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SHAKESPEARE THE GREAT CREATOR OF TRAGEDY

"In His Isolated Achievement Tragedy Climbed to Its Supreme Summit and Vanished"

Painted by Wm Hogarth. Mr Garrick in the Character of Richard the 3d. Engravd by Wm Hogarth & C Grignion

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By RICHARD LE GALLIENNE.

ONLY two races so far have been able to create tragedies of universal currency. Other races have produced tragic dramatists who take classical rank among themselves—Corneille and Racine for France, Calderon and Lope de Vega for Spain, and so on—but Greece and England alone have produced tragedies that are world classics, as the "Antigone" and "Hamlet" are world classics.

In the modern world, tragedy has only one universal representative, and it is singular to reflect that the only tragedies known today to the world at large were written by one man in a space of time covering about twelve years.

To the names of Æschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides the modern world has added but one name—that of Shakespeare. In his isolated achievement tragedy climbed to its supreme summit and vanished. For Goethe's "Faust" alone since his day can any claim for universality of tragic eminence be advanced, though Ibsen may be the forerunner of a renaissance of the tragic spirit; for it is probable that his own plays will in the long run seem valuable rather for their practice of a new dramatic formula than for themselves.

Not, need one say, that Shakespeare's achievement was, except in its last creative transmutation, an individual miracle. On the contrary, it had long been in course of preparation, up to a point, like all universal work, was the manifest outcome of many collaborating processes of evolution. Very much had been done for him. The materials were there, not always entirely in the rough. Many conditions were favorable, even provocative. The time was ripe. Accumulations of heroic history and romance lay ready for his shaping hand. Many of the themes which he was to make immortally his own had been already worked over, and were already familiar matter to his public. The stage, still evolving out of the miracle plays and the moralities, which for long had made the drama a part of the religious and educational life of the people, was popular as it has never been since. National vitality was in the very apogee of its exuberant energy. Were they not "the spacious times of great Elizabeth"? The Reformation had come. The Renaissance was in full bloom. The Armada had been defeated. The winds of newly discovered worlds filled England with the sound of ruffling sails. It was the mighty Spring of modern Europe.

The newspaper was as yet unborn. Books were still for the few. The stage was at once the intellectual playground and lyceum of the people, and the players literally "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time." That Elizabethan drama, tragedy and comedy alike, was an indigenous growth, only subjected to classical influence when some of its most marked features were already sturdily developed, is clearly demonstrated by Professor Thorndike, in dealing with the miracle plays and the moralities. The miracle plays, being dramatized versions of Biblical narratives, he says, "had long familiarized men with tragic action, tragic conceptions in the drama, and tragic power in the treatment of situation"; while in their introduction of "comic relief"—horse-play and buffoonery for the benefit of "the groundlings"—they had not only laid the foundations of comedy, but accustomed audiences to that juxtaposition of clowning and high seriousness which would have been an unpardonable incongruity to the Greeks, though it was to become something like a tragic convention with Shakespeare, finding its supreme illustration in "King Lear."

As for the moralities, "in substituting for a translation of the Bible narrative, the symbolization of life as a conflict between folly and wisdom, or the vices and virtues, or the body of the soul, the moralities gave importance to one of the most essential elements in tragedy, that of moral strife."

In addition to the popular dramatic activities of the miracle plays and the moralities, but haughtily aloof from them, were the scholastic performances of plays chiefly in Latin, at the universities, the inns of court, and the great public schools. The St. Paul's School may be regarded as something like a seminary of theatric training for the early drama, the boys being famous for their skill in acting. It was through these learned "humanist" experiments that the influence of the Greek drama first made itself felt as a contributory element to the general dramatic evolution, in very second-hand fashion, however, through the plays of Seneca, whose transpositions of Euripides were as near as the earlier Elizabethans approached to the Greek tradition. Through the study of Seneca came about a secularization of subject in the native drama, and its early tendency, never quite lost, to sup full of horrors.

"Tragedy," said the early critic Puttenham, "deals with doleful falls of unfortunate and afflicted Princes, for the purpose of reminding men of the mutability of fortune and of God's just punishment of a vicious life." Happiness and the lives of humbler folk was felt to be the province of comedy. Ghosts, and other supernatural machinery, unhappy endings, mainly in the form of bloody deaths, spectacular revenges and retributions, were also felt to be indispensable to tragedy; an attitude reinforced by the influence of Aristotle, coming through Italy with his formula of the purpose of tragedy being the purging of the soul through pity and terror—though the Elizabethan drama was to escape his prison of "the unities of sheer vitality." From Italian models, too, came the first uninspired use of blank verse, as the appropriate tragic medium, by Sackville in "Gorboduc."

The part played by "the chronicle" in the shaping of tragedy must be noted. As tragedy was expected to deal with the fates of Princes, the dramatist naturally turned to the histories of native Kings for themes that would combine national and narrative interest with disastrous vicissitude. Thus, Shakespeare's "King John" had an earlier and far from negligible forerunner in "The Troublesome Reign of King John," and his great English "histories" (as tragedies were often called) generally had in Marlowe's "Edward II." one predecessor not unworthy in some respects to be named beside them.

The debt of English tragedy to Marlowe is indeed very great, and, though it is evident that he could never have done for it what Shakespeare was to do, he lifted it immensely higher in temper than any preceding dramatist, not merely by virtue of his splendid verbal power, but by his focusing of the action about the protagonist and his conception of tragic significance as being less that of a chronicle of horrors than that of a heroic struggle between a strong human will and a still stronger destiny. His work moved too much in "the purple," was too uniformly grandiose, to include that complexity of human character and experience which Shakespeare's greater humanity qualified him to introduce, but there is no question that in "Tamburlaine," and "Edward II.," and "Dr. Faustus" he blazed the way for his greater successor. Thomas Kyd, in his "Spanish Tragedy" and his lost play of "Hamlet," had made valuable contributions also, as Greene and Peele, by their development of the "character" and idyllic features of drama, had done much in preparing those subsidiary elements, all of which Shakespeare was to include within the compass of a tragic formula which was bounded only by life itself. Much, very much, had been done for him by way of preparation. There was even a great actor, in Richard Burbage, in readiness to play the great tragic parts—he was to play Hamlet, Othello, Lear, and Richard III. Almost all the offerings were there on the altar. All else that was needed was—the fire from heaven.

The materials, the methods, (in part, at all events, and as yet in imperfect union,) the actors, the audience, "the psychological moment"—all, as invariably happens with universally great figures, was ready, awaiting the advent of—the man; the man who could alone project them in a new triumphant synthesis.

Of all artists, the dramatist must needs be an eminently practical man. Everything we know of Shakespeare proves him to have been that, and one reason for his being the greatest of dramatists was that he understood and accepted the conditions of his work as he found them. The stage and the audience were the first things he had to think of.

Brought up with the "Vice" or "Devil" of the moralities and miracle-plays, they were not lightly, he knew, to be robbed of them. They should have clowns, immortal and ever-various clowns, and fools to the top of their bent. When a Scottish James I. is coming to the throne, what more natural than that the London mob should have a chronicle-play of an old Scottish King, plentifully daubed with gore, and—the King being a great witch-finder, the author of the "Daemonology"—hair-raising with the supernaturalism of "the weird sisters." They should have "Macbeth." When they want an old favorite revised, he is not the man, supreme genius though he be, to balk their simple tastes with omitting the old sensations. He will, on the contrary, make his own use of every one of them, so inclusively that Professor Thorndike thus sums up his obligations to the old "Hamlet," probably Kyd's, and unfortunately lost: "The plot, situations, types of character, and leading motives of the old 'Hamlet' were already familiar to the stage in several plays. Revenge, directed by a ghost, hesitation on the part of the hero, insanity real or feigned, intrigue, copious bloodshed, a secondary revenge plot, meditative philosophizing in the form of soliloquies, were all essential elements probably of the Kydian 'Hamlet,' certainly of several other revenge plays. The refusal of an opportunity to kill the villain, the songs and wild talk of a mad woman, the murder of an innocent intruder, scenes in a churchyard, the appearance of the ghost to soldiers on the watch, the play within the play—all these, as well as many more minor conventionalities, such as the swearing on the sword hilt, or the voice of the ghost in the cellar, had appeared in other plays than the old 'Hamlet.' And Hamlet himself, wild and ranting at times, crafty and dissimulating at others, cynical and ironical, given to melancholy and meditation, hesitating in bewilderment, harassed by the unavoidable 'whips and scorns of time'—so far as we can analyze the tragic hero, his characteristics had been already used by contemporary dramatists."

The only difference there was to be between the old and the new "Hamlet" was simply—Shakespeare. He was to endue these familiar materials with an energy and significance of life such as had never been breathed into them before, to express them in language of an imaginative suggestiveness such as no poet else has ever had at his command, and to infold them in an atmosphere at once of humanity and eternity which is the very atmosphere of life itself.

This peculiar Shakespeare atmosphere is one of the characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy which make it different from any other. In inferior dramatists we feel at once that we are not in the natural world of men and women. The air we breathe is artificially ominous. It has, so to speak, been consciously denaturalized. We feel that we are in for tragedy and nothing else. The "damnable faces" begin at once, and continue all through. Attempts at contrast seem merely grotesque and out of place. Even in Greek tragedy the air seems rarefied, as by the presence of the gods. They, and Fate behind them, are the real actors. The mortals seem to lose their humanity in their presence, and huddle, shrunken and overawed, in a corner of the stage. The invisible, instead of permeating the action as in Shakespeare, seems to crowd out, or to depolarize, the visible. We are more constantly aware of the presence of the inevitable issue than of the drama that is to bring it about.

In Shakespeare there is none of this artificial darkening of the atmosphere, or strange chilling of it, as by the vicinity of unseen icebergs. The tragedy falls suddenly, or glooms gradually, in the midst of the warm shining of life. The sun is broadcast, the birds are singing, men are going laughingly as mortals do about their daily business, when either, with a swift crash like a bolt, the tragic thing happens, or we grow slowly aware of its coming, by little sinister hints, the falling of silence on the human murmur, low far-off rumblings, the piling up of threatening clouds, and the growing darkness of the world.

When Shakespeare has to enact how "the mightiest Julius fell," he does not begin with the squeaking and gibbering of ghosts in the Roman streets, but with the humors of a damagogic cobbler, who, while indirectly serving to hint at that popular discontent on which the conspirators are to rely, diverts us by a cynical sidelight on the materials of which mobs and their leaders are made. Whatever he may pretend, he is simply marching his followers about in the interests of his business, to wear out their shoe-leather! So with the famous porter in "Macbeth." Even while the horror of Duncan's murder still hangs undivulged in the air, hanging as it were between Macbeth's guilty lips and Macduff's innocent ears, the porter, roused from sleep, must complain, as natural with men of his station, and vent his clownish wit, as happens every day in the as yet unseen front of catastrophe.

It was Shakespeare's previous apprenticeship to comedy, comedy which sometimes narrowly escapes from some tragic menace, that qualified him for this various peopling of the tragic scene, and in his earliest tragic masterpiece, "Romeo and Juliet," the power and truth of his method is at once triumphantly evident. How bathed is the whole play in the radiance of life, how flooded from end to end in its golden energy. It is almost as much Mercutio's play as that of the ill-starred lovers. Ill-starred—and yet not all pitiful. Tragic death indeed is the theme, but there is such a wonder of loving before it strikes, that somehow we think less of the cutting off of the flower than of the glory of the flower; just as Mercutio's laughter seems to go on even after he has fallen by Tybalt's sword. For, after all, this is a tragedy of youth, and piteous as is that tragedy of fair things taken in their young bloom, it is the tragic moral behind the progression of Shakespeare's tragedies that there is a still grimmer and drearier tragedy implicit in living than that.

At the door of life, by the gate of breath,
There are worse things waiting for men
than death.

Life, Shakespeare's tragedies would seem to say—great as was his joy in it—is a progress in sadness. The sadness of "Romeo and Juliet" is the young sadness, the tragedy of the spring blossom—"the branch that might have grown full straight"; but life has still to teach the truth that, after all, it is a tragedy of "those whom the gods love." The tragedy of the bitterness of the fruit, of those whom the gods do not love, the agonies for which there is no alleviation but the end of them, the despairs for which there is no outlet save oblivion. It was to be this tragedy of the wrecked and disillusioned soul that was to employ Shakespeare's most mature and terrible powers: the sorrow alike without meaning or end, the tragedy which we can only meet with the abdication of hope and a stoic expectation of the worst—"the readiness is all"—or with the crazed preoccupation of the heart-broken Lear, plunged in a universal astonishment of incredible, heaven-denying, world-shattering sorrow:

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children—

the tragedy of the ambitious will thwarted by destiny, or wrecked by its own weakness; the terror of a soul fighting a losing battle with itself.

The chronological order of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, as now generally surmised, is as follows: "Julius Caesar," 1601; "Hamlet," 1602; "Othello," 1604; "Macbeth," 1605; "Lear," 1606; and "Antony and Cleopatra," 1607. There is a school of interpreters that would read Shakespeare's own history, the progress of a private grief, between the lines and in the sequence of these variously motived tragedies. Such considerations need not detain us here, nor have I space to analyze or contrast these several masterpieces. That has been done to superabundance by a multitude of critics, and frequently overdone with fanciful ingenuity and super-subtlety. Nor can I attempt to weigh the greatness of one masterpiece against the other. Such judgments are largely conditioned by individual preference. There would seem to be something like a consensus in favor of the greatness of "Lear." Personally, I do not feel that it is so much great as a play as great in its one supreme, volcanic, elemental, dramatic lyric of Lear's frenzy on the heath, that appalling duet, so to say, between his sorrow and the elements. The fable that supports it is too childish and the characterization of the sisters too arbitrary to carry conviction for the play as a whole. But I am lapsing into comparison involuntarily, and I must confine myself in conclusion to more general considerations.

After that all-enfolding atmosphere of humanity and eternity of which I have spoken, it seems to me that the greatness of Shakespeare's tragic art was achieved through his supreme possession and exercise of two gifts: the gift of characterization at once of unequaled energy, solidity, and subtlety, and the gift of imaginative, atmospheric expression. Apart from quotable power and beauty, his words have a quality of dramatic embodiment and suggestiveness for which there is no parallel in literature. First, he knew men and the souls of men as no other man has ever known them, and then he was able to present them as agonists of destiny—a destiny not external, as with the Greeks, but implicit in their own character—by virtue of words creative at once of them and of the whole world of conditions in which the mystery of life had placed them. All his other gifts would have availed him nothing without his crowning gift of a supernatural literary expression.