

REFLECTIONS ON THE TRAGEDIES OF SHAKESPEARE

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I SHALL begin this talk with a question from a scholarly and profound student of the Shakespearian drama. It may serve as sort of index of the trend of my humble effort to express some of the thoughts and impressions left in my mind from readings of the Plays, and commentaries thereon, of this very remarkable man. Humility is the proper attribute, surely, in the presence of one who, apart from our Lord Himself, saw human beings in their inward and outward essences, with the Creator's gift of free will; some doing everything "that may become a man;" some treading "the path of dalliance," and others battling through "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune."

And now the question:

"Shakespeare is perfectly impartial. He does not ask himself to prove anything, or justify the ways of God to man. Shakespeare, for all the glory of his imagination, has the truly scientific temper in his fidelity to fact.

"There he and Bacon are alike, in spite of their enormous differences. Both rejected preconceived theories, and sit down before the fact like children. And, if in Bacon's case that attitude opened the way to scientific knowledge, what did it lead to in the case of Shakespeare?" (End of quotation).

That is the question we now seek to face.

Even the average reader of the Tragedies may find some of the answers.

The real scientist, as we understand the term, goes out to the world of Nature to learn her secret powers, and to mould and channel them to the legitimate service of mankind. He accepts, as he goes forth, no previous knowledge than that proven and accredited through the most exacting technique of Science. He is armed with all the instruments of his craft. In our own day he has trailed the very unit of our planet's matter to its seclusion; with what results the whole population of our world are in wonder, and a measure of uneasiness.

Shakespeare turned his scientific attitude to another, if closely allied, field of endeavour. He would probe into the inner and outer essences of the men and women of the earth, created by

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an Eternal God, endowed with free will and bearing through the ages in varied degree, the darkness in understanding, weakening of will resulting from their first disobedience to their Creator. With the eye of the scientist he searches the ways and character of man himself. To this end he went to history, turning the searchlight of a marvelous brain upon the doings of men and women across the centuries — and their intimate relations to the good and evil discoverable in human society. He observed the great structures of human progress, that stood for the good of the world, sprang from individuals whose minds and character were on the side of Heaven. On the negative side, he saw the havoc wrought by Evil in the world. There was antagonism here that found expression in the minds and souls of individuals leading to deeds of evil which often destroyed themselves as well as bringing death and suffering to the good and innocent ones in human society. A reckless old saying that good may come from evil is, of course, not so. It may come, and often does after overcoming evil attacks.

I have seen Shakespeare's Tragedies on the Stage; and it became a habit of my life to sit down betimes and read and study the Plays. They always left me with a certain sense of the mysterious, and maybe wonder, that God who marks the swallow's fall, should permit the suffering and murder of the innocent and worthy, brought about by the malicious intrigue and black evil of men and women. Shakespeare often accentuates the aura of the mysterious with touches of the supernatural. This is very evident in the ghost scenes in Hamlet, the apparitions of Banquo and the witches in Macbeth. But there is mystery in life itself, and in the thread of evil that runs through men's lives.

Shakespeare knew that evil warred against the good. It formed much of the background of the Tragedies. But he took no issue with the Creator for permitting it. He was not a theologian in any sense. His rewards and punishments were confined within the art of a great dramatist; and, therefore, did not reach beyond the grave. Whether Shakespeare believed the existence of ghosts and witches, and the like, is a question. The words of many of his characters do not necessarily express his own beliefs. He might have used them for their suggestive and dramatic power. But there is abundant evidence that Shakespeare believed in moving, guiding, restraining powers, outside ourselves, that enter deeply into the tenor of our lives. Witness the words of Hamlet, speaking of an extremely hazardous moment in his career:

There's a divinity that shapes our ends
Rough-hew them how we will.

These "supernatural solicitations" are not always the good; often on the side of evil in the Tragedies, they aroused ambitions and temptation that acting on perhaps a single weakness found often in brave, and intellectual men, turned the current of their lives to deeds of wickedness. Macbeth, broken and beaten, and minutes before he is slain by Macduff, gives his answer to the glowing promises of the witches:

Accursed be the tongues that tell me so,
For it had cowed my better part of man;
And be those juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.

In the basic character of the workings of evil in Shakespeare's Tragedies there is some similarity to that of the great dramatic epic of the Bible, the book of Job. But what we might call to-day the techniques of their operations differ markedly. The action of the drama in the latter was a direct contest between God and Satan, arising from a challenge from Satan that, if God would inflict Lot with certain misfortunes, he would break from his faith, and worship to God, and finally curse the Almighty. The challenge is accepted, and Satan is given permission to inflict Job as he will, apart from taking his life. A long bloody trail of iniquities were heaped upon Job, but, even at times under grievous temptation, he clung to his faith in God, and won the victory.

Shakespeare, perhaps the greatest dramatist of all time, and functioning in a Christian era, sets his characters on the stage, and lets them go their way. It is the way they always went, for they are human beings on the stage of life, and:

"One man in his time plays many parts."

His characters come in from many walks of life, the high and the low, a sort of cross-section of human society. They are the good, the bad and the indifferent; but under the searching eye of the dramatist, all of nature's casts, with whatever modifications environment and the good and evil of human society may effect.

The character and argument of the plots selected by Shakespeare in the Tragedies bear the profoundest thinking into the depths of the human heart and soul of any of his plays. An aura of the mysterious envelopes one's mind at times, when logic and reason begin to falter in the face of what should seem avoidable crushing events. In Shakespeare's dramatic art, however,

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evil powers, outside ourselves, may turn the good and normal course of human action to tragedy. The plots are wide and varied enough to present the actors on the stage with the problems and events met with in human society, their solution often being perverted by evil counsel and bloody intrigue, ending in tragedy. As the action ends in most of Shakespeare's Tragedies, the stage is literally covered with the bodies of the slain, or poisoned or suicide, a ghastly business. The dead include the great and the innocent, as well as the evil ones responsible for the tragic spectacle. The love of Romeo and Juliet was a holy love; Mercutio was a brave and honorable man. They, too, are lying dead on the stage. Why? It was not their love that led to all their agony and death. It was the devilish and sinful strife between the houses of Capulet and Montague. Love purifies and enables; Evil ruins and destroys. One finds in all Shakespeare that evil is either directly present, or close enough to transmit its baneful influence to disrupt the good and better course of events.

Hamlet, son of a King and heir to the throne, lies dying on the stage from a poisoned foil wound, the result of the criminal treachery of his usurping uncle, the king, and the latter's perverted accomplice, Laertes. The dying prince is Shakespeare's greatest character. He had great gifts of intellect, and a faculty of introspection in which he habitually loses himself and the power of action from "thinking too precisely on the event." And the event was the murder of his father by his uncle, assuming the kingship and marrying his mother within a few days following. "The funeral baked meats did furnish forth the marriage cheer," was Hamlet's melancholy account to his friend, Horatio, of the brief period of mourning between her husband's death, and her marriage to his uncle.

The sudden death of his father, and the "over-hasty" marriage doubtless aroused suspicions in Hamlet's mind, and this, with his great grief for his father, are strangely reflected in his words and manner as he comes on the platform at Elsinore, where his father's ghost is said to appear. He greets Horatio and Marcellus, talks a bit about the cold weather, and then goes into a long dissertation on some of the customs of the court of which he disapproved. A rather unusual flourish of indifference for a loving and devoted son summoned by his friend, Horatio, to meet the ghost of his murdered father. But this nonchalance is but a mask to cover the dark suspicions and depression of soul within him, one of the character traits of Shakespeare's Hamlet.

When the ghost, in sepulchral tones, poured into his amazed ears the most heart rending tale ever printed in any literature, of his foul murder — “Cut off even in the very blossoms of my sin” — and pledges him to avenge this — “cruel unnatural murder” — Hamlet is changed in a moment to a fierce avenger: —

“Haste me to know it, that I with wings as swift
as meditations, or the thoughts of love
May sweep to my revenge.”

And then, as the cock crows, and the ghost vanishes, he sits down and starts writing on his tablet how “A man can smile and smile, and be a villain.”

Such eccentricities run through his whole life, and in their exaggerated forms, in which he frequently indulged, simulated madness; which, of course, it never was. The profound melancholy, frustration and inability to make up his mind to do the deed entrusted to him by reason and supernatural biddings puzzled his will, and in the words of his famous soliloquy:

“And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied over with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pitch and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.”

Hamlet dilly-dallied with his sworn duty to avenge his father's murder. That it was his duty to dispatch the king and, as rightful heir, ascend the throne, he never doubted. His conscience was quite clear. He was beloved by the Danish people who, with little use for the usurping king, would acclaim his ascension, and guard and support his rule. He was no coward; with a variety of character, he was brave and magnanimous when he emerged from his fits of introspection, and faced the reality of things. He walked with the ghost to the edge of the cliff at a moment in the night, when he was not quite sure the ghost was his father's spirit, or some damned ghost leading him to destruction. You and I might feel a bit jittery in like circumstances. He was the first to board the attacking pirate ship, after carrying out a piece of detective work that, in a later century, might phase Sherlock Homes; and which saved his own life, and sent both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to their well deserved doom. He showed his fighting spirit when Laertes attacked him at the grave of Ophelia, and again, in the final scene, in the duel, when he received the fatal wound from Laertes' poisoned lance.

Perhaps Hamlet could not understand himself, as is suggested by Shakespeare, but it is certain that he felt himself bound by evidence, reason and conscience to avenge his father's murder;

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even the welfare of the State called for such action. But he failed in this tremendously important duty; and brought destruction to himself and all directly concerned in the drama. Also indirectly to the thousands of his countrymen who trusted in him. This was the sin of Hamlet; and thus the tragic evil that followed from it.

And now we can gaze at the bloody wreckage wrought. The beautiful, if child-like, Ophelia, broken hearted from Hamlet's desertion of her, in one of his rampant, irresponsible moods, goes insane and drowns herself. Polonius is dead as a result of another of his wild tantrums. Dead on the stage in the tragic finale are the king, the queen and the valiant, though perverted, Laertes. Hamlet is dying beside them, and in gasping breaths, he is saying to his best loved friend:

“Oh good Horatio, what a wounded name,
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind me,
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
In this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.”

As the soul of Hamlet passes to the “undiscovered country, whose bourne no traveller returns,” Horatio speaks this requiem:

“Now cracks a noble heart, Good night, sweet Prince;
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.”

Take your gaze from the tragic scene that ended Hamlet's career of delay and irresolution in a duty, solemnly pledged and never fulfilled. Look then on the bloody spectacle that trailed through the action and tragic ending of Macbeth. In the end results there is little to choose. They both stand guilty. But I think a jury would find much in Hamlet's action to be lenient with. A very good friend of mine, a doctor frequently on the witness stand, would tell the jury that Hamlet was a whole lot of a neurosthenic, and didn't know what he was about much of his time. I think Shakespeare would have other views, although a critic of the play recently stated that even the great dramatist himself never understood Hamlet. You might be vexed at Hamlet and critical of his conduct at times, but you never hated him; while your hatred of Macbeth and Iago increased with their every deed. Apart from a few glimpses of something better in his character, betimes, Macbeth was a powerful, remorseless tyrant; and Iago the able, sneaking, devilish villain — the blackest picture of human iniquity in the whole world of Shakespeare; even his wife hated him, for which natural virtue she suffered death at his hands.

Shakespeare gave us perhaps the most striking example in literature of the havoc temptation to evil deeds may effect in human character. There was much that was good in Macbeth. He was brave, loved his wife, a great soldier and commander of the King's armies. He was addressed by admirers as "the noble Macbeth." He had as a close friend and fellow-officer, one of the noblest characters in Shakespeare, Banquo. His background, you would say, was all good. Such was his high standing with his king and country when we first meet him on the misty northern heath. He and his friend, Banquo, have just returned from a great victory over the army of their country's enemy. What then happened to pervert his character and start him on his way to a life of shocking evil; and finally his own destruction?

Temptation may come from within or from without; or as in Macbeth's case, from both. He was flushed with the pride of victory. There is evidence in the text that he was fostering ambitions for the throne before he met the witches. Uncontrollable ambition is a close relation of illicit means to attain it. Macbeth's mind was thus susceptible to temptation from without; and it came with the promises of the witches.

Macbeth toyed with his own mind and kept reflecting on the promises of the witches, weakening his resistance to evil suggested. If he banished the dangerous thoughts taking form in his soul, and could say to the evil hags: Get thee behind me, Satan, he would most likely have the grace later to withstand his wife's sinful soliciting to the murder of Duncan. It is an axiom of God's providence for us that no one is ever tempted beyond his inherent power of resistance. Though of the Christian faith, there is no evidence that he prayed for guidance in this most momentous crisis in his life; and, falling under the dictates of Satan, pursued a career of such evil as only the magic pen of Shakespeare can picture. He and he alone is morally responsible for the tragedy; not Lady Macbeth, as some commentators say. I am far from saying she was the nice, agreeable kind one should want to live with — particularly if there was an assortment of "daggers" within her reach. She aided and abetted Macbeth knowing he had some weak spots in his spine.

Even from the ugly heap of tragedy little gleams are sometimes reflected. Shakespeare is fond of them. He never condemns anyone to hell. He often leaves a tiny light burning. In Macbeth's case a symbol of what had been before his fall. I will quote one or two. To the doctor in attendance on his wife who under the crush of her iniquities is going insane: —

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“Cure her of that
Can’st thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of the perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?”

And again when his armies are beaten and he sees his own end approaching: —

“Seyton, I am sick at heart.
I have lived long enough; my way of life
Is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-horror, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny,
And dare not.”

The world of Shakespeare was the world of his time and before his time; is our world of to-day and to-morrow and to-morrow, and to-morrow. History and Science, and perhaps I may add Philosophy, can submit no data that human nature shall ever change essentially. Tennyson’s “parliament of man, the federation of the world” may come, but the relations of men and women to good and evil are likely to remain unchanged, and so Shakespeare shall ever be up to date, because he is ever true to fact.

I will close this talk by touching briefly the great Tragedy of Othello.

Othello, of Oriental birth, was a great general in the State of Venice, who had won many wars for his country. A brave and mighty warrior, hardened by the “flinty and steel couch of war,” but to the soft ways of peace and the subtleties and intrigues of the arch-villain that preys on society, an utter stranger. He had married a lady of high rank, the beautiful and virtuous Desdemona, a real love match. Shortly after, Iago, the most consummate villain in all Shakespeare, began a long chain of lies and fabricated incidents to destroy their happiness, and bring about the downfall of the general. He hated Othello, but assuming friendship for him, gained his confidence, and became a close personal advisor. The big generous hearted Othello fell into the trap; and when Iago had convinced him that Desdemona was unfaithful to him with one of his officers, in a mad frenzy of jealous rage he killed her.

The body of the innocent victim of his rash anger was hardly cold before the whole iniquitous plot to lead him to this murder was unfolded. The result was paralysing in the extreme. He could not adjust himself to the horrible fact that he had been led by false reports to murder his innocent wife. Stunned and broken hearted, he allowed himself to be placed under arrest.

Despite his crime, Shakespeare has made the essential nobility of this sadly wronged, deluded man live forever in this searing, haunting valedictory, spoken to the officers placing him under arrest: —

“Soft you; a word or two before you go.
 I have done the state some service, and they know 't.
 No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
 When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
 And smote him, thus.”

With these words he plunged a dagger into his heart, and fell dead beside the body of his wife.

The sin of Othello here was jealousy and uncontrolled rage set in action by the evil intrigues of Iago. Was the whole event a terrible wrong? Othello had many of the qualities of greatness and nobility. We are saddened at the spectacle on the stage, and we inwardly curse Iago. But when we turn to our news journals, we meet the same and similar tragedies, the same causative factors, each bearing the stamp of Evil — the same old, old story; for Shakespeare has the truly scientific temper in his fidelity to the facts.