearly knows, but to open the lips of his own oracle. Rhythm helps him to establish communication with the unconscious; and it is more for purposes of discovery than presentation that poetry is rhythmical.

In their uninspired moments, poets may long for fame and wealth; but these incentives have nothing to do with the production of poetry; not even their opposites, derision and poverty, can keep a poet from his task when the forms of the unconscious are demanding expression. *Fiat tragoedia, ruat caelum*.* There is also, of course, a resistance to expression; so that to write tragedy is like wrestling with a dark angel and compelling him to reveal himself. In the throes of this struggle, mundane motives cease to count. It is true that Shakespeare was capable of mercenary as well as sublime thoughts; but from the critical point of view this is an unproductive vein. It is irrelevant to criticism that Shakespeare was successful; if his work had led him to misery, like poor Greene, he would have done it, or died.

We must, however, distinguish between inspiration and intention. They stand in contrast, as the unconscious to the conscious mind. It is possible to have too much of either; too much adherence to intention tends to artificiality, and too much inspiration to mediumship. It is not the least of Shakespeare's qualities that he is able to balance these

opposites so finely. But what we must consider first is intention.

What ought Hamlet or Brutus to do – something that will make a good play, or something that will lead to a good life? I am sure that both these questions are important. It is obvious that Shakespeare aimed at dramatic excellence; but it is equally clear – unless we prefer to be blind to it – that he was deeply concerned with the meaning and enhancement of life. What the tragic hero did may have been theatrically right; but if it was ethically wrong, that also was Shakespeare's preoccupation. And a study of this second point may lead us to a better understanding of himself. Our need for this is brought home by Bradley's astonishing remark: 'We cannot be sure, as with those other poets we can, that in his works he expressed his deepest and most cherished convictions on ultimate questions, or even that he had any. And in his dramatic conceptions there is enough to occupy us.'[*] This statement is a challenge in itself. And I hope to show that Shakespeare had convictions, that he expressed them, and that they are so related to his dramatic conceptions as to be mutually revealing. In fact, the ethical problem seems to have exercised an increasing fascination over him; and in his later plays, when he knew all the tricks of the theatre and could probably have gone from strength to strength in the production of theatrical success, he wittingly sacrificed stage effect in order to pursue the ethical as distinct from the dramatic problem. These later plays are more seldom staged, but Shakespeare was not in his dotage; it is simply that in them he was less concerned with the art of the theatre than with the science of life. The ethical interest had always been with him, and it is from this standpoint that we shall proceed.

Shakespeare allows his characters, nearly always, to express their own philosophy, and we cannot identify him

personally with any one of them. Occasionally, however, he slips in a few lines which we may feel come straight from him to us; but we can only be sure of this if they express ideas that are consistently developed in successive plays. To trace a few of these continuing themes is one of the aims of this book.

It may sound platitudinous to say that only a careful study of the context can tell us what Shakespeare intends a word to mean; but a surprising amount of confusion has been caused by failing to distinguish between Shakespeare's values and those of his characters. Words like honour, nobility, justice, traitor and harlot are often, perhaps more often than not, to be suspected in this connection. Sometimes, but comparatively seldom, this is obvious. Ophelia, Desdemona and Hermione are all called harlots by the hero, and it is clear that he is self-deceived. But when we notice how frequently justice, as the speaker terms it, is to Shakespeare tyranny or worse, how often honour, in its conventional sense, is deliberately shown by Shakespeare as preventing conciliation and conducing to superfluous death, we come to mistrust the face value of many other words and to consider them in a wider context of ideas. Gradually this leads us to a persisting standard of value, for Shakespeare was no chameleon in his principles; and it is not unreasonable to hope that, although we may never know much about his life, it will be possible some day to establish his philosophy. But we must begin by being sure, as Bradley was not, that he had one.

Any characteristics that recur in play after play are important to this enquiry. I should like to consider, first of all, Shakespeare's method of presenting tragedy. In all presentation there is an element of showmanship, but a great deal more is here involved. Any attempt to fit Shakespeare's tragedies to the Aristotelean pattern is to lay them on a Procrustean bed, for Shakespeare worked out a pattern of his own. Much of this has been thoroughly

mapped* and it would be supererogatory to go over well-trodden ground. But there are some other principles of construction in the tragedies which, so far as I know, have not been isolated and to which Shakespeare is remarkably faithful. I will summarise what I conceive these to be, and attempt to justify the statement later.

FIRST: We are shown a soul, in many respects noble, but with a fatal flaw, which lays it open to a special temptation.

SECOND: The ‘voices’ of the coming temptation are characterised for us, so that we may have no doubt that they will persuade to evil.

THIRD: There is a temptation scene, in which the weak spot of the hero’s soul is probed, and the temptation is yielded to.

FOURTH: We are shown an inner conflict, usually in the form of a soliloquy, in which the native nobility of the hero’s soul opposes the temptation, but fails.

FIFTH and SIXTH: There is a second temptation and a second inner conflict, of mounting intensity, with the result that the hero loses the kingship of his own soul.

SEVENTH: The tragic act, or act of darkness.

EIGHTH: The realisation of horror.

NINTH: Death.

This is Shakespeare’s own way of conceiving tragedy, and it has little to do with Aristotle. I will illustrate this briefly from *Macbeth*. I do not mean to discuss the play, but merely to show that it contains the pattern.

Macbeth, before he enters, has cast his shadow on the scene. The full measure of it can only be taken after we have established Shakespeare’s standard from several plays, and I must ask the reader’s patience if some statements seem arbitrary here. Support for them has yet

to be built; and this cannot be done from a single tragedy. The opening scene is as short as it well could be, and yet there is much more in it than atmosphere. There is an under-meaning in the words of the witches that they will meet Macbeth on the heath when the battle – his great victory – has been ‘lost and won’. The battle is then in progress, and the witches know that Macbeth, although winning in one sense, has already begun to lose in another; that is the reason why the hour has come to tempt him. Shakespeare doubtless had in mind a text he has illustrated several times – that it is possible to gain the world and to lose one’s soul. We are about to witness the tragedy of a man who will lose to win; and in order to do so, he must invert his values, ‘Fair is foul and foul is fair.’ This is one of the constants of Shakespearean tragedy. The inversion of values is shown taking place in every tragic hero, but he is generally unconscious of it.

The witches, who are themselves psychic phenomena, alert us to the fact that two battles are really taking place; and the more important, philosophically, is that within Macbeth. His state of soul is shown to us, symbolically, before he comes on stage. ‘What bloody man is that?’ Then we are told of his recent exploits; of ‘his brandish’d steel which smoked with bloody execution’; of how, when he met the rebel, ‘he unseam’d him from the nave to the chaps’, and fixed his head on the battlements. And the savagery is summed up, as if it were ‘to bathe in reeking wounds, or memorise another Golgotha’. To the hearers, all this is heroic; but, as may be shown from other plays, it is a form of madness to Shakespeare:

> I have made you mad;
> And even with such-like valour men hang and drown
> Their proper selves.

‘Proper selves’ represents another Shakespearean constant of which we shall have more to say. Temptation is

resisted when the 'proper self' is in command; but when it is not, which is a kind of madness, the temptation is yielded to. Macbeth, by giving rein to a blood-lust that is linked with Golgotha, has become a man who 'is not with himself' and therefore he is predisposed to fall.

The voices of temptation – the witches first, and Lady Macbeth later – are obviously persuading to evil.

The first temptation is by the witches. We must remember that *Macbeth*, written in 1606, comes late in Shakespeare's tragedies, and he was able to handle such scenes with great economy. What the witches say is brief and equivocal; but it is temptation beyond doubt. Banquo says, 'Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear?' Macbeth starts because the witches have touched the flaw in his soul. They did not sow the evil seed, but watered it. It is the guilt of an idea already present that he fears. And then we are told his fault – 'the royal hope, that he seems rapt withal'.

With great concision, the fruit of long experience in temptation scenes, Shakespeare has presented the essential points: the background weakness of the hero's soul, the nature of the temptation, and the implication that, if he follows his fate, he will yield. But it must be stressed – although to do so here is to anticipate – that no Shakespearean hero is compelled to follow his fate; there is always a spiritual quality in him which, if it is asserted as it ought to be, is superior to fate. 'My fate cries out!' may be Shakespeare's indication that a temptation is in progress; but to follow a ghost is the opposite of asserting the soul's supremacy. This is looking too far ahead; enough, for the moment, that Macbeth is being tempted to follow the witches: 'Would they had stayed!'

The first inner conflict is then revealed to us in Macbeth's asides:

> This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill, cannot be good …
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? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

Instead of sovereignty of the proper self, there is an insurrection in his soul; and the tragic inversion is continuing, so that 'nothing is but what is not'.

The second temptation is by Lady Macbeth. Its place in the pattern is all we need to notice about it at the moment.

The second inner conflict is integrated with the temptation – a point of construction we will consider later – and is revealed in soliloquy:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly; if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor …

The temptation is then intensified, and the final battle 'lost and won' – a spiritual defeat, accompanied by an outward show of resolution:

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

We are still on the bloodstained path to Golgotha.

The three other phases of the sequence – the tragic act, the realisation of horror and the hero's death – all clearly follow in due order.

We may pause to notice, here, that the tragic act comes early in *Macbeth*, midway in *Julius Caesar*, near the end in *Othello*, and right at the end in *Hamlet*. It is most unlikely that this is accidental. Shakespeare's choice of plots is not haphazard. I suggest that he selected and shaped these in order to give himself the opportunity to analyse, in detail, each stage of his tragic path. *Macbeth* is a deep study of the aftermath of the deed of darkness, of the realisation of horror and the relentless approach of the reckoning of death. *Othello* particularly examines the temptation; that is why Iago is a much more developed character than the witches or Hamlet's ghost. *Hamlet* is almost wholely concerned with the inner conflict.

* 'Let the tragedy be played out, though the heavens should fall.'

* Bradley, 'Shakespearian Tragedy', Lecture I.

* See T.W. Baldwin: *William Shakespeare's Five-Act Structure*, University of Illinois Press, 1947.

2

Macbeth, Julius Caesar: The Temptation

NO ONE DOUBTS that Macbeth and Othello ought not to have done what they did. The general comment on *Othello* is, 'O, the pity of it!' And on *Macbeth*, 'Oh, horror! horror! horror!' But about the assassination of Caesar there has always been a division of opinion. Brutus can, and does, support his action upon ethical grounds. Are they valid; or rather, since that is our enquiry, did Shakespeare think they were?

It has been said that Shakespeare does not take sides in *Julius Caesar*. But this is not so. Each of his major plays is (besides being so many other things) a study in morals. Shakespeare is never ethically neutral. He is never in doubt as to whether the souls of his characters are rising or falling. *Julius Caesar* is really the tragedy of Brutus; and Caesar's last reproachful question has an under-meaning; in this sense it is not a question, but a statement and a prophecy, '*Et tu, Brute!*' Before the play opens, 'Brutus was Caesar's angel'. At its close, Caesar's ghost is to him, 'Thy evil spirit, Brutus.' How great a fall from grace! But if we set the play beside the tragic sequence – which, I believe, Shakespeare looked upon as his rules of tragedy – we are not surprised that Brutus fell. He falls by the pattern. Let us trace this out.

The fatal flaw in the soul of Brutus, as Shakespeare displays it to us, is that he puts politics before humanity:

that he has more faith in the power of death than in the power of love. More than once we are told that there is mutual love between himself and Caesar; but Brutus never assays its influence. '… I love him well.' 'It must be by his death …' That juxtaposition begins to reveal Brutus. It does not even occur to him that a political situation might be met in terms of humanity and life. His weak point, which the temptation probes, is that he sets what we now call an ideology higher than love and life.

The voice of the temptation is clearly characterised, so that we may know for certain that to follow its council will be to fall. Shakespeare is showing us his own thoughts when he describes the tempter. 'Yond' Cassius has a lean and hungry look …', and '… he hears no music'. The man who has no music in his soul, 'Is fit for treasons, strategems and spoils …', and, therefore, he is very dangerous. Cassius confirms both points – the weakness in Brutus and the evil in himself – in a soliloquy that would be surprisingly candid, if it were not intended as a sign-post to the audience:

> Well, Brutus, thou art noble; yet, I see,
> Thy honourable metal may be wrought
> From that it is disposed: therefore, it is meet
> That noble minds keep ever with their likes,
> For who so firm that cannot be seduced?

He has tied the label of seducer on himself. If Brutus continues in such company, he will gradually be corrupted. Shakespeare is following his pattern; and shows, by doing so, that he is not neutral.

The first temptation stands out clearly against this background. And the first inner conflict, of which there are several intimations, comes to a head in the soliloquy, 'It must be by his death.'

The second temptation is by means of the anonymous letters which are thrown into his house from the street.

And to this, again, Brutus yields:

> O Rome, I make thee promise …

He has scarcely uttered the words, when he is plunged into the second inner conflict. The soliloquy in which this is mirrored is most important, because it also sheds light on other plays:

> Since Cassius first did whet me against Caesar,
> I have not slept.
> Between the acting of a dreadful thing
> And the first motion, all the interim is
> Like a phantasma or a hideous dream:
> The Genius and the mortal instruments
> Are then in council, and the state of man,
> Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
> The nature of an insurrection.

This could be said of all Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, and it states his own theory of the conditions which must lead up to every tragic act. We have already found them in Macbeth:

> My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
> Shakes so my single state of man that function
> Is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is
> But what is not.

When the evil voices have been listened to, and are allowed to re-echo in the mind, they create the thoughts that are traitors. These, like the soldiers in the Trojan horse, capture the citadel from within. What the tragic hero is now losing is, in Swinburne’s perfect phrase, ‘the Lordship of the soul’. Shakespeare pictures the soul as a kingdom (potentially the kingdom of heaven) wherein man’s true self should be enthroned. The outcome of the inner warfare, which always follows the yielding to temptation, is that the ruler within is overthrown. The Genius now controls the mortal instruments; and the