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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMATURGY

The first part of this essay draws attention to certain elements in Shakespeare's dramatic art which have largely escaped comment, and certainly co-ordinated comment. It offers a very tentative systematisation of these elements, suggesting their possible importance. The second section is a consideration of the part they play in a single work, *The Winter's Tale*.

In relation to the potentialities of the subject both parts of the essay are perfunctory. The systematisation attempted is very sketchily worked out, and even the application of it to *The Winter's Tale* far from exhaustive. The paper is not intended as an articulated piece of work but only as an indication of work that should be done.

### I

Analysis of any aspect of Shakespeare's artistic development tends to involve some slightly blurred comparisons. The techniques of any given play do not bear simple witness to the current stage of achievement, since they are modified by their immediate context. The following comparison between a late and an early Shakespearian scene is made with this reservation, and only to establish a general point.

The *Willow Song* scene in *Othello* achieves a powerful theatrical effect in just over a hundred lines. Yet there is little verbal beauty in the passage. The factors which make the scene striking on the stage are mostly only latent in the text and do not fully emerge on reading. One is the presence of Othello. Although he is on stage for the space of a bare ten lines the mere fact of his appearance gives the interval since Desdemona's previous

appearance a retrospective tension which offsets the quieter mood to come. And his command: "Get you to bed, on the instant I will be returned" has a decisive dramatic effect. The audience watches Desdemona throughout the rest of the scene knowing she is about to be murdered.

Apart from the irony of the lyrics, the fact of there being a Willow Song at all has significance. Elizabethan books of etiquette, such as Castiglione's *The Courtier* taught that a woman of gentle birth should not sing except in "familiar and loving company". Desdemona's singing, for a contemporary audience, would create a great sense of intimacy. It would establish a context of complete informality in which all her remarks, her innocent protestations to Emilia, would be conclusively seen to be the simple reflex of a total innate purity.

The scene in *Romeo and Juliet* where Juliet takes Friar Lawrence's potion, has several similarities of mood and circumstance. Like the *Othello* example it shows an innocent girl who is near to death, struggling with doubts and fears. But it is far less effective because reduced almost solely to a long soliloquy. Juliet describes her terrors, and a tension is built up from the verse. In the *Othello* scene the presence of Emilia precludes the possibility of anything so explicit and therefore limiting as Juliet's catalogue of imagined fears, Desdemona's apprehensiveness is revealed in a single incident:

Des: "Hark! who is it that knocks?"

Em: It is the wind."

The forebodings are all unstated, and exist below the level of the text, contrapuntally set off by Emilia's coarse cheerfulness, by flashes of feminine gossip:

"This Lodovico is a proper man"

and by the routine ordinariness of

"Prithee unpin me"

This last command involves the enactment of a visual scene — Emilia unfastening her mistress' clothes — which also adds a contribution to the atmosphere. It increases the sense of informality and helps to imply Desdemona's defencelessness.

The later example, then, shows an infinitely greater complexity and suggestiveness. It represents a move away from the

creation of dramatic effects through poetry alone towards methods of creating them through inference, through action, through the relation of word and action, and through mere physical appearances. Juliet's soliloquy would be almost equally moving and effective in a dramatic poem. The *Othello* scene would be almost meaningless in such a context. It is primarily Shakespeare's use of physical appearances which will be considered here, but all the other factors mentioned are inter-involved with it. The distinction to be made, in so far as one is possible, is between the effects Shakespeare achieves through his verse and those he contrives by exploiting the resources of the theatre.

The field of inquiry is enormous. It would include, for example, the use and disposition of soliloquies, the construction and juxtaposition of scenes, and the importance of stage properties, such as the flowers in *Hamlet*, *Lear* and *Cymbeline*. It should consider Shakespeare's growing capacity for establishing character by extra-poetic means. At Hamlet's first appearance his black clothes mark him out from the rest of the court. Shakespeare has suggested his isolation and made him visually the centre of interest before he speaks a word. Othello stands out at once because of his colour; Lear because of his age.

Then certain visual comparisons are marked so clearly in the text that they must surely be purposeful. When Desdemona arrives safely in Cyprus Cassio cries to the assembled people:

"You men of Cyprus let her have your knees."

In the third act Othello and Iago kneel to make their vow of vengeance. In the fourth Desdemona goes on her knees to beg her Husband's pity. The three incidents therefore express a dramatic irony. When this vestigial parallelism is carried a stage further it produces the kind of effect to be seen in *Timon of Athens*, where the sumptuous feasting of hypocrites in the play's second scene is later parodied by the banquet of steam and the meal of roots.

All Shakespeare's implicit stage directions and his more certain explicit ones, come within the scope of this inquiry. It is to be noted how Othello's epileptic fit underlines the moral collapse which Iago has wrought in him. The scene in *Hamlet* where

Claudius strives to pray, unconscious of Hamlet who stands behind him with drawn sword debating whether to kill him, cuts even deeper. Some of the central conflicts of the play are summed up in action.

Many of these aspects of Shakespeare's art have had their share of comment, but it has tended to be oblique comment. Wilson Knight has effectively annexed certain visual affects in the interests of interpretation. Granville-Barker has touched on others from the producer's point of view. But, surprisingly, no-one seems to have scrutinised these elements for the sake of tracing a development in Shakespeare's dramaturgy in the same way as, for instance, Dr. Clemen has traced a development in his imagery. The effects of this critical gap are apparent in the constant tendency of Shakespearian critics to forget that a dramatist can control more than words. Shakespeare does not only reproduce human thoughts and emotions through poetry, he reproduces human behaviour and reactions by dramatic means.

The majority of critics, often concentrating either on the characterisation or the verse, have tended to draw their conclusions from a close scrutiny of the text. L. C. Knights, one of the earliest „interpretative“ critics, claims that „we start with so many lines of verse on a printed page.“ The dangers of such an approach overlooking the part played by action in the dramas is obviously great. In practice the result has been some false emphasis. Examination of the imagery, for example, has tended to be quantitative rather than qualitative. In *Hamlet* fifty verbal images of disease and death do not have the force of one notable "image in action": the visual memento mori of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull.

The development in question is that of Shakespeare's awareness of the possibilities of his medium: the use of grouping, of visual effects, to reinforce, and be reinforced by, the verse; the possibility of establishing character or atmosphere not through straight descriptive monologue, but through a complex of dialogue and action. It happens that these qualities in his work cannot, as can characterisation and verse, be conveniently isolated. On the one hand they overlap, and are sometimes indistinguishable

from, the mere business of telling the story. The scene of Claudius' prayer in *Hamlet* is intrinsically striking, but it is impossible to tell whether it was invented for its own sake, or whether it was primarily a sine qua non of the plot.

On the other hand physical action within the scene is partly the producer's province, though Shakespeare included a growing number of positive instructions in his text. The aspect to be considered, then, is far from clear-cut. This inconvenience may partly account for the critical lacuna. But the fact that it is difficult to limit the area artificially in the same way as rabid "character" analysts have done is perhaps no bad thing. It should help to preclude the heavy bias exhibited by the over-specialised Shakespeare critics.

There are a number of reasons why the study in question seems desirable. First, in a field where there is constant searching for new meanings, it would provide evidence of a most important kind. A consideration of the sort of dramatic emphasis Shakespeare employs should provide a timely curb to over-sophisticated readings.

Then there is the possibility of getting a fuller, more coherent understanding of a number of "difficult" plays, both in respect of reading and production. The full power of a play like *The Tempest* is surely based on an interdependence of verse and stage-effects. The more Shakespeare's use of the latter is studied the easier it will become to achieve an integrated appreciation of the play.

In any case there is the intrinsic interest of any aspect of development in a writer of Shakespeare's stature, and the possibility of a study of any one facet shedding light in unexpected directions. To suggest one possible instance: the scene of Gloucester's blinding in *King Lear* seems vitally significant in the context of the large number of verbal images of blindness on which Heilmann expatiates in his study of the play. A similar correspondence of imagery and visual effects in other Shakespeare plays might be evidence of a greater consciousness of his meta-physical "themes" than he has yet been credited with.

As a preliminary gesture the factors under discussion might be roughly systematised under three main heads:

i) An increasing facility for expounding story, emotion and themes through an interplay of conversation and action rather than through description.

ii) An increasing skill in creating scenes or situations which are of intrinsic interest as figuring and focussing tensions latent in the play.

iii) An increasing power of contriving a kind of symbolism through appearances only.

The *Willow-Song* scene is an example primarily of the first practice, the prayer-scene from *Hamlet* an example of the second. The third is illustrated by the tableau of Hamlet holding Yorick's skull.

## II

In order to show something of how Shakespeare employs these techniques in a single work, *The Winter's Tale*, I must first make a necessarily brief and unsupported statement of what I take to be the symbolic significance of the play. Although in fact worked out independently it is a viewpoint substantially similar to that outlined by S. L. Bethell in his study of the work.

*The Winter's Tale* falls into two parts. In the first a happy group of people are brought to disaster through one man's sinful error. In the second two lovers survive difficulties to reach a happy ending. The latter part is a complete comedy in itself, the former a near-complete tragedy.

Leontes' jealousy is shown not as a motivated suspicion, as it is in Shakespeare's original, *Pandosto*, but as a manifestation of a sin which infects from without. In this, and several other respects, there is a parallel with *Macbeth*. After murdering Duncan Macbeth cannot sleep at nights, and thinks to restore his peace by killing Banquo. Leontes seeks to have Hermione executed for the same reason:

"Nor night nor day no rest; it is but weakness  
To bear the matter thus ... say that she were gone,  
Given to the fire, a moiety of my rest  
Might come to me again."

In both plays the hero's sinful state of mind is described in terms of disease. In both the evil is at first limited and specific — a single murder in Macbeth's case, jealousy in that of Leontes — but later proliferates until sin is heaped on sin. Leontes regresses to blasphemy and attempted murder.

But Leontes repents in time and does penance for his sin. Sixteen years of repentance cannot be shown dramatically. They are alluded to in the second part of the play, and they are figured by the presence of Perdita.

The finding of Perdita as a baby almost coincides with Leontes' acknowledgement of his fault. Her growing-up parallels the development of recovered grace in the king.

Mamillius, it is stressed in the play, closely resembles the youthful Leontes. His death symbolises the death of innocence in his father. Florizel is associated with Mamillius several times in the first and second scenes of the play. When he visits Leontes Paulina claims:

" . . . . . Had our prince  
(Jewel of children) seen this hour, he had pair'd  
Well with this lord; there was not a full mouth  
Between their births . . . . ."

His arrival at the Sicilian court signifies a kind of re-birth of innocence in Leontes. Similarly Hermione is linked in a number of lines with the idea of grace. After being believed dead she is restored in seemingly miraculous circumstances. The inference is that penitence can restore purity and grace even to deeply sinful men.

There are several subsidiary themes. Paulina and Camillo, for example, seem between them to figure Conscience, and their final union is therefore appropriate. But the general symbolic purpose of the play is the important thing. By a coupling of tragedy and comedy *The Winter's Tale* presents the evil and the virtue in the world and shows how both may come to a good end.

Inevitably Shakespeare has to maintain a delicate balance between symbolism and his usual degree of realism. The characters must have sufficient psychological consistency to make them interesting, but they have also a loosely allegorical function.

Shakespeare has several methods of preserving a balance between the two kinds of interest. Some of these involve the verse alone. Much of it is written in what, by normal Shakespearian standards, is a rather formalised style. This depersonalises the play to a useful extent. Images of disease are used to enlarge the reference of Leontes' jealousy: it is seen as a spiritual sickness. Images of generation, birth and growth suggest the gradual development of grace in him.

But in this careful „placing" of the play sheer stagecraft is at least equally important. There are a number of interesting examples of the kind of effects described in the first part of this paper.

One such instance involves a further parallel with *Macbeth*. When Macbeth is first revolving the prophecies of the weird sisters he becomes so self-absorbed that he ceases to notice the presence of his companions. Banquo comments: "Look how our partner's rapt." In the same way Leontes, in his jealous fit, grows so abstracted that Hermione and Polixenes cannot but notice it.

Pol. . . . . What means Sicilia?  
 Her. He seems something unsettled.  
 Pol. How my Lord?  
 Leo. What cheer? How is't with you, best brother?  
 Her. You look  
 As if you held a brow of much distraction.

The similarity with the *Macbeth* episode in situation and tone is marked. In both cases Shakespeare is showing evil as an external thing. In *Macbeth* the witches are introduced as a concretion of this idea. In *The Winter's Tale* the conception remains abstract, but the audience are made to feel its reality by seeing the sudden physical effect on Leontes.

His rejection of innocence is concisely and powerfully imaged in Act II scene iii by a similarly adroit piece of dramaturgy. Paulina, having battled her way into the king's presence, lays down his new-born daughter and bids him take her up. He snarlingly refuses; and as he upbraids Paulina the child lies almost forgotten. This sustained tableau sums up and re-states his wrong-doing in the most elemental visual terms. It is one of the means by which Shakespeare enlarges the play's terms of re-



ference. Leontes' sin ceases to be a private jealousy and becomes generalised into a larger breach of charity.

Two important points of stagecraft at the play's centre of balance have been noted by Professor Coghill in an essay in *Shakespeare Survey*. The first concerns the appearance as a character of Time — regarded as an „inessential mechanism" even by Bethell. As Coghill says, he has an important function, showing the audience that they „are being taken beyond »realism« into the region of parable and fable, adumbrated in the title of the play”.

The much-criticised bear represents a further advised use of visual effect. Antigonus, in the interests of the plot, must be expunged, but if his death is felt as a sad thing the new note of hope and cheerfulness in the play will ring flat. The bear resolves the difficulty by being comic and adequately destructive at the same time. A narrative essential which could have proved a thematic liability is brilliantly converted into an asset.

The scene in question — Act III scene iii — is, as Coghill points out, "a dramaturgical hinge". What he does not indicate is the precisely-placed fulcrum of the scene itself and hence of the whole play.

By the beginning of this scene events in Sicilia have reached a doleful impasse. Hermione is "dead" and Leontes' last speech is one of sorrowing despair. Antigonus fulfills his oath by depositing the child and is then chased off by the bear. The presence of the baby, who occupies the stage alone, is the only sign of hope that the deadlock may be broken. The old shepherd enters and the action begins to revive. But the moment when the whole hope of the play is seen to depend on the fate of the abandoned baby, shows the audience, as clearly as anything in the verse, how little the play depends on character and action in the usual sense, and how much on Providence and grace.

The climax of the play, the Statue scene, is perhaps also the crowning dramaturgic sleight. Shakespeare could obviously have produced Hermione in a number of ways which did not demand the theatricality of the one he uses. But once again a visible appearance is being used to bridge the gap between symbolism and

realism. As both Bethell and Coghill have shown, the crucial moment of Hermione's first movement is prepared for very carefully in two ways. First the audience is assiduously shown that the statue is only a statue. It is described as the work of a real-life Renaissance sculptor, Giulio Romano, and the scene is so written that Hermione must stand motionless before the audience for several full minutes. Second, a mystic and even specifically religious atmosphere is built up by words and music.

" . . . . . It is required  
You do awake your faith"

says Paulina. In two ways, then, the restoration of Hermione, while scrupulously shown later not to be miraculous is made temporarily to appear so. The apparent transition from inanimacy to life emphasises that the conclusion of the play represents not merely a conventional happy ending but a spiritual redemption. The audience does not have to infer the metaphysical suggestion from the verse — they can see it involved in the action on the stage. Unusually, Shakespeare makes it clear in the dialogue that the hero and heroine must first touch and then embrace. These gestures are a final visual image of the ending, on all planes, of the "disseverance".

*The Winter's Tale*, then, is not just a symbolic poem, but a symbolic play. Its masterly ambivalence is sustained not merely by the verse but by action and physical appearances. Shakespeare, who had learned to use these effects to lend power to his mature plays adapted them also to point and illustrate the symbolism of his great romances. In his last play, *The Tempest*, he was to create Ariel and Caliban, to take a further step towards the direct use of visual symbols.