

**SHAKESPEARE'S GREAT
TRAGEDIES**

A CRITICISM OF A CRITICISM

By

WAGDY FISHAWY

PH. D. Birmingham

Second Edition 1985

Published by
NAHDET EL SHARK
Cairo University

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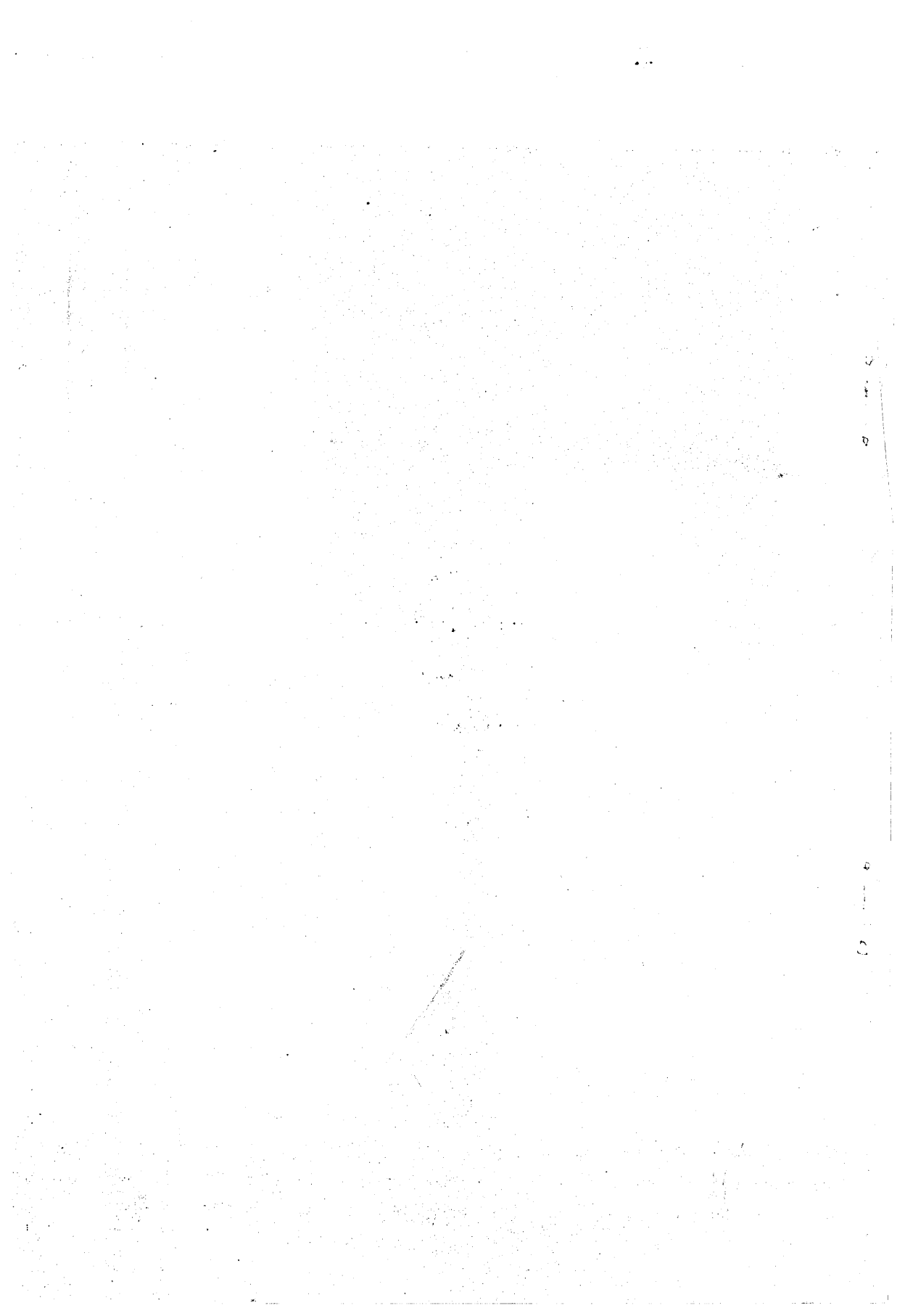
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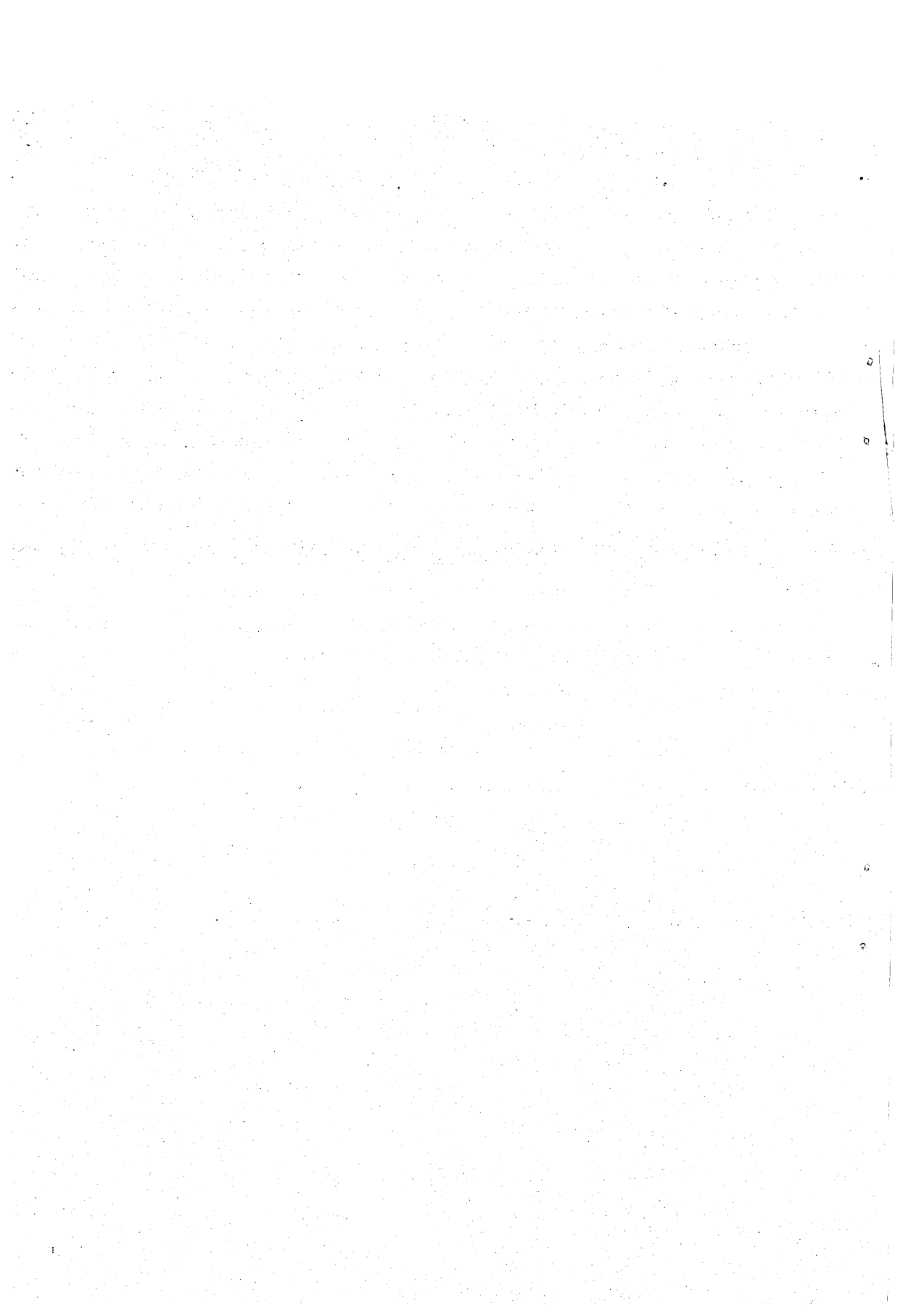
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STANLEY WELLS



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FOREWORD

Reviewing the first edition of John Middleton Murry's *Shakespeare* in 1936, T.S. Eliot wrote : 'Mr. Murry has written a book about Shakespeare which, for several reasons, is a very good book indeed. It was evidently a book that Mr. Murry wanted to write : one cannot read it without becoming convinced that he has worked on the subject for a long time, and has made himself perfectly familiar with the plays and poems of Shakespeare. . . . Furthermore, his conjectures are always restrained by reason ; and while scholars may perhaps be able to question some of his constructions, they cannot be allowed to deny that these constructions are illuminating, and valuable even if mistaken.' These words remain true today, and to have Murry's work on four of Shakespeare's major plays presented to us again is welcome indeed. In the following pages my friend Dr. Wagdy Fishawy examines Murry's interpretation of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, plays which have established, and maintained, Shakespeare's reputation among the greatest of European dramatists. His choice is a wise one : though there is much throughout Murry's book which would repay analysis, here, in his confrontation with the most profound aspects of Shakespeare's art, we see the critic at his best and most characteristic. In *Hamlet* he discerns the culmination of that figure he traces throughout Shakespeare's earlier work and which he interestingly labels 'The Shakespeare Man' ; in *Othello* he finds Shakespeare's genius expressing itself with 'unremitting intensity' ; his analysis of *Macbeth* is illuminatingly focused on the important question of time in the play ; and in his

discussion of *King Lear* we find Murry provocatively willing to challenge accepted critical opinion, forcing us to reconsider our responses to the play in the light of the honesty of his reaction, 'valuable', as Eliot says, 'even if mistaken'. One regrets, of course, that some things have had to be omitted from Dr. Fishawy's discussion, in particular, perhaps, Murry's very important examination of the history plays, and his perception of the peculiar significance to Shakespeare's development of the creation of the Bastard Faulconbridge in *King John*. But Dr. Fishawy's energies, I know, are boundless, and we may hope that in a future volume he will redirect our attention to the value of these aspects of Murry's criticism.

It is not only, however, in bringing first-class criticism afresh to our attention that Dr. Fishawy serves us so well. Nearly forty years have passed since Murry's book was published, years of intense activity in Shakespearian scholarship. To examine Murry's work in the light of subsequent critical discussions of these four tragedies, as Dr. Fishawy has done, is to reveal the deftness and accuracy with which Murry isolated the principal critical problems, and the tact and good sense with which he wrote about them. Murry's readings remain genuinely helpful and interesting, grounded as they are on the closest knowledge of, and reference to, the verbal texture of the plays. He is less aware, perhaps, than modern critics would wish, of the theatrical dimension, but if there is a lack here it seems adequately compensated for by his understanding of the nature of poetry, 'more penetrating', as Eliot says, 'than that of most scholars and men of letters, and more comprehensive and catholic than that of most poets'.
ough this, above all, Murry's criticism remains capable of deepening and enriching our response to Shakespeare.

In that early review of Murry's book, Eliot drew attention to its author's close acquaintance with Shakespeare criticism, so that 'he neither parades his predecessors superfluously nor ignores them when their presence is desirable'. Readers of the following pages will be grateful to Dr Fishawy not only for reviving our interest in a valuable work of criticism and for setting it in a fuller context, but also for the tact he displays in following his master's example.

The Shakespeare Institute,

R.L. Smallwood

December 1972

I

AN APPROACH

IN the world of mighty critics and strenuous scholars, Shakespeare's allurements are always unavoidable. Though colossal and at times frightening, Shakespeare has always been considered the real test of critical discernment and acute perception. To approach him genuinely and successfully, means an everlasting name in the circle of light.

As the most distinguished critic in the twenties, Murry found it of considerable importance to say his say and add his mite to the Shakespearean heritage ; it was a responsibility which he could not burke and an ambition that he could not smother or resist. Moreover, he felt intensely that Shakespeare "held a secret" for him, "asecret of the utmost importance for my life". By the force of this intuitive secret, he was driven to devote three years to an intensive study of Shakespeare's work : "I read [him] again and again". Continuously, slowly, and painfully, he began to have impressions, to form views, and to come to the conclusion that he should give himself to "the task of a complete exposition of Shakespeare."

Murry's *Shakespeare* was published in 1936, and from the start, Murry states his critical procedure. He has no theory to formulate, no conclusion to come to ; he will not go to the work, to use Hazlitt's expression, with a pair of compasses and a ruler to see whether it is round or square or to measure its critical dimensions. He will "feel" Shakespeare — for him, no other way is possible — in an attempt to communicate his feelings to his

readers. This simply means that Murry's main concern is concentrated, not on passing a judgment, but on conveying a sensation, for, as he believes, the absolutely final word can never be said in the field of Shakespearean criticism. Best of all, says Murry, "perhaps would be that a critic who, early in life, determined to try to say something of permanent value about Shakespeare, should write a book once every ten years or so based on a sudden and complete re-reading of Shakespeare, careless each time of what he had said before, discarding his notebooks, with a plain text in front of him, concerned with only what he, at that moment, understood and felt and conjectured" (1).

Approaching his great "hero", Murry decides to avoid the old "beaten way" of criticism. The detached, cold, calculating style is not one of his main concerns ; the attraction it has for other critics is dismissed as a spurious artificiality ; it does not give the sensation of what Shakespeare really is. This, quite naturally, leads Murry to the conviction that the scientific approach to Shakespeare's works — though precise, minute, and analytical — is neither valid nor acceptable. The application of a scientific method to works of the imagination is one of the most serious aberrations in literary criticism ; to insist on it is a misconception of the critic's function as Murry understands it. To carry an imaginative work to the laboratory in order to dissect it leads inevitably to failure, for in such a case the critic may be trying the impossible — a reconciliation of the contraries : "The results of science and the deliverance of the imagination are in opposition. It is unlikely that it is the imagination that is at fault" (Shakespeare, p. 24).

(1) J.M. Murry, *Shakespeare* (London, 1965), p. X.

It was Murry's firm belief that the best style, to be used in dealing with Shakespeare, is that of self-surrender. The critic must submit completely to the overwhelming influence of the playwright ; no alternative is possible : "Either we must move away from him, in order to remain ourselves ; or we must let the wave go over us, and risk annihilation" (Shakespeare, p. 17). The procedure is, unmistakably, romantic. Murry lives, spiritually, with Shakespeare's characters, in a different and highly elevated universe, and gives his immediate reaction, as if he were responding to real flesh and blood. Once again, like Hazlitt, he says what he thinks and thinks what he feels.

This attitude towards Shakespeare is not surprising, however, whether it is of a romanticist like Murry or of a strenuous classicist like Johnson who notes that Shakespeare's characters are an honest presentation of human nature itself. Shakespeare, says Johnson, "has no heroes ; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion : Even where the agency is supernatural the dialogue is level with life" (2). To Johnson, then, Shakespeare is the supreme poet of nature ; the supreme essence of human existence is minutely and genuinely portrayed in his writing.

It is not theoretic extravagance to say that this is a point on which no two critics of eminence can ever differ ; Classicism and Romanticism, in so far as Shakespeare's genius is concerned, can safely meet without disputation. Johnson's view concurs with that of William Hazlitt — the most impressionistic of all the romantic

(2) **Johnson On Shakespeare.** Essays and Notes Selected and Set forth with an Introduction by Walter Raleigh (London, 1931), p. 15.

critics — who rapturously declares that “other dramatic writers give us very fine versions and paraphrases of nature, but Shakespeare, together with his comments, gives us the original text” (3).

The same stance is taken by Murry who proclaims forcibly that Shakespeare’s works are not a mere expression of the truth about life, they are “pre-eminently” an embodiment of that truth. This immortal artist, according to Murry, does not look at nature and write : “nature utters itself in him”. Shakespeare, he puts it bluntly, is life itself. That is why he finds it extremely difficult, if not absolutely preposterous, to pass final judgment on Shakespeare : “You cannot sit in judgment on life itself”. And so long as submission to life is the common lot of man, submission to Shakespeare becomes unavoidable. Consequently, Murry does not concern himself with finalities in critical evaluation ; he concentrates on the communication of a sensation — an indisputably romantic approach.

Murry begins his book with a brief discussion of the views of Edgar Fripp and G. Wilson Knight, pointing out the main differences between their critical criteria and his own. Fripp’s contention that Shakespeare was brought up in a puritanical atmosphere is unacceptable, though Murry avows his debt and gratitude to Fripp’s *Shakespeare : Man and Artist*. At the same time, Murry does not disguise his dissatisfaction at Wilson Knight’s interpretation of some of Shakespeare’s plays, which, though overwhelming, is neither satisfactory nor illuminating. Knight’s conclusion that Henry VIII is “in spiritual content, the veritable crown of Shakespeare’s work,” is rejected as misleading extra-

(3) P.P. Howe, ed., *Complete Works Of William Hazlitt* (London, 1930-1934), vol. 4, p. 233.

vaganza. This opening section is followed by an exposition of Shakespeare's influence on Johnson, Milton, Coleridge and Keats, as well as their own reactions towards the great "poet of poets".

Shakespeare's huge production is extensively dealt with ; besides, Murry exerts a satisfactory effort in an attempt to reveal some aspects of the poet's personal life as reflected, consciously or unconsciously, in his works. This does not mean that Shakespeare's life-history is precisely explored ; it rather indicates that the life of the artist is approached through the artist's own art. Nevertheless, Murry realizes the difficulty of the method and states frankly that "the number of passages in the whole of Shakespeare's plays which point at all compulsively to actual incidents in his life is singularly small. And an indication which is compulsive in this direction to one reader, may be without significance to another" (Shakespeare, p. 32).

Generally speaking, Murry divides Shakespeare's theatrical career into three main periods : the first, from 1585 to 1592 ; the second, from 1594 to 1602 ; the third, from 1603 to 1611. During the first period, Shakespeare wrote **Henry VI** in three parts, **Titus Andronicus**, **The Comedy of Errors**, **The Taming of the Shrew**, **The Two Gentlemen of Verona**, and **Richard III**.

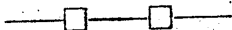
Shakespeare's impressive production belongs to the third period which is the period of **Othello**, **Macbeth**, **Lear**, **Timon**, **Troilus**, **Coriolanus**, **Antony and Cleopatra**. **Cymbeline**, **The Winter's Tale**, and **The Tempest**. The rest of the plays, culminating in **Hamlet**, belong to the second period. The stress here will be on Murry's views on the four 'great' tragedies : **Hamlet**, **Othello**, **Macbeth**, and **King Lear**, on the assumption that the greatest strength of genius is always shown in portraying the strongest passions.

It must be stressed that Murry does not probe deep into the plays as whole entities ; the questions of texture, structure, character, and language, in the works as organic unities, do not arouse his interest or occupy his thought. He snatches a soliloquy here or a passage there and concentrates all his attention on it, paying no heed to the vast issues of the play in general. Such a method leads to no final conclusion and incorporates no definite approach which may be systematized into a theory.

Nevertheless, it may be safely said that Murry's attitude towards Shakespeare's tragic heroes has always been influenced by the idea of the existence of a serious discrepancy between their characters and their actions. An objection may easily be raised against such a deduction on the grounds that Murry's study of the plays is not comprehensive, and that he does not emphasise the prominence of such a discrepancy. To a great extent this may be true. But once again, regardless of all reservations, it must be said that the discrepancy between character and action is the only thread that can be handled in Murry's criticism of the plays ; otherwise, his views will appear as if they were no more than shreds and patches scattered here and there, without any value or significance.

Shakespeare's fundamental method, notes Murry, lies in the splendid effort he exerts in humanizing characters and actions that, in the hands of an ordinary dramatist, would have appeared as either melodramatic or farcical, or both. But the process of humanization, though successfully managed, leads inevitably to a "point when we are aware of a discrepancy between the character and the acts. This discrepancy does not disturb us ; we are seldom immediately conscious of it as a discrepancy. It strikes us rather as a mysterious control exercised by some vague and

dark supernatural power" (Shakespeare, p. 323). In **King Lear**, the discrepancy is between Lear's natural inclination and his "initial act" ; in **Macbeth**, it is between the striking "naivety" of the hero and the heroine, and their terrifying crime of genocide ; in **Othello**, the discrepancy between honest simplicity and murderous jealousy springs with a devastating power as a result of the satanic "machination of a human 'demi-devil', Iago" ; in **Hamlet**, it is between what Hamlet says and what he does, a method which is consciously and cleverly utilized so as to "delay act" instead of putting it into motion. It is this theory of discrepancy that will be elucidated and critically evaluated throughout the following pages.



II

HAMLET

THE universality of Hamlet's "To be or not to be" has been acknowledged by multitudes of scholars all over the world. It is not a critical extravaganza to say that about three thousand books and articles have been written on the paradox of Hamlet's anguished life and tragic death. Eminent critics and commentators have been attracted and fascinated by the perplexing question of "To be or not to be". In their attempt to find a meaning and reach a conclusion, they have dug deep and wide, so that the chance of adding any new contribution becomes a real test for those who are exceptionally endowed with more than common sensibility. Yet, Murry believes that the passage has always been misunderstood and consequently misinterpreted. He shrewdly advances his case : "One might say that everybody knows it, and that everybody knows what it means ; and everybody knows wrong. Of course, that 'every-body' is an exaggeration ; it must be. But it is the fact that I have never discussed the speech with any person, however educated, however familiar with Shakespeare, without finding that he was convinced that 'To be or not to be' means 'To live or not to live', and that the whole soliloquy is a debate on the pros and cons of suicide" (*Things To Come*, pp. 230 - 231).

Murry does not concur with the general opinion, for it appears to him as groundless and unreal ; it is not the question of to live or to die that puzzles Hamlet, but it is the problem of to act or not to act, to kill the king or not to kill the king, that

occupies his thought. Murry affirms that "what is 'to be or not to be' is not Hamlet, but Hamlet's attempt upon the king's life".
Hamlet's

"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them", (3/1/57 - 60)

lends credibility to Murry's interpretation. The option for Hamlet is not a simple one ; he has either to endure in silence and pain, submitting to the powers of darkness and evil, or to carry arms and take the plunge into an indefatigable war against all his troubles, which evidently indicates that opposition, not suicide, is the subject of his meditation as the only means leading to stability and rest. But the idea of death is not excluded : by killing the king there is a great possibility of his being killed. From this, springs the inevitable speculation on the subject of death — not the death of a coward escaping his troubles by committing suicide, but the death of a "rebel in arms", a hero.

But the thought of what takes place in the after-life paralyzes Hamlet's will. Were he sure of serenity and peace in the world to come, he would kill the king pat, without the slightest hesitation and face his own death with a calm smile. But being perplexed, he was sure of nothing :

To die, to sleep —

No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to ; 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished to die to sleep !
To sleep, perchance to dream, ay there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil
Must give us pause — there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life. (3/1/60 - 69)

Hamlet's uncertainty about what will come after death, and the idea that death may not be an end in itself, makes him hesitate and endure the calamities of a depressed and tortured life :

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of disprized love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin. (3/1/70 - 76)

Here and for the first time, Murry assents, the soliloquy mentions the idea of a suicidal act. Yet, he contends, it appears only to disappear, for in the main Hamlet reflects on death in general, and "suicide enters simply as one means of death. It enters only to disappear again".

It is worth noting that G. Wilson Knight comes into a direct confrontation with Murry when he ventures a reckless step in the opposite direction, stating daringly that Murry's reading is unacceptable. Alleging that he does not intend to attack or hurt other critics, but only to explicate his own point of view, Knight proceeds to refute Murry's viewpoint : "I am aware that Mr. Middleton Murry considers that he has shown the opening of this soliloquy to refer, not to suicide, but to Claudius' assassination : he reads it as 'to act or not to act'" (3) Knight contends that there

(1) G. Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme* (London, 1931), p. 106.

is nothing in the text to support Murry's "paraphrase" that the Killing of the king would certainly or compellingly lead to Hamlet's death. The point advanced by Knight is that the whole soliloquy is a profound meditation on self-murder, "a perfect unit as a piece of suicide-thought". Hamlet's words, knight argues, are "to be" and not "to act".

This is a dangerous critical battle in which to engage. But one is forced to part company with Knight's reading — he takes Hamlet's words at their face value, giving a literal explanation which is very far from being the right expression of Hamlet's thought. The monologue is not an expression of the last convulsions of a man on the brink of self-destruction out of agony and despair ; it is rather a minute analysis of what is to be done and whether the consequences are to be endured or not. This means that Knight's case is unacceptable. Nevertheless, one must add that it is very difficult, if not completely impossible, to give the absolutely indisputable meaning of the Hamlet conception.

In any case, Murry's view can easily be supported by other critics, who have taken a similar approach. F.C. Kolbe penetratingly declares that Hamlet's main intention is to reveal himself : "In accordance with the character of the play, he is analysing himself to himself. This is a psychological consideration of great importance : yet it is often missed. In this case he has not the smallest intention, or even temptation, to commit suicide : he is just 'putting a case' " (2).

Derek Traversi, in an illuminating comment on the soliloquy reflects Murry's contention that "To be or not to be" means to

(2) F.C. Kolbe, *Shakespeare's Way* (London, 1930), p. 35.

act or not to act, for, says Traversi, action is "the necessary confirmation of being", even if it leads, in the end, to self-destruction (3).

So it is action, not suicide as Knight alleges, round which Hamlet's thought revolves. The point is accepted without reservation by James Kirsch who affirms that Hamlet does not "meditate suicide"; Hamlet's question is "whether to be a murderer or not," an explication that confirms the validity of Murry's verdict, indicating at the same time that Knight's argument does not hold good. However, in his reconsideration of Hamlet, Knight does not hesitate to declare honestly that his previous views on the play seem to him rather "misleading" and "inadequate". Inevitably he finds himself confronting the problem of his first reading of "To be or not to be", and his insistence, when refuting Murry's, that it expresses nothing but suicidal thought. Becoming conscious of his slip, he tries to advance an emendation without sharply contradicting what he himself has said elsewhere. So he attempts a compromise by plausibly saying that "commentators differ as to whether Hamlet's 'To be or not to be'; that is the question,' refers to the proposed killing of Claudius or to the killing of himself. Hitherto I have supported the latter reading, but I now think that both are somehow included, or rather surveyed from a vantage not easy to define" (4) Knight in *The Wheel Of Fire* disproves what he has said in *The Imperial Theme*, admitting, though indirectly, that Murry's interpretation is authentically sound. To conclude this point, however, one would

(3) Derek Traversi, *An Approach To Shakespeare* (London, 1969), vol. 2, p. 53.

(4) G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel Of Fire* (London, 1949), p. 304.

like to refer to D.H. Lawrence's reading of Hamlet's famous question, for — regardless of all reservations — it is both profound and unique. "The question", says Lawrence, "which Hamlet puts himself, does not mean to live or not to live. It is not the simple human being who puts himself the question, it is the supreme I, King and Father. To be or not to be King, Father, in the Self supreme ? And the decision is, not to be" (5).

But to say that Hamlet's decision is 'not to be' means that Lawrence has come to the idea of the ultimate meaning of Hamlet's words, which is undoubtedly no more than sheer theoretic supposition. Hamlet is not so much of a melancholic defeatist as to come to the final conclusion of not to be, thus losing the battle without raising an arm. To Murry, Hamlet is made of a mettle that befits a great tragic hero ; to say from the start that he has decided not to be is to distort the whole meaning of the tragedy and to state that Hamlet is a great failure instead of being a great hero. Such a conclusion is decisively rejected by Murry who, with a slight touch of irony, declares : "To me, it always seems ridiculous to speak of the failure of Hamlet. If that is what to fail, one can only pray for failure : for Hamlet appears to me not a beaten, but a triumphant man ; or rather, triumphant Man" (Shakespeare, p. 270).

Here, the question becomes : Why does he not act ? He has a father killed, a mother stained ; he believes that his uncle has popped between him and his ambition of himself becoming king ; he is "intolerably wronged and dangerously threatened." Henceforth, action, and action of the most violent kind becomes the

(5) D.H. Lawrence, *Twilight In Italy* (London, 1923), p. 96.

indispensable necessity for Hamlet's life ; still he does not act. That is why, as Murry discerningly points out, a serious discrepancy, between Hamlet's character and his acts, emerges from within, puzzling his wits and paralysing his will.

In the prayer-scene Hamlet gets his chance to revenge his father's death, and to put an end to all his troubles ; his enemy is in front of him, helpless and unaware of Hamlet's unsheathed sword ; but he will not kill the king at his prayers. Instead of giving the death-thrust, he soliloquizes, philosophizes and holds back with his sword unused :

Now might

I do it pat, now a' is a-praying —
And now I'll do't, [he draws his sword] and so a goes
to heaven,
And so am I revenged. That would be scanned ;
A villain kills my father, and for that
I his sole son do this same villain send
to heaven
Why, this is bait and salary, not revenge.
A' took my father grossly, full of bread,
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May,
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven ?
But in our circumstance and course of thought,
'Tis heavy with him : and am I then revenged
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage ?
No. [he sheathes his sword]
Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent,
When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in th' incentuous pleasure of his bed,

At game, a-swearing, or' about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't,
Then trip him that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damned and black
As hell whereto it goes.

(3/3/73 - 95)

In his comment on the scene Murry refers to Johnson's horror at the villainous "fiendishness" of Hamlet, and to Coleridge's comment in his notes on Shakespeare where he seems troubled by "Dr. Johnson's mistaking of the marks of reluctance and procrastination for impetuous, horrorstriking, fiendishness! — Of such importance is it to understand the germ of a character" (6). The two approaches are thoroughly antithetical, and Murry refrains from deciding between them; but he clarifies his position by stating that it is difficult to accept a literal explanation of Hamlet's words, for "it is by no means self-evident, as it is now supposed to be, that Hamlet means what he says" (Shakespeare, p. 256).

The view that Hamlet is fiendishly cruel and savagely barbaric, though adopted by many critics, is totally rejected by Murry, who vehemently defends his hero. James Kirsch notes that Hamlet is an unfortunate creature whose misery is mainly caused by the murderous motives that drive him to destroy and be destroyed at the end of the play. To him, as it has been to Johnson, Hamlet spares the king's life only because he wants to send him to an eternal damnation, without any hope of either purgation or salvation. His brutality is also quite apparent in

(6) S.T. Coleridge, *Notes On Shakespeare And The Dramatists* (London, 1881), p. 224.

the way he speaks to his mother and in the hasty rashness of killing Polonius. He stabs his mother with his merciless words, causing her soul to bleed in agony and fear ; then with his brandished sword he stabs Polonius, crying "How now ! a rat ? Dead, for a ducat, dead !". His question "Is it the king ?" is senseless, for a moment's reflection would have led him to the realization that it could not be the king whom he has just left at his prayers. Hamlet, according to Kirsch, "has now descended almost to the same level as Claudius, a fact he again does not notice about himself and cannot" (7).

Wilson Knight's attitude towards Hamlet is not different from that of Kirsch. He thinks that Hamlet is abnormal, cruel, dangerous, and inhuman. He is excessively severe to Ophelia as well as to his mother ; he rejoices in tormenting the king by the "murder of Gonzago." and when he finds him conscience-stricken, at prayer, takes a "demonic pleasure in the thought of preserving his life for a more damning death" (*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 26). Furthermore, Hamlet unscrupulously sends his two school-mates, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, to their death : "They are not near my conscience". According to Knight, Hamlet is no less diabolical than Iago, the differences are slight : both are intellectual, critical, cynical, poisonous and depraved. Hamlet, says Knight, "is not of flesh and blood, he is a spirit of penetrating intellect and cynicism and misery, without faith in himself or anyone else, murdering his love of Ophelia, on the brink of insanity, taking delight in cruelty, torturing Claudius, wringing his mother's heart, a poison in the midst of the healthy bustle of the court. He is a superman among men. And he is a superman be-

(7) James Kirsch *Shakespeare's Royal Self* (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 171.

cause he has walked and held converse with death, and his consciousness works in terms of death and the negation of cynicism. He has seen the truth, not alone of Denmark, but of humanity, of the universe :and the truth is evil. Thus Hamlet is an element of evil in the state of Denmark" (*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 38).

Murry tries, using all his critical alertness and discerning acuteness to defend Hamlet against his accusers. The case of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz must not be used as an illustration to prove Hamlet's savagery or his inclination to contrive an eternal damnation for the king. The two cases, Murry asserts, are not analogous. The two school-mates go to their death "off-stage", disturbing neither Hamlet nor the spectator ; they are not near Hamlet's conscience and "certainly not much on ours". But this is not the true crux of the matter. The essence of the Hamlet problem is much deeper than that. Murry perceptively points to two different Hamlets within the same person : "Hamlet-in-action" and "Hamlet-in-thought" ; the two are completely different, being naturally opposed to each other. Henceforth, the discrepancy between Hamlet's character and his action becomes striking — a fact that must be acknowledged as the essential trait of Shakespeare's portrait. We have to accept, says Murry, "the fact that one of the most striking characteristics of the Hamlet whom Shakespeare sets before us is the discrepancy between what he can do 'on the spur of the moment' and what he can do when there is time for that cantelous consciousness of his to put itself in motion. That discrepancy, one might almost say, is Hamlet" (*Shakespeare*, p. 259).

This discrepancy is the main key to Hamlet's character. Polonius is killed on the "spur of the moment" when Hamlet has no time to think ; Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are the victims

of the "Hamlet-in-action"; the king's life is spared simply because the encounter between the two mighty adversaries coincides with a Hamlet lost in his meditation, and consequently in his hesitation, which inevitably results in the paralysis of his will-to-act; he becomes the thinker, the philosopher, the scholar who is dazed by the strangeness of his own dream. Nor is that all. There are two main causes that have helped in creating Hamlet's hesitation to kill the king in an instant: The first is Hamlet's fear of the after-death state; it possesses all his being and shakes him to the very core:

But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others we know not of?

(3/I/78 - 82)

The second, as Murry puts it, is a religious motive which emanates from Hamlet's breast in "obedience to the supreme demand of Christ: 'Resist not evil.'" This means that Hamlet becomes a Christian without knowing it (8). Murry is aware of the fact that the second cause may be discredited on the grounds that he is always vacillating between literature and religion without setting a definite demarcation between the two, which naturally distorts his work as a literary critic. Therefore, he cautiously adds: "Shakespeare (it seems to me) sets working both motives in Hamlet's mind. Not equally of course. The former is the main dramatic motive of delay; but the latter is present as an overtone" (Shakespeare, p. 245).

(8) This expression has originally been used by T.S. Eliot.

In any case, the second motive can be completely ignored without heavy detraction from the value of Murry's critical corpus as a whole — for it is with the dramatic motivation, in the main, that, literary criticism is concerned. It is the fear of the after-life, then, that curbs Hamlet's movement. And in his turn Hamlet puzzles his audiences by his paradoxical words on "The undiscovered country, from whose bourn/No traveller returns". One is obliged to say that he has either forgotten the Ghost or lost his belief in him, which in both cases, is incredible, for it is essentially the Ghost's terrific pronouncement that has partly "shattered the innocence" of Hamlet's soul.

To be more specific, an explication of Murry's view on this point is necessary. Murry believes that, regardless of all the impressiveness of the Ghost's appearance and the harrowing effect of his tale, Hamlet cannot put his faith and trust in the apparition coming from the after-death kingdom. To Hamlet, Murry argues, the Ghost belongs to a different order of existence and embodies a different kind of morality which cannot be applied to the order of living men ; the dead, even if they exist in another world, must not impose their will on the living. The natural outcome of such an argument is that Hamlet cannot admit the reality of the Ghost and consequently cannot trust his tale.

That Hamlet does not become immediatly — after his encounter with his father's spirit — a ghost-possessed man, is an unacceptable contention which is rejected by most of the Hamlet critics. G. Wilson Knight, for example, stands in extreme opposition, declaring that the role played by the Ghost is overwhelmingly crushing ; Hamlet's personality and attitude towards life suffer a complete change : "Absolute death, absolute evil, disease and horror, and all life now but a tale told by a ghost . . . this is Ham-

let's vision" (*The Imperial Theme*, p. 105). Concurring with this view is James Kirsch's reading which claims that Hamlet "surrenders his consciousness unreservedly", and becomes a different personality : "Hamlet is now both he and his father" (9).

This interpretation leads inevitably to the conclusion that Hamlet's spirit and thought are poisoned by the Ghost's words, that the supernatural is imposing its conation on the natural order of existence, and that Hamlet is a mere puppet in the hands of a power coming from behind the frontiers of the unknown. In such a case, a crucial question may be raised : Can such a Hamlet be a tragic hero ? If he is to be considered, from the very start, as a ghost-diseased youth, one does not believe that he will ever be accepted as a hero ; the weak and the diseased arouse feelings of pity mingled with scorn, which will never do in the case of Hamlet, for a tragic hero he was, every inch a hero.

The Ghost shakes Hamlet simply because he comes as a mere confirmation of the "hideous suspicion" of Hamlet's "prophetic soul". The doubt, the gloom, the melancholy, and the father-complex are originally there, in Hamlet's heart, taking root, spoiling his life and embittering his existence. His father's image seems to be engraved in his mind and heart ; he sees his father, even before the appearance of the Ghost :

Hamlet. My father, methinks I see my father.

Horatio. Where, my lord ?

Hamlet. In my mind's eye, Horatio.

(1/2/184 - 186)

(9) James Kirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

This clearly indicates that the tragic flaw emerges from Hamlet's natural disposition and that the Ghost "merely confirms" Hamlet's streak of perturbed thought. Yet, Murry does not deny that Hamlet is profoundly disturbed by the Ghost's appearance ; his sight is blurred and his doubts are intensified ; the strangeness of the scene around him responds to the strangeness of the feeling within him. "The revelation of his mother's animality", notes Murry, "his dreadful doubt concerning the manner of his father's death — these have already meant the shattering of a whole moral universe. Why should not abysses yawn in the after-life, as they have yawned in this ?" (Shakespeare, p. 268). Such an idea intensifies Hamlet's dreadful fear of the life-to-come.

What must be emphasised is that Murry firmly believes that the Ghost, regardless of the impressiveness of his revelation, does not shape Hamlet's destiny or lead him to his destructive end. To Hamlet, the Ghost cannot be real. That seems, says Murry, "to do violence to the naked substance of the play ; and yet it is no perversion of it. The fifth act arises utterly free of the Ghost and his influence. It has faded away, as it were at the cock-crow of a new imaginative dawn. But to be rid of the Ghost, Hamlet has had to become a new man — a man who is no longer such that a Ghost (or that of which a Ghost is the emanation, or symbol) can shake his disposition" (Shakespeare, p. 267).

And to become a new man Hamlet has to put an end to his self-division, to the discrepancy between what he says and what he does, and also to his fear of what will come after death. In other words, Hamlet has to achieve the wholeness of his soul — the devastating opposition between the two conflicting Hamlets must be "transcended". And, as Murry states emphatically, "it is transcended". No successfully convincing case can ever be sub-

mitted against the fact that the Hamlet of the fifth act is a Hamlet without fears of the "something after death", without hesitation, without a puzzled will, and without a ghost. The Ghost gradually fades away and loses his influence on Hamlet's attitude towards his surroundings. This is true even in the third act : by the time of "to be or not to be", the Ghost's reality is shaken.

The Hamlet of the last act is a Hamlet who, with a new faith, goes to his destined end with a contented soul. The whole problem raised in "to be or not to be" is solved. Hamlet has found his answer and reached his destination :

Horatio : You will lose this wager, my lord.

Hamlet : I do not think so. Since he went into France, I have been in continual practice. I shall win at the odds ; but thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart — but it is no matter.

Horatio : Nay, good my lord —

Hamlet : It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gain-giving as would perhaps trouble a woman.

Horatio : If your mind dislike any thing, obey it. I will forestall their repair hither, and say you are not fit.

Hamlet : Not a whit, we defy augury. There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come — if it be not to come, it will be now — if it be not now, yet it will come — the readiness is all. Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes, let be.

How supremely revealing is this "let be"! Hamlet's belief in the "special providence" that shapes man's destiny, and the impressiveness of his final "let be", create the impression that the new Hamlet has emerged into life — the perfection of his prophetically heroic soul has reached the highest pinnacle ever reached by man. He is ready : and "the readiness is all".

Murry asserts that the Hamlet of the last act is an absolutely free soul : "so far as we can tell, there is no thought in Hamlet's mind now of revenge upon the king" (Shakespeare, p. 248). He asks Laertes' pardon, though, ironically enough, Laertes waits for him with a poisoned rapier ; he behaves cordially, innocently, and decently as if he were a newly born soul. It is only when the queen cries, "The drink, the drink ! I am poisoned !", that Hamlet becomes aware of the poisoned existence all around him. "O villainy !", he cries coming to a sudden realization : "Ho ! let the door be lock'd : Treachery ! Seek it out." But the appalling confession of Laertes discloses the secret of the bloody deed :

Laertes : It is here, Hamlet. Hamlet, thou art slain,
No medicine in the world can do thee good,
In thee there is not half an hour of life,
The treacherous instrument is in thy hand,
Unbated and venom'd. The foul practice
Hath turned itself on me, here I lie,
Never to rise again — thy mother's poisoned —
I can no more — the king's to blame.

(5/2/311 - 318)

In such a situation, hesitation is cowardice, and meditation is senseless ; the truth is as plain as the mid-day sun. "The point is envenom'd too," Hamlet decisively knows what he has to do : "Then, venom, to thy work." And by his own instrument of

death, the king falls. It is not the Ghost's demand that drives Hamlet to stab the murderous king ; it is the king's final act of "treachery" that moves Hamlet to instant action. "We feel," says Murry, "and perhaps we are meant to feel, that Hamlet kills the king as much for his corruption of Laertes as for his treachery towards Hamlet's self ; and finally we feel . . . , that thus and only thus could the Hamlet of the fifth act have killed the king at all" (Shakespeare, p. 249).

So at last, miraculously enough, Hamlet succeeds in overcoming the discrepancy that has poisoned his thought and shattered his will. His self-unity is achieved, and he dies the death of a perfect hero, not of a diseased, ghost-haunted man. As Murry triumphantly puts it : Hamlet has conquered his fear.



III

OTHELLO

IN *Othello*, Murry concentrates on the drama of the handkerchief, for it stands as a symbol that magnifies the terrifying discrepancy between character and acts in the different movements of the *Othello-Desdemona* tragedy. The handkerchief, Murry notes, is "disregarded by the very motion of love," and this seemingly simple incident is, intelligently and maliciously, used to drive the Moor to a catastrophic end — he kills where he loves.

Murry draws attention to the fact that the seeds of destruction have been implanted by nature into the Moor's heart ; his existence and his wife's life are smothered when the seeds take root and grow dangerously and disastrously. According to Murry, Iago is not the main and ultimate moving power that turns the wheels of *Othello's* misfortune, for even Iago, with all his diabolical cunning, would have found himself helplessly despicable in front of a healthy and undivided *Othello* : "Iago's motive power would be irrelevant and futile if it had no point of application ; or, by a better metaphor, were the seed of catastrophe not present in the relation of *Desdemona* and *Othello*, it could never be germinated by the heat of Iago's malign cunning" (*Shakespeare*, p. 319).

Othello is a strange crop transplanted into a strange soil ; survival in such circumstances becomes a matter of mere chance. To be coloured, or discoloured, by a new life, a new tradition and a new trend of thought is not an every day occurrence ; it

nearly reaches the verge of the impossible in men of extraordinary calibre — men who are made of the mettle of heroes. Othello has either to adjust himself or perish, and because of the impressive magnanimity of his noble nature, he cannot become what he is not. He perishes. It cannot be otherwise.

By nature and upbringing, notes Murry, Othello is a romantic figure. It is not an exaggeration to say that he is the most romantic of all Shakespeare's heroes. His adventures are live history and his words are moving poetry. He wins Desdemona's love by telling her strange and amazing tales that have the power of magic on the maiden's heart :

Othello.

My story being done,

She gave me for my pains a world of sighs :

She swore, in faith 'twas
passing strange ;

'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful ;

She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished

That heaven had made her such a man ; she
thanked me,

And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,

I should but teach him how to tell my story,

And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake ;

She loved me for the dangers I had passed,

And I loved her that she did pity them.

This only is the witchcraft I have used.

(1/3/158 - 169)

He loves Desdemona in his own way, romantically ; he idealizes her, idealizes himself, as if they were made of a stuff rare to be found in human nature. He creates an aura of a charmed world around his life with Desdemona — of such a world, the handkerchief, with the magic in the web, becomes a symbol.

There is some wonder, says Murry, in this handkerchief. And he sets out to discover it. It was the Moor's first gift to Desdemona, a token that embodies all his love for her ; that is why its importance becomes fatally significant. The loss of such a keepsake becomes disastrous to a man of the Othello type. It may be argued that the magnitude given to the handkerchief's value is somewhat overestimated. But Murry contends that any true love-gift must have no "intrinsic" value, for its real worth lies in the meaning it represents : "A pebble, a wild flower, a blade of grass, a handkerchief — such are the gifts of love : things which can have no meaning but love, because they can be tendered only by love, and received only by love" (Shakespeare, p. 314).

Nevertheless, Murry is not blind to the fact that Othello's handkerchief is not of common stuff ; there is a touch of ancient Egypt about it, in addition to a mysterious magic that makes it wonderfully unique in its kind. Othello's words about the handkerchief sound as if they were the revelations of one of the ancient prophets :

Othello.

That handkerchief

Did an Egyptian to my mother give ;
She was a charmer, and could almost read
The thoughts of people : she told her, while she kept it
'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
Entirely to her love ; but if she lost it
Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathe'd and his spirit should hunt
After new fancies. She dying gave it me,
And bid me, when fate would have me wive,
To give it her. I did so ; and take heed on't :

Make it darling like your precious eye ;
To lose it or give't away were such perdition
As nothing else could match.

Desdemona. Is't possible ?
Othello. 'Tis true. There is magic in the web of it :
A sibyl, that had numbered in the world
The sun to course two hundred compasses,
In her prophetic fury sewed the work ;
The worms were hallowed that did breed the silk ;
And it was dyed in mummy which the skilful
Conserved of maidens' hearts.

(3/4/58 - 78)

The loss of such a handkerchief cannot pass without serious consequences ; it can never be forgiven. And Desdemona does lose the handkerchief — an incident that creates an overwhelming chaos in her small world, and threatens her very existence. The magic in the web gains a revengeful power, and “the prophecy of the Egyptian is being fulfilled on her”.

Here, the discrepancy between character and acts prevails supremely ; it is quite apparent in the behaviour of both Othello and Desdemona. According to Murry, Desdemona is undoubtedly a true lover ; to her, the handkerchief, as a symbol of love, is dearly loved ; she “reserved it evermore about her to kiss and talk to”. Yet, ironically enough, she forgets all about it in a moment of absolute devotion to the man she loves, for in such a moment her sick hero, lover and husband, fills her mind, heart and imagination as the only reality ; the handkerchief sinks into the background as a mere handkerchief, “a piece of lawn,” no more than that. “It is,” notes Murry, “the perfection of Desdemona’s love for Othello that destroys her. For ‘there is some

wonder in this handkerchief' — a wonder of which Desdemona is aware : the wonder of the true love-token. And she forgets it only when love bids her forget it" (Shakespeare, p. 315). Othello in his turn rejects the solicitous devotion of his wife, refusing to allow her to help in curing his headache. By the mere act of rejecting her attention — an attention which he needs most — he, as Robert Heilman says, "rejects the magical powers of love ; he will not be cured . . . He will neither love nor let himself be loved" (1).

Murry firmly believes that *Othello* is essentially a tragedy of love — love which is absolute in its entirety and perfection ; that is why its continuity becomes an impossibility : "It is that the perfection of human love destroys itself." The handkerchief, in such a context, is a symbolic manifestation of a ruinous process leading to an inevitable end. Its loss, from Murry's point of view, is not an accident, and cannot be one ; Desdemona must lose it, forget that it has been lost, and to remember it "would be the blemish". It is an edict of destiny which cannot be avoided, a fatal blow that cannot be averted. Othello's and Desdemona's love must be undermined by its own perfection.

It is worth saying here that Murry is overestimating, if not glorifying, the love affair between the Moor and his wife. Absolute perfection, as suggested by Murry, cannot really exist, except as a dream, in the world of men and women. It is true, says Murry, that the "seeds of death" lie in the hearts of the lovers, or, to be more precise, in the heart of Othello ; but he does not elaborate or convincingly support his view. His idea

(1) Robert B. Heilman, *Magic in the Web* (Lexington, 1956), p. 213.

about the "perfection of human love [that] destroys itself," cannot be easily accepted, for, in point of fact, Othello's love is not entirely perfect. Derek Traversi does not hesitate to declare that Desdemona's passion for the Moor, judged by the standards of Venetian morality, is no more than an emotional "perversion" which cannot survive for long simply because it is against the nature of things. He claims that "for the cultured and sceptical venetians around Desdemona, her relations with the 'lascivious Moor' are mysterious, unnatural, and deeply disturbing. In the eyes of her father, who holds to the last that his child has deceived him, Desdemona's action proceeds from a perversion of the judgment and is a poison which acts through the erring senses to enslave the will" (2).

This reading of the Desdemona - Othello relationship is not, by now, an anomaly in the vast arena of Shakespearean criticism ; the shortcomings of the two lovers have often been referred to. H. Somerville notes that Desdemona has been misled by her "romantic" inclinations. Desdemona's love for Othello is founded on "esteem and pity" which, ineluctably, lead to frustration and failure ; pity, in particular, leads to disgust and contempt, never to love. It is not difficult, Somerville expostulates, "to read between the lines [of the willow song] and find that she was already half repenting her black bargain" (3).

Neither is the Moor, as Murry claims, perfect in nobility. It is true that he is noble, but it is also true that he is not altogether noble ; he is splendidly and supremely human, but the

(2) Traversi, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

(3) H. Somerville, *Madness In Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1929), p. 79.

mere fact of his being human denotes that he has the weakness inherent in the nature of human beings. Derek Traversi suggests that Othello's defects can easily be detected in spite of the overwhelming "impression of strength and consistency" that his character inspires. The Moor tends to dramatize feelings and thoughts in order to achieve a self-aggrandizement that may add to the impressiveness of his personality :

My services which I have done the signiority
Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know —
Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,
I shall promulgate — I fetch my life and being
From such royal siege ; and my demerits
May speak unbönneted to as proud a fortune
As this that I have reached.

(I/2/18 - 24)

That is how the Moor, rhetorically and poetically, proclaims the nobility of his royal descent, culminating in a proud declamation of his heroic achievements. At the beginning of the play, he shows off with bombastic theatricality ; and at the end he passes away, like a dying swan, in the pomp and glory of his high-sounding words :

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,
Perplexed 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 medicinable gum — Set down this ;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumciséd dog
And smote him — thus. [he stabs himself]

(5/2/341 - 358)

Yet, it must be noted that Othello's rhetorical theatricality is not his most serious defect. Self-aggrandizement, in his romantic individuality, leads naturally to self-deception. This is one of the factors that has helped in working out the downfall of the unfortunate hero. He adores Desdemona, and he finds no shame in declaring it ; but he resolutely denies that he is taking her with him to the battle-field to satisfy a sexual need. He gives his audience the impression that he is nobly supreme ; he is the hero, the fighter, the conqueror, the noble Moor who has mastered not only men but also passions and desires. This collected and calculated belief in rationality is amazing in a man who firmly believes in the "magic-webbed" handkerchief he gives to his beloved. The discrepancy between what he professes and what he practises must result in failure.

Othello's denial of the sexual effects, and his serene haughtiness in proclaiming that he is a conqueror even of his own desires, lead some critics to the conclusion that he is sexually impotent. Robert Heilman, analysing the Moor's shortcomings, hints — though obliquely — at it. "The disvowal of sensuality," says Heilman, "is another index of self-deceptiveness. Not, I believe,

that there is in Othello a powerful sexuality which he is endeavouring to deny or disregard. The general incompleteness of response to Desdemona is the counterpart of a certain physical tepidness ; there is a lack of warmth at all levels" (4). The same view has been expressed by Somerville, who believes that Desdemona's choice is fatal, that her marriage is catastrophic, and that her death must not be regretted, for it delivers her from the pains of living an extremely miserable life with an "impotent husband". It is Othello's "consciousness of a shattered manhood" that draws him to the "sheltering bosom of his gentle love" (5).

The upshot of all these views is to elucidate Murry's vague and imperfect statement about the seeds of death in the Othello-Desdemona "perfect" love, though one concurs with his general conclusion that this love is foredoomed to destruction even without the cunning manipulation of Iago. Murry believes that Iago is used as a means to an end, a machination to bring the invisible tragedy of the human heart into clarity and visibility. The handkerchief, Murry argues, is used symbolically as a dramatic effect operating indirectly, but Iago is represented as the maker of the "drama" in the sense that "he magnifies it into visibility. He is to be understood as a mere source of motive power whose function it is to bring the seed of death that is in the love of Othello and Desdemona to maturity within the compass of a play. What would be, in ordinary human life, a process lasting many years, with no violent outcome ; ending only in the death of love, and perhaps in its rebirth, has to be turned into 'sensation'. And Iago is the means by which it is achieved" (Shak-

(4) Heilmann, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

(5) Somerville, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

espeare, p. 318). This, unequivocally, denotes that Iago is a mere instrument whose function is to turn the wheel of destiny, accelerating the rapidity of disaster ; without his diabolical effort, the death-process would have been longer, but the result would have been the same.

This acute appreciation of Iago's character, as a moving power, reveals an intelligent perceptive capability on Murry's part as a critic. He is not misled by the devastating demonism of Iago's power into saying that Iago is the main source of the tragedy, he is not. But this does not mean that Murry overlooks or underestimates Iago's villainy. Neither does he argue against the idea that Iago is diabolical. Compared with the common lot of humanity, Iago's diabolism appears as piercingly devastating. He is an embodiment of the "element of death that is in love" ; without him there would have been no drama at all, regardless of the fact, Murry emphasises once again, that the "seed of catastrophe" is essentially inherent in the very nature of the Othello-Desdemona love-affair.

Murry argues that Iago's cunning, or what he calls Iago's "kenning" is the most characteristic trait that distinguishes him from those around him. This is an indispensable quality in a character whose main function is to "expedite disaster". In a man, states Murry, "that would be diabolical indeed. But Iago is not a man. He is a disembodied intelligence, of somewhat the same kind that Dostoevsky was to bring shadowily before us in his Stavrogins and his Svidrigailovs — an abstract potentiality of the human consciousness : that which knows the nature of human love, and knows what accidents are necessary to destroy it" (Shakespeare, p. 320).

What is significant in Murry's approach to Iago's character is his declaration that "Iago is not a man". Such an interpretation concurs with the readings of various critics ranging from Coleridge to G. Wilson Knight. Coleridge, for example, believes that Iago's art is irresistible simply because it is "superhuman". Hazlitt considers him as one of the most marvellous "supererogations" of Shakespeare's genius ; Iago is created with none of the "milk of human kindness" in his composition. His imagination is devilish, and his thoughts are poisonous ; to his depraved appetite, virtue or goodness are sickly and insipid. Iago's dark, guarded, and deliberate "artifice" is beyond the skill of any living being. G. Wilson Knight, following the same track, states that the elements of human nature are lacking in Iago ; his devilishness is absolute, and his cynicism is limitless. Iago is "cynicism loathing beauty, refusing to allow its existence. Hence the venom of his plot : the plot is Iago — both are ultimate, causeless, self-begotten. Iago is cynicism incarnate and projected into action" (*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 114).

There may be slight differences in the approaches of these critics, but in the main they reinforce Murry's conclusion which denies the humanity of Iago. Nevertheless, one can refer to another group of critics whose views are entirely different from Murry's ; to them, Iago's inhumanity or superhumanity is no more than a fallacious idea that must be rejected by any sagacious scholar. Charles Coe notes that there are many indications in the play which help in creating the belief that Iago is a man, "a real man turned villain for a purpose". Bradley expresses the same opinion when he writes about the symptoms of humanity in Iago's character ; Iago's hesitation and "doubt", as to whether he must work out Cassio's and Roderigo's death, impress and surprise him as indications of "the obscure working of conscience

or humanity". He goes to the extent of saying that Iago feels remorseful and ashamed because he is inflicting pain on an innocent creature, "for Desdemona is the one person concerned against whom it is impossible for him even to imagine a ground of resentment, and so an excuse for cruelty". He, also, interprets Iago's rushing at Emilia, with the cry "villainous whore!", as a rare moment of "real passion" (6).

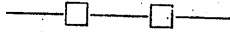
The human element in Iago's character, expressed by Coe and stressed by Bradley, is referred to, though differently, by Heilman who suggests the possibility of a one-sided love between Iago and Desdemona. After a long analysis of Iago's feelings and motives, Heilman comes to the conclusion that Iago is sensationally obsessed with an endless train of "erotic imagination", and that he is "in his strange way sexually attracted to Desdemona" (7).

Though these views may be regarded as a possible refutation of Murry's thesis that Iago is not a man, one does not hesitate to say that the delving deep into Iago's character has been carried too far, and that the application of modern psychology to an Elizabethan creation may be misleading. Iago has been created for a purpose, and he is significant in so far as he succeeds in achieving this purpose : the manipulation of a discrepancy which has already been existing. In other words, says Murry, in a wonderfully perceptive conclusion, "to discover what Iago is, the

(6) A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, (London, Macmillan, 1950), p. 235.

(7) Heilman, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

time-medium [of the tragedy] must be changed back again. Then he dissolves from an incredible human being — a monster — back into his imaginative reality, which is simply the awareness of the potentiality of death in human love. That awareness is Shakespeare's" (Shakespeare, p. 320).



IV

MACBETH

THE discrepancy between character and act in *Macbeth* is one of the most striking accomplishments of Shakespeare's art. The deed is done, Duncan is killed, but Macbeth feels puzzled, perplexed, lost in the whirlpool of the dreadful act. He has murdered grace, divinity, loyalty, and he has also murdered sleep. He is shaken to the very roots of his existence so that he yearns for the impossible — Duncan's rise from the dead :

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself, knock.
Wake Duncan with thy knocking : I would
thou couldst :

(2/2/71 - 2)

Murry states that the discrepancy between character and act in *Macbeth* is "turned consciously to account". It is the vortex from which the whole tragedy emerges, arousing great animation and expectation, illusion and disillusion, overwhelming ambition and dreadful despair. Macbeth, the mighty warrior, "that Bel-lona's bridegroom, lapp'd in proof," and his seemingly iron-willed wife look at each other, after the murder, in puzzled astonishment, as if they were two naive children. They "see themselves", and what they see makes them tremble. That is why they try by all possible means to avoid looking into themselves. They resort to all human and superhuman resources in a desperate attempt to save the integrity of their souls. But it is of no avail ; it is a destiny which they have to face. No escape is possible. And the mere realization of that drives them mad.

According to Murry, this fatal power to see themselves, "manifested as they manifest it, convinces us as nothing else could convince us, of their essential nobility of soul. And by this turn the situation becomes bottomless in profundity. That a man and woman should, in the very act of heinous and diabolical murder, reveal themselves as naive and innocent, convulses our morality and awakens in us thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (Shakespeare, p. 325). The contrast here lies in the nobility of the protagonists' souls and the heinousness of their action. This leads one to examine the mysterious motive power that has disastrously worked havoc in the hearts of these two extraordinary personalities.

In *Othello*, Iago plays the part of the instigator, the tempter who puts the action into that rapid motion which results in the total destruction of the protagonist and his wife. The devilish agent takes the form of a human power embodied in a man dealing with men. In *Hamlet*, the drama begins with the supernatural trying to impose its will on the natural order of things — the visitation of the Ghost reveals the secret of the murder of a king, mercilessly awakening Hamlet's deeply rooted suspicion. In *Macbeth*, the tempting powers are both human and superhuman — Macbeth's ambition, his wife's lustful desire for power and family-aggrandizement, and the predictions of the Weird Sisters, all contribute to the bloody rise and harrowing downfall of the hero.

The role of the Weird Sisters has always been disputed by the Shakespearian critics. The question of whether they are natural or preternatural, human or superhuman, mere future-tellers or destructive elements, cannot be answered simply or easily. Murry thinks that it is a gross mistake to represent the

Witches as active factors practically working for the extermination of the unfortunate Macbeth. They, Murry insists, "do not hate or contrive or entangle. They merely reveal a future to him who will believe it". But whether or not they have an influential power over Macbeth, directing his steps to a predestined conclusion, will not be answered by Shakespeare. Undoubtedly Shakespeare was conscious of the medieval tradition with all its beliefs in preternatural agents able to reveal the secrets of the unknown. Stories of bargains between men and the powers of evil have been told throughout the ages, and the price has always been the same : man has to give up his soul to the devil.

The question it is important to ask is this : Is there any bargain between Macbeth and the Weird Sisters ? Do they compel him to wade in the blood of his innocent victims ? Do they ask for his soul in return for revealing a glimpse of the future ? Murry's answer is unequivocal : "Macbeth makes no bargain with the emissaries of the powers of darkness : nor are they bargainable. The knowledge offers itself to him : it is, indeed, as he says 'a supernatural soliciting'. But he is not solicited to the treachery and murder which he commits. It has been granted him to read a little in the book of destiny, and he has found its first sentence true, there is nothing that compels him to be assistant and accomplice to the working of the second" (Shakespeare, p. 326).

Murry's reading of the text does not differ much from that of his great predecessor A.C. Bradley who states clearly that the Witches must not be labelled with the responsibility of Macbeth's guilt. Bradley contends that there is no indication whatsoever which would lead to the belief that Macbeth has been driven to his destiny by supernatural powers. The Witches and their pre-

dictions, says Bradley, "are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal Macbeth is, in the ordinary sense, perfectly free from them" (1). Their main significance springs from the fact that they harp on Macbeth's thought as an echo of his murderous intentions :

1 Witch. All hail, Macbeth ! hail to thee , Thane of Glamis !

2 Witch. All hail, Macbeth ! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor !

3 Witch. All hail, Macbeth ! that shalt be king hereafter.

Ban : Good Sir, Why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound or faire ?

(1/3/48 - 52)

Banquo's question is piercingly poignant. He notices that, on hearing the prophecies, Macbeth is startled, as if dazed. An innocent man would have never feared such a revelation, but Macbeth is not such a man. He is terrified simply because, unexpectedly, the Weird Sisters have given utterance to his own thoughts. The temptation does not come from without ; it mainly springs from within creating havoc in the barbaric world of Macbeth. The Witches, as Roy Walker says, are instruments, not powers ; they "would be defeated without a principal to enforce their attack upon Macbeth's soul" (2). Against such a strong point of view, James Kirsch, in his valuable book *Shakespear's Royal Self*, claims that Macbeth, due to an inherent weakness in his personality, falls a "helpless victim of the Witches' craft" (p. 333). The first part of Kirsch's contention is valid, but the rest of it is far from being true — Macbeth is not victimized by the Witches.

(1) A.C. Bradley, *op. cit.* p. 343.

(2) Roy Walker, *The Time is Free* (London, Andrew Dakers, 1949), p. 136.

One do not hesitate to accept the full implications of Murry's conception of the Weird Sisters. Macbeth, after the fatal encounter, could have held back paying no heed to the prophecies, and forgetting all about the heath and the Witches. Such a supposition can be accredited and easily supported by Macbeth's own words :

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly : if th' assasination
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 shall have judgment here ; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th' inventor :

.....

Besides, this Duncan

Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off ;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. — I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th' other —

There is no reference here to witchcraft or metaphysical aid ; Macbeth does not make the slightest attempt to put the responsibility of his attitude towards the king on the shoulders of the mysterious hags ; he does not even mention them. The instigation comes originally from within, not from without. Essentially it is his "vaulting ambition" that causes his destruction ; and in this sense he gains in depth and magnanimity as a tragic hero. To say that the Witches are the active agents that cause Macbeth's catastrophic end, is to destroy the whole conception and significance of the tragedy.

In point of truth the murder of Duncan has been meditated upon before the appearance of the Witches. Lady Macbeth's stunning question "What beast was't then, That made you break this enterprise to me ?" (1/7/47), unequivocally implies that the murder has been a topic of discussion between Macbeth and his wife. Lady Macbeth has a full knowledge of her husband's psychological state. She can read his thoughts as easily as she reads his words. She is sure that his soul is yearning for Duncan's untimely end ; yet she is also aware of his instability of purpose and his discouraging hesitation he "would not play false, but yet would wrongly win". What frightens Macbeth is not the murder itself, but the ensuing damnation of its discovery ; he is ready to commit it, if ascertained that the world around him will not damn him with suspicious eyes. Being no Hamlet, he is not worried or impressed by the world-to-come ; such a question can be burked, and the life-to-come can be jumped over. The murderer, says Murry, "who will jump the judgment of the life to come, and all that it implies, needs but the hope that the murder will be unknown to do the deed. That hope will come ; it will create itself. For the life of the judgment to come is projected conscience. Conscience once drugged Murder becomes but a mat-

ter of contrivance. And that is all. Macbeth is appalled not by the thought of the deed, but by the thought of failure to conceal it” (Shakespeare, pp. 327 - 8).

According to Murry, what Macbeth needs is the drugging of his conscience, which, if achieved, would let loose all the furies of Macbeth’s bloody imagination ; he would challenge men and beasts, humans and superhumans, and even fate would not count too much for him, if it came into the list. But it all depends on whether his conscience will be efficiently drugged or not. This is marvellously achieved by Lady Macbeth — a woman who will be described by Malcolm as “the fiendish queen”.

Lady Macbeth’s influence over her husband is tremendous. She is handling a man with whom she has lived both physically and spiritually. He has a conscience which must be “drugged”, if that deed is to be done. He is for the murder of Duncan, but he does not want to be himself the murderer. She would drug his conscience, overcome his hesitancy, fill him with her own spirit and drive him forward to achieve all the wished for greatness :

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear ;
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
to have thee crown’d withal.

(1/5/27 - 32)

The news of Duncan’s passing the night in her castle is beyond her expectation. It is her golden opportunity and it must not be lost. Still, she is afraid of her husband’s faltering virtue — a fact which is confirmed by Macbeth’s helpless words :

We will proceed no further in this business :
He hath honour'd me of late ; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

(1/7/30 - 32)

Macbeth is afraid lest the murder should undo him ; it would mean the perdition of his existence.

At once, Lady Macbeth reacts, and her reaction is overwhelming, so much so that Macbeth stands gazing at her in amazement, as if stunned. She attacks him ferociously, shaking him to the very roots of his being. To her, his hesitation is cowardice, his fear is childish, and even his masculinity is doubtful. Kingship and manhood, she believes, cannot be separated ; so, he would be much more the man, if he becomes the king. She has prepared everything for the final scene — the grooms are drugged, the daggers are ready, and Duncan sleeps happily and unsuspectingly after being generously treated by his "honour'd hostess". There is no possibility of failure. All they need is determination ; the chance must not be missed, and the deed must be done. To be a man that deserves her veneration Macbeth must overcome his "cowardice" and put an end to his fear. Her argument with him is rounded up with the nerve-shattering lines :

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me :
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
have plucked my nipple from his bottomless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(1/7/54 - 59)

These lines may be interpreted as the expression of a diabolical creature — a woman without pity, without fear, void of the milk of common humanity. To put it summarily, she appears to be a woman without regrets, especially if seen in the light of her

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from crown to toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty !

(1/5/41)

This has tempted some critics to consider Lady Macbeth as the embodiment of absolute evil. Roy Walker represents her as a "Gorgon", a "she-devil", who is ready to be "de-natured and unsexed" for the sake of attaining the crown. Macbeth, says Walker, "might overcome his own temptation to murder Duncan, might face the Witches and break the spell that binds him to his burning desire for the crown. But when he confronts the fiend, in limb and motion feminine, whose prayer to Hell that she may be unsexed and filled from crown to toe with direst cruelty has been answered, his return upwards to the light of day is for ever lost" (3). With this view James Kirsch concurs, though he gives his interpretation the psychological colouring of Dr. Jung and his school of thought. To Kirsch, Lady Macbeth is "a continuation of the Witches into the human realm. She has no moral scruples whatsoever. She intends to be quite active in Macebeth's plans, to stimulate his anima with her criminal intentions. She incarnates his murderous impulses She is more goddess than human being, and must therefore be under-

(3) Roy Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

stood as a representation of Macbeth's unconsciousness" (4). By goddess here Kirsch means the goddess of darkness, villainy and dire cruelty who fears neither Heaven nor Hell, and who cares not for either blessing or damnation ; her main aim is to strike with all her might in order to have the "golden round".

This reading is partly accepted by G. Wilson Knight who believes that Lady Macbeth is the incarnation of "evil absolute and extreme" for "only one mighty hour". But after that, when the terrifying deed is done and Duncan is removed forever, she becomes what by nature she is — a woman with all the frailties of womanhood : "She faints at Macbeth's description of Duncan's body. As her husband grows rich in crime, her significance dwindles : she is left shattered, a human wreck who mutters over again in sleep the hideous memories of her former satanic hour of pride" (*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 152).

What must be stressed is that Lady Macbeth is a great woman of mighty will, unequalled courage, and unique power of determination ; her self control is admirable, her presence of mind is perfect, and her belief in herself is almost absolute, that is why she towers over all those around her. Hence springs the fatal flaw that creates the crack, the discrepancy which in its turn destroys her mercilessly. Lady Macbeth is a woman who has miscalculated the limits of her strength and overestimated her "powers of endurance". The fact that she commits this fatal mistake proves that she is human. To borrow the words of Somerville, Lady Macbeth is a woman only, not a superwoman.

To this great woman, notes Murry, Macbeth submits, and the moment of his submission becomes the moment of his perdition.

(4) James Kirsch, *op. cit.*, p. 345.

It means that he is forever lost, without any hope of redemption or any glimpse of salvation.

Lady M. : My husband !

Macb. : I have done the deed. Did'st thou not hear a noise ?

Lady m. : I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.
Did you not speak ?

Macb. : When ?

Lady m. : Now.

Macb. : As I descended ?

Lady M. : Ay !

Macb. : Hark !

Who lies i' the second chamber ?

Lady M. : Donalbain.

Macb. : This is a sorry sight [Looking on his hands]

Lady M. : A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight.

(2/2/15 - 21)

The discrepancy here, as Murry points out, lies in the terrifying "naivety" of the protagonist and his wife. The deed begins to work havoc in their souls, regardless of the fact that they are unconscious of it. Still, the snapping of the cords can be clearly heard :

Macb. : There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried,
"Murther !"

That they did wake each other : I stood and
heard them ;

But they did say their prayers, and address'd
them

Again to sleep.

Lady M. : There are two lodg'd together.

Macb. : One cried, "God bless us !" and "Amen," the
other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's
hands.

List'ning their fear, I could not say, "Amen,"
When they did say, "God bless us."

Lady M. : Consider it not so deeply.

Macb. : But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen" ?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen" Stuck
in my throat.

Lady M. : These deeds must not be thought
After these ways : so, it will make us mad.

(2/2/22 - 32)

The dialogue is supremely revealing. Lady Macbeth is exerting a tremendous effort to control the situation and bring her husband back to his senses. She screws up all her powers ; yet "as she gathers control, she knows that he is not considering it deeply at all. He is considering it simply and strangly, and fatally, as she had also been considering it. There is no word for that kind of contemplation, when two creatures, become themselves, look on the irremediable thing they did when they were not themselves" (Shakespeare, p. 331).

The point it is important to make is this : the discrepancy between what the two characters essentially are and what, after the murder, they have consequently become, is a string on which Shakespeare harps with masterful skill. It becomes the predominant feature of the tragedy. It is the callous power that drives the wheel of fortune full circle, ending in the destruction of Macbeth and his wife. Lady Macbeth cracks under the burden of conscious-

ness and a conscience emerging, despite her desperate attempt to smother it, from the subconscious. She walks in her sleep, confesses her guilt on paper, seals it, murmurs in a whimpering voice about what is, what has been, and what is to be :

Out, damned spot ! out, I say ! — One ; two :
why, then 'its time to do't. — Hell is murky !
Fie, my lord, fie ! a soldier, and afeard ? What
need we fear who knows it, when none can call
our power to account ? — Yet who would have thought
the old man to have had so much blood in him ?

.....
Here's the smell of blood still : all the
perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.
Oh ! oh ! oh !

(V/1/34 - 50)

The burden is more than she can bear, and the inner struggle is beyond her power of endurance. She has overestimated herself and miscalculated the limits of her strength. "It will drive us mad," she tells Macbeth, and it does.

Macbeth, on the other hand, is puzzled and frightened by the strangeness and unexpectedness of the event. He is unable to recognize what is real and what is fanciful. Tumult within and outside him play havoc in his soul ; he hears strange voices and listens to terror-striking words :

Macb. : Methought, I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more !
Macbeth does murther Sleep," — the innocent
Sleep !

Sleep, that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,

Balm of hurt minds, great Nature's second
course,

Chief nourisher in life's feast ; —

Lady M. : What do you mean ?

Mach. : Still it cried, "Sleep no more !" to all the house :
"Glamis hath murther'd Sleep, and rherefore
Cawdor

Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no
more !"

(2/2/34 - 42)

Murry's comment on these lines is one of the most interesting things he says. He believes that by murdering sleep, Macbeth has murdered time, human time ; so it becomes inevitable that he should take the plunge into the horror of the metaphysical. Macbeth's time is now timeless. His existence is annihilated by the timelessness of time ; he is bound to the devastating wheel of fire, "the victim of uninterrupted and unending time, chained to the wheel of the everlasting Now" (Shakespeare, p. 333). From such a condition no escape is possible. Lady Macbeth commits suicide, but even death would not save her soul. Those who have murdered sleep, have "murdered death also". In such a state of existence, life becomes meaningless :

Mach. : Wherefore was that cry,

Sey. : The Queen my lord, is dead,

Mach. : She should have died hereafter :

There would have been time for such a word. —

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time ;

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.

(5/4/15 - 28)

Murry's interpretation of the first part of Macbeth's speech is indisputably unique. He admits frankly that he cannot fully grasp the meaning of the first five lines. Still, he rejects Johnson's reading which states that the Queen's death "should have been deferred to a more peaceable time". This is the common explanation of the text which necessitates no diving deep into the real state of Macbeth's strange world. But, Murry strenuously disputes the point, "Macbeth's meaning is stranger than that. 'Hereafter,' I think, is purposely vague. It does not mean 'later' ; but in a different mode of time from that in which Macbeth is imprisoned now. 'Hereafter' — in the not - now : there would have been a time for such a word as 'the Queen is dead'. But the time in which he is caught is to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, — one infinite sameness, in which yesterdays have only lighted fools the way to dusty death. Life in this time is meaningless — a tale told by an idiot — and death also. For his wife's death to have meaning there needs some total change — a plunge across a new abyss into a Hereafter" (Shakespeare, p. 335).

Murry's thesis of the timelessness of time in Macbeth and his explanation of the meaning of the "hereafter", in connection with Lady Macbeth's death, seem somewhat puzzling, if not perplexing to some critics and commentators. Kenneth Muir, in his notes on Macbeth, states that Macbeth's "She should have died

hereafter" is "ambiguous". He refers to Arrowsmith Wilson's interpretation : "She would have died sometime," and to Johnson's "Her death should have been deferred to a more peaceful hour ; had she lived longer, there would have been a more convenient time for such a word", following these two readings by Murry's criticism of Johnson's. In his very short comment on Murry's statement, Kenneth Muir's perplexity is quite apparent ; he does not accept Murry's reading of the text, but at the same time, he does not refute it. He finds a way out of the impasse by stating : "that Shakespeare would have been puzzled by this explanation is not necessarily a condemnation of it" (5).

Roy Walker, in the main, agrees with Murry's thesis of time in *Macbeth*, though he blames Murry for not referring to the resumption of "human time" at the end of the play. Analysing *Macbeth's* "She should have died hereafter", Walker draws attention to the fact that the statement is meaningless ; *Macbeth* himself has realized that, "for time itself — time past, time present and time future — is meaningless ; he has jumped the life to come. Time is a nightmare succession of incidents without significance" (6). Time according to Walker, is "rooted in the eternal" which cannot be "mocked" and from which there is no escape ; it is different from *Macbeth's* time which is "not joined to the days of the year, to the natural rhythm of seasons, the cycle of death and resurrection. It is a chaos of separate to-morrows in which the to-morrow that is a time for planting and the to-morrow that is time for plucking up never comes" (7).

(5) Kenneth Muir, ed., *Macbeth*, New Arden Edition (Mothuen And Co., London, 1951), p. 159.

(6) Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

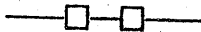
(7) *Ibid.*, p. 194.

Clearly there is no fundamental difference between Murry's and Walker's explanations, though Walker, in his introduction, gives the impression that he is going to advance a new theory of the time process in *Macbeth*: "How much I agree with this judgment [Murry's] the following pages show, but Murry does not observe the resumption of what he calls 'human time' (it is essentially superhuman time) in the final scene, expressed by the flood of daylight and summed in Macduff's words: 'The time is free'" (8).

Walker's veiled attack, in the form of a reservation and an unqualified objection, is pointless, for Murry's concentration is on the question of time in the *Macbeth*-world, not after that. So, whether after *Macbeth*'s death time is free or not, is not Murry's main contention, the title of his article being "The Time Has Been", not the time will be. Moreover, Walker's rejection of Murry's "human time", by alleging that "it is essentially superhuman time", is a grave misunderstanding of Murry's point of view. By writing about "human time", Murry is referring to the time process before the murder of Duncan, for, Murry asserts, the selfsame moment Duncan's blood is shed " 'the blessed time' is gone, an accursed time is come. And what an accursed Time may be, we glimpse in the speech: 'She should have died hereafter'. The blessed time does not appear very blessed to us — a time 'that when the brains were out, the man would die,' a time when *Macbeth*'s senses 'would have cool'd to hear a night-shriek'. Nevertheless, that time was human [*Italics mine*]" (*Shakespeare*, p. 336). To agree with Roy Walker that the time was superhuman, is to take the risk of accepting a critical absurdity.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. IX, n.

To round up Murry's argument, one must stress the fact that the protagonist and his wife have been destroyed by a discrepancy between what they are and what they, after the murder, have subsequently become. They have overthrown order and broken harmony in the natural order of society ; the coherence of life has been desecrated. By trying desperately to grasp the "future in the instant", they have murdered the symbol of a divine order, thus murdering sleep, dislocating time, and taking the plunge into the timeless world of metaphysical horror. Their desperate attempt to hold the self and not-self together — what they have been and what they have become — is absolutely futile, for it demands a more-than-human effort. Under such a terrifying burden the cords of their existence snap and finally their life cracks and collapses. Time which has been violated, but never successfully mocked, takes revenge. The queen, mercilessly attacked by the "great instant" which has sunk into the subconscious to emerge every now and then driving her mad, commits suicide. Macbeth, in his terrifying attempt to disjoint the frame of things and make "both worlds suffer" in order to escape the fear of the moment, is fully annihilated by the fatal stroke of the grace of Grace, represented by Macduff and embodied in his final words : "The time is free".



KING LEAR

APPROACHING the tragedy of *King Lear* the discrepancy appears, not between Lear's action and his character, but between Murry's theory and practice, for he does not follow the same line pursued in his dealing with *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. He disregards his theory and takes a tremendous plunge into the arena of anti-Shakespearean criticism. *King Lear*, Murry puts it bluntly, is not a great tragedy in the sense that *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* are great ; it does not belong to the same order and it does not possess the same grandeur or magnitude. It is the work, Murry persistently insists, of a weary man who is psychologically obsessed and poetically out of his depth, which consequently and inevitably leads to perfunctoriness and artificiality — two prominent defects obvious throughout the whole work. Nevertheless, Murry asserts, in its own kind, *King Lear* is a masterpiece, though "it is its kind which seems to me lacking in the supreme Shakespearian qualities of spontaneity and naturalness" (Shakespeare, p. 343). To do it justice, *King Lear* must not be placed with the three great tragedies, but with the lower order of *Timon of Athens*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Titus Andronicus*, for it is only among these plays that its grandeur becomes manifest.

Murry declares quite candidly that he is a "heretic" in so far as *King Lear* is concerned. He will not allow himself to be overwhelmed or overawed by the tags used by the devout admirers about the sublimity and the titanic grandeur of the play. It is

not all that ; it is rather "the work of a Shakespeare who is out of his depth. He does not really know what he wants to say ; perhaps he does not really know whether he wants to say anything" (Shakespeare, p. 338). This is not because the theme is inferior to or less exciting than any of the themes of the other Shakespearian tragedies ; on the contrary it is more "tremendous", for, as Murry puts it, it is "the death of the Self and the birth of Divine Love" on the way to self-knowledge which is achieved through "absolute isolation" and through madness to the extent that Lear becomes "the thing itself".

Such a theme, if properly tackled and rightly approached would produce a most powerful effect on both readers and spectators. But Shakespeare, according to Murry, failed in handling his subject and manipulating his material. He was, says Murry, "if not perfunctory, uncertain. I could almost believe that Shakespeare was on the verge of madness himself when he wrote King Lear, and perhaps . . . I should put King Lear and ~~Timon~~ and Troilus together as the evidence of a period of uncontrollable despair, lit by gleams of illumination. I mean a period different, in essential nature, from what is generally called the 'tragic period'. Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth are tragedies ; but they are evidence of entire imaginative mastery in their author. That which is creative is creating itself undisturbed in them. But in King Lear, I find disturbance, hesitation, uncertainty, and a constant interruption of the 'predominant passion'. The major and the minor intensities are continually flagging. The imagination of the theme becomes perfunctory or strained, the imagination of the verse spasmodic. There is weariness, and a flagging of the intention" (Shakespeare, p. 338). The process which has led, or misled, Murry to these conclusions is worth exploring.

Self-knowledge, through unbearable suffering, is the main theme of *King Lear*. Still, Shakespeare did not succeed in the working out of his conception. The play, as G. Wilson Knight says, is based on an absurdity. A tottering old man, the chosen hero, decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters, in order to get rid of the burden of responsibility and lead a care-free life. But all this depends on a strange and demanding request : they have to undergo the ordeal of a love test, proclaiming their devotion for the old monarch ; the warmer the declaration is, the greater the share will be :

Know that we have
divided
In three our kingdom ; and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age,
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death

....

Tell me, my
daughters,
(Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state)
Which of you shall we say doth love us most ?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge.

(I/1/37 - 53)

From the start the absurdity is apparent — it reaches the verge of the grotesque. If Lear is serious — and one does not hesitate to say he is — the division of the kingdom and the giving away of power must be achieved in a ritualistic atmosphere of thanks-giving and love “acclamations”. Childish and

sentimental, it may be said, yet — one may retort — natural to the common feelings of man. But Lear is not any man. He is a king, and has been a mighty one. So the slightest mistake in his calculation is fatal, and the least of his errors is catastrophic. And he does err.

The two elder daughters, being false and corrupt, succeed in flattering their father's vanity with unfelt love protestations which he unhesitatingly gulps. He does not understand, nor does he care to understand, the true nature of the three sisters. Consequently, the honey-dipped flattery of the elder daughters finds its way quite easily to his heart ; he blindly believes in its truth and sincerity. That is why his disappointment and frustration are tremendous when he listens to the simple truth emanating from the breast of the third daughter, Cordelia, his most beloved :

Lear. : Now, our joy,
Although our last, and least ; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest'd ; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters ? Speak.

Cor. : Nothing, my lord.

Lear. : Nothing ?

Cor. : Nothing.

Lear. : Nothing will come out of nothing : speak again.

(I/1/82 - 90)

She will say no more than the truth of what she feels, to which the old king reacts with : "thy truth then be thy dower". Not being a hypocrite or a braggart, she will love and be silent. She is unable to heave her deep emotion to her tongue, neither

will she condescend to take part in a despicable contest to win a piece of land.

Being herself proud, Cordelia will not satisfy her father's arrogant pride and morbid egoism. There is, says Coleridge, "something of disgust at the ruthless hypocrisy of her sisters, and some little faulty admixture of pride and sullenness in Cordelia's 'Nothing'" (1). Furiously and blindly, without giving himself a moment of consideration, the old king shoots his arrow into the heart of his dearest — she will have nothing, for, according to his simple logic, nothing will come of nothing :

Lear. : Cornwall and Albany,
With my two daughters' dowers digest the third ;
I do invest you jointly with my power,
Pre-eminence, and all the large effects
That troop with majesty.

(I/1/27 - 32)

Rashly and unknowingly, he has given all to those who deserve nothing. Hence springs the tragedy of King Lear.

Here, one cannot help repeating the puzzled questions of Alfred Harbage : "Why should that patriarch who wishes to yield his power and possessions require of the receivers declarations of love ? Why should that maiden who honestly loves him responds only with declarations of her love of honesty ?" Unanswerable questions, or at least questions that cannot be answered logically. Still, a very naive answer can be advanced : the drama demanded it, and Shakespeare followed the drama. That is why

(1) S.T. Coleridge, *Notes and Lectures* (Liverpool, Edward Howell, 1881), p. 192.

Murry regards the play as no more than an artefact, a perfunctory work done at a moment of uncertainty and tiredness. With such a verdict Harbage concurs when he declares that there is no logical reason to account for what is taking place in the first scene of the play ; yet "ritual is ritual ~~is~~ ritual, its logic its own. Prose is yielding to poetry, 'realism' to reality. King Lear is not true" (2).

Lear's tragedy is the outcome of his rash judgment, or to be more accurate, of his rash misjudgment. Cordelia is to leave for France "without our grace, our love, our benison" ; Kent, the most faithful and most courageous of his followers, is to be banished because he tries to make the old king "see" ; and Lear is to be left at the mercy of the merciless Goneril and Regan. That is how the torture of Lear begins. Diabolical in their thought and inhuman in their action, the two daughters drive their old father out to face the devastating storm, fight the elements, lose his wits, and find himself eternally bound to "the wheel of fire". And with the crushing agony of Lear, his education begins, and through the fire of his suffering he is purified, thus achieving the salvation of his soul.

Murry believes that Lear's madness is consciously represented as a "process". Lear is aware, being maltreated by Goneril and rejected by Regan, that something within him is giving way. The ruthless "savagery" of the two daughters is absolutely beyond his expectation ; it strikes him as if it were a thunderbolt, stunning and destructive. He realizes suddenly that he has been

(2) Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 113.

stabbed by those who have sucked the sap of his life. Awakened by the tremendous shock, he sees the reality of what he is : a poor, tottering old man who has once been a mighty monarch. Under the burden of such a realization, he begins to collapse :

Lear : You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need !
You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,
As full of grief as age ; wretched in both !
If it be you that stirs these daughters hearts
Against their father, fool me not so much
To bear it tamely ; touch me with noble anger,
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,
Stain man's cheeks ! No, you unnatural hags,
I will have such revenges on you both
That all the world shall — I will do such things,
What they are, yet I know not, but they shall be
The terrors of the earth. You think I'll weep ;
No, I'll will not weep :
I have full cause of weeping [Storm heard at a
distance] but this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O Fool ! I shall go mad.

(2/4/73 - 88)

And it does come true. On the heath, under torrents of rain and flashes of thunder, rapped by nothing but the piercing wind, Lear's "wits begin to turn". He will not listen to Kent's entreaties to enter the hovel ; the tempest all around him is not as destructive as the tempest within him ; physical pain, to Lear, is a mere trifle if compared to mental agony, for inevitably "that way madness lies".

Lear. : Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm
Invades us to the skin : so 'tis to thee ;

But where the greater malady is fix'd,
The lesser is scarce felt.

.....

 this tempest in my mind
Doth from my senses take all feeling else
Save what beats there — filial ingratitude !
Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
For lifting food to't ? But I will punish home :
No, I will weep no more. In such a night
To shut me out ? Pour on ; I will endure.
In such a night as this ? O Regan, Goneril !
Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave
all, —
O ! that way madness lies.

(3/4/6 - 21)

Edgar's appearance as Tom o'Bedlam, and his first encounter with his king, prove that Lear has become thoroughly mad. He takes Edgar for a philosopher, a "learned Theban", a "good Athenian", asks him about the cause of thunder, begs for a word "in private", and insists on keeping "still with my philosopher".

What is surprising is that simultaneously with the process of suffering which leads to madness, there is another process towards knowledge and wisdom. Murry believes that through suffering Lear learns his lesson ; the purification of Lear's soul springs from his mental agony. With the first lash of the fateful whip, he takes an unusual plunge into his inner self and faces those around him with the unexpected question : "Who am I ?" Oswald gives him the blunt answer : "My Lady's father", the Fool provides a different one : "Lear's shadow". Significantly enough, he awakens to face facts ; he begins to "see" that the

mighty Lear is no more than a relic of the past, a has-been who exists no more as an unquestioned authority in the world of men, nor in the world of women either. His nakedness becomes gradually transparent, and his helpless impotence forces him to look into himself and realize that his life has been a fraud, a lie :

They

flattered me like a dog, and told me I had the white
hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there.

.... ..

Go

to, they are not men o'their words : they told
me I was every thing ; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-
proof.

(4/6/97 - 106)

That is true. Lear is not "ague-proof" ; he is as vulnerable as a broken-winged hawk. And in his bewilderment he learns too much, too late. He sees what he has never seen before :

Poor naked wretches, where so'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these ? O ! I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp ;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the Heavens more just.

(3/4/28 - 36)

This is not the Lear of the beginning of the play, the majestic autocrat who divides a kingdom, creates monarchs, and stands as a colossal demi-god towering above all : "Of all these bounds . . .

we make thee lady", "To thee and thine, hereditary ever/Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom", "Come not between the dragon and his wrath", "Hence and avoid my sight!", "I invest you jointly with my power", "Away! by Jupiter,/This shall not be revok'd", "Better thou/Hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better". The sense of absolute power gradually fades away with the monarch, to be replaced by the sensations of a purified soul. Through agony and madness, Lear becomes a different man who declares that "None does offend, none, I say, none", and who — asking for pardon — at last admits :

I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less ;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.

(4/7/60 - 64)

The more awareness of what he now is, is supremely revealing. The moment of realization becomes the moment of illumination : by accepting his suffering, Lear creates his own kingdom within the realm of a selfless spirit. On the wheel of fire, he becomes a king — every inch a king. But he pays the price, and the price is all he has, for his newly created kingdom belongs not to this world, but to the world to come. Lear's final innocence, according to Murry, "is not that of a man who has experienced a spiritual revolution through suffering, but that of one who has suffered too much as well. That his final innocence is terrible and wonderful when it comes is beyond dispute" (Shakespeare, p. 347).

What Murry disputes is Shakespeare's presentation of madness. He feels that the presentation of madness in Lear is unnatural ; it does not reach the great and splendid heights of

jealousy in Othello, or "hesitation in Hamlet, or guilt in Macbeth"; it does not belong to the same order of poetic genius, for it lacks the genuine Shakespearian spontaneity. What is creative is not creating itself: "Lear's 'madness' — including in it his desperate sanity as well — is splendidly worked out; but it is worked out. It may, for ought I know, mark the limit of what is possible in this direction. But that would merely show that there is a great difference between the limit of what is possible in a certain direction, and what Shakespeare achieved in certain other directions. I refuse to be overawed by epithets. King Lear may be 'sublime' and 'titanic'; and, if those adjectives are used to imply that there is a difference in kind between King Lear and the other tragedies, I am willing to submit to them. But the adjective I should choose to convey and define that impression would be less ambiguous; it would suggest that Shakespeare, in being 'titanic', was being unnatural" (Shakespeare, p. 348).

That the mad-scenes have a touch of the grotesque and the improbable is by now a critical commonplace. G. Wilson Knight in his essay on "King Lear and the comedy of the grotesque", deals elaborately with the point. The mock trial which Lear sets for his daughters in "ridiculous"; it stresses the fact that the whole play is based on "indignity and incongruity". Lear's madness, being tackled in such an unnatural way, comes to "something nearer the ridiculous than the terrible, something which moves our pity, but does not strike awe" (*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 168). The same view is advanced by Alfred Harbage when he asserts that "there is even a Gothic element of the Grotesque, as when a mock-beggar, jester, and king, reduced to common condition, hold their mad juridical proceeding in a storm-lashed hovel, or when crazed king and blinded subject exchange lamenta-

tions and puns !” (3). The reasoning of the mad king is strange and the answers of Edgar are bewilderingly stranger :

Lear. : Now all the plagues that in the pendulous air
Hang fated o’er men’s faults light on thy daughters !

Kent. : He has no daughters, Sir.

Lear. : Death traitor ! nothing could have subdu’d nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
It is the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh ?
Judicious punishment ! ’twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters.

Edg. : Pillicock sat on Pillicock hill :
Alow, alow loo, loo !

Fool. : This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen

Edg. : Take heed o’th’ foul fiend. Obey thy parents ;
Keep thy word’s justice ; swear not ; commit not
with man’s sworn spouse ; set not thy sweet heart
on proud array. Tom’s a-cold.

(3/4/70 - 83)

It is quite apparent that Shakespeare is forcing his imagination to work out the scene, simply because, as Murry says, the whole experience of madness was beyond the scope of his imaginative power. It is lacking in intensity, and instead of arousing the required feeling of awe and pity, it evokes smiles, if not laughter. The poetic spontaneity, which is one of the main characteristics of Shakespeare’s genius, seems at the end of its tether, uncertain, exhausted and even lost. As L.C. Knights states, in

(3) Alfred Harbage, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

his Further Explorations, the whole essence of **King Lear** is natural, but it is not presented naturalistically. There is no need, says Knights, "to do more than remind you of how far, in **King Lear**, Shakespeare is from concerning himself with naturalistic illusion. Not only are there bold improbabilities (the parallel plots, Edgar's disguises, Dover cliff, etc...), there is an almost complete rejection of verisimilitude in the portrayal of the characters and their setting, of anything that might seem to keep us in close touch with a familiar — or at all events an actual — world" (p. 174).

This, according to Murry, is mainly due to the fact that Shakespeare wrote the play more or less in the spirit of a "professional", at a time when he himself was psychologically obsessed : "I could almost believe that Shakespeare was on the verge of madness himself when he wrote **King Lear**" (Shakespeare, p. 338). But to be on the verge of madness does not necessarily mean that the writer will be a supreme creator in handling a theme dealing with madness ; the identification may be impossible : "To identify oneself completely with a character in the process of going mad is perhaps inherently impossible". That is why Shakespeare's vision seems to be under a cloud. **King Lear**, Murry feels, gives one the impression of a Shakespeare who is tired, divided, hesitant, and uncertain, "a Shakespeare who is out of his depth".

In sum, Murry believes that **King Lear** cannot stand up to the profundity and splendour of the other three great tragedies ; it is artifact, a tour de force which proves no magnanimity and creates no supremacy in the realm of art. The incessant question is : Why did Shakespeare, being no humbug, choose such a theme which proved to be outside the range of his poetic depth and intuitive spontaneity ? Murry's answer is suggestive, though not

definite : "Perhaps the necessity of novelty, of striking out in a new direction, of presenting the public with a new sensation, pressed harder upon Shakespeare than we willingly conceive. Hitherto, his novelties had been of a kind which enabled his imagination to function freely ; but **King Lear** obstinately remained in the condition of a **tour de force**. That he took great pains with it in the beginning, the story of its construction is evidence ; perhaps he took great pains with it throughout. But great pains is not enough" (Shakespeare, p. 349).

Murry's fault, as Kenneth Muir suggests, seems to be based on the assumption that Shakespeare lived the parts he created and he would not believe that Shakespeare could have undergone the intolerable sufferings of **King Lear** ; that is why he thinks that the identification between the creator and the created character was beyond the frontiers of what is convincingly possible.

One does not find it preposterous to support Muir's point of view. Murry's treatment of the play, if one is not mistaken is neither thorough nor satisfactory. He neglects the play as a whole and concentrates on a scene or two so as to drive his attack home, forcibly and vehemently. However, one does not feel it appropriate here to elaborate and dispute the point with Murry proving that the play, regardless of its glaring defects, has moments of unsurpassed splendour and unique power. It is enough, for a conclusion, to quote few lines from Murry's very short reconsideration of **King Lear**, in which he admits that it was he, not Shakespeare, that was out of his depth when dealing with the play : "I feel that, however honest, it was preposterous in me to say that Shakespeare was out of his depth, when the evidence stares me in the face that I was out of mine. There is not a little evidence in the construction or the verse to suggest that Shakespeare was not saying in **King Lear** precisely what he wanted to say" (preface to the new edition of **Shakespeare**. 1955, p. xviii).

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