

**CONCEPTUAL AND STRUCTURAL DETERMINANTS OF
SHAKESPEARE'S
DRAMATIC EVOLUTION -PART II-**

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By the time of his great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, Shakespeare's attitude towards life becomes more complex and closer to the reality of the mind. Whereas in his earlier years he depicts the reality of the senses¹, in his middle years the external world is of interest to him only when reflected in the mirror of his characters' mind². While before the eye delighted in the magic of the physical world, now the eye is shut recalling of reality only its impression upon the individual's organs³.

The form for its representation which before was restricted to sensory perception now is broadened to include the register of memory. But memory is not only preservative and chronological. Emotional and other factors modify it so that its products can become quite changed from what they were

1 See by the same author and the same title, Part I, in Revista de Literaturas Modernas, N° 20

2 S. T. COLERIDGE. Shakespearean Criticism, in the edition of T. M. Raysor, Vol. 2. London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd. 1961. p. 150

3 Ibid.

when registered⁴. Evidence is unconsciously selected and distorted⁵.

The dramatic relevance of an emphasis on mind and memory is that the reality depicted now is mostly internal situations and it is specific to a certain individual. There is a retiring from reality and a retreat into the isolated darkness of a single mind⁶. The passions and impulses that shaped man's life before are now often embodied in visions, imaginary terrors, nightmares, or supernatural beings, which are the "shadows of the human mind"⁷. Goddard reminds us that representations of the underworld or the supernatural are attempts to represent the psychic as distinguished from the physical world⁸.

Now the springs of conduct are to be sought in "the dim recesses of the human mind"⁹ "free of urgent stimulation from the outside"¹⁰. He does not act according to circumstance but in "response to tenuous or emotionally charged images as well as consciously willed purpose"¹¹. The hero carries the seeds of his own future within his self.

The result is that action is often at a remove. The drift of it follows only tardily upon the movement of the spirit, its

4 Edward A. ARMSTRONG, Shakespeare's Imagination. University of Nebraska Press, 1963. p. 124

5 See the Introduction to Elizabethan Drama edited by Leonard DEAN, Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1964. p. 9

6 G. K. HUNTER "Shakespeare's Last Tragic Heroes". In Robert B. HEILMAN's Shakespeare: The Tragedies. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc. pp. 203-217

7 Walter RALEIGH, Shakespeare. London, Macmillan, 1961. p. 159

8 Harold C. GODDARD, The Meaning of Shakespeare. The University of Chicago Press, 1960. p. 112

9 H. B. CHARLTON, Shakespearean Tragedy. Cambridge; At the University Press, 1948. p. 218

10 Michael GOLDMAN, Acting and Action in Shakespearean Tragedy. Princeton University Press, 1965. p. 35

11 Francis FERGUSSON, "Macbeth as the Imitation of an Action" in Alfred HARBAGE'S, Shakespeare: the Tragedies. Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1964. p. 105

intentions and feelings, which cause the action¹². Its nature is unsettling. There is no connection between the character and the deed. The character, who in the earlier plays changes as a result of the play's action, now changes in response to inside forces¹³: the inward stirrings of the protagonist, the promptings which precede the action, and his reaction to it as it is being performed¹⁴.

In *The Tragedy of Hamlet* it becomes apparent at a very early stage that the main emphasis is not on the outer course of events but on the inner drama of the titular character. Granville-Barker¹⁵ points out that Shakespeare's objective is "to keep the secret instabilities" of Hamlet's mind the "effective center of the action". To this effect he includes the "exceptional number" of "seven soliloquies by which we are brought into unimpeded contact with his mind."

Hamlet's vision of reality is unequalled among his peers. It is darkened by his "nighted colour", the discordant note amid the brilliance and warmth of the Court. His eye does not "look like a friend on Denmark". It is a reflection of the melancholy in his mind. Deprived of the gloss of the golden past the world now displays all its vile nudity:

.....'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in
nature
Possess it merely...

His memories cling fast to him. Reality is sacrificed to the image of beauty he holds of his loving father and his devoted queen. Through the eye of his mind Claudius reaches him in the shape of a Satyr and sitting next to him the figure of a slut.

12 GOLDMAN. Op. Cit. p. 20

13 Susan SNYDER. De Comic Matrix of Shakespeare's Tragedies. Princeton University Press. 1979.

14 CHARLTON. Op. Cit. p. 158

15 Harley GRANVILLE-BARKER. Prefaces to Shakespeare: Hamlet. London. B. T. Batsford, 1971. p. 53

All the springs of life which used to flow in boundless supply, love, laughter, joy, hope, and faith are becoming dry¹⁶. Love dries up and the celestial Ophelia changes into the coarse Ophelia of IV, v, whose madness becomes the "mirror in which the vileness is reflected and dilated"¹⁷. Laughter with his excellent childhood friends turns into the wry grin of death when Hamlet sends them to it "Not shriving-time allow'd." The wise old Polonius is made to shrink into a tedious fool with "a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams". He is bundled off to fatten maggots with as little fuss as in the killing of a rat. The tragic sadness of it all is that the world is made to conform to its image in Hamlet's mind. This results in the sinister control that a human being can exercise over persons to change realities, which in the early plays was always put to comic uses¹⁸.

The ghost of the late king Hamlet reveals to the prince a tale of perfidy and lust. His brother Claudius murdered him in his sleep to dispossess him of his crown and his queen. His tale accords well with Hamlet's innermost thoughts. "O my prophetic soul", groans the youth. The ghost echoes the feeling he has felt all along to be the truth. It consolidates his decision to right the disjointed times. "My tables, -meet it is I set it down" is Hamlet's vow" to make his memory a blank of all maxims and generalized truths that observation had copied there"¹⁹. He vows to live by the horrified memory of his mother's incestuous marriage and the "damned" villainy of his goatish uncle. Thus memory serves as the backdrop to the action.

Action now is free of external stimuli. It is the result of an inner movement of the spirit²⁰. In fact, Hamlet does not

16 Caroline SPURGEON. Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells us. Boston, Beacon Hill, 1935. p. 318

17 Harley GRANVILLE-BARKER. Prefaces to Shakespeare: King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra. London: T. B. Batsford, 1970. p. 42-43, note 18

18 SNYDER. Op. Cit.

19 COLERIDGE. Op. cit. p. 23

20 GOLDMAN. Op. cit. p. 27

act according to circumstance. His motives are baffling and enigmatic. His decision to simulate madness after his encounter with the ghost is a case in point. It will prove as futile as Macbeth's pursuit of his idea of the crown, and it will spread death like a plague²¹. The staging of the "Murder of Gonzago" to entrap the king's soul exemplifies wilful manipulation with sinister results. It leads to Claudius' abortive effort to have Hamlet put out of the way, to the death of Hamlet's friends, to Ophelia's muddy end, and to Laertes' lapse into villainy.

His conduct towards Ophelia, his childhood friends, and his mother is in response to images in his mind of the world filtered through his melancholy: former delight turned to present anguish, in the nunnery scene, to despondency, in the recorder scene, to sexual innuendo, in the closet scene. In all of them melancholy is juxtaposed to nervous excitement and demonstrativeness²². The end is lunacy. In fact, all have to chase after Hamlet through the darkened castle, when he suddenly turns and runs, an obvious lunatic.

Instead of memory-driven actions the slaying of Polonius, Hamlet's wild talk of his love for Ophelia in the graveyard, and the stabbing of Claudius, seem authentic lapses in rationality, impulsive reflex actions after the fashion of the earlier plays. In fact, compulsive behavior may be a clue to the "earliness" of *Hamlet* when compared to the other great tragedies. Other signs may also be detected: the absence of a set purpose which accounts for the looseness of *Hamlet's* structure where "everything is left for time and circumstance to unfold"²³, Coleridge's observation that in it mere accidents, independent of all will, form an essential part of the plot²⁴; a certain amount of growth in the hero as the result of the

21 Mark VAN DOREN. Shakespeare. New York. Henry Holt and Co.. 1938.

22 Elmer Edgar STOLL. Art and Artifice in Shakespeare. New York. Barnes and Noble. 1963. p. 108

23 William HAZLITT. Characters of Shakespeare's Plays. London. J. M. Dent and Sons. 1957. p. 233

24 COLERIDGE. Op. cit. p. 32

play's action and not in response to stimuli from inside²⁵; and the kind of imagery included²⁶.

The dramatic implication of freeing action from external stimuli is that its drift is often removed from the intentions and feelings which cause it. There is a terrible gap between thought and desire and performance. While in the earlier plays heart, head and hand were at one, now they are out of unison. Spencer notes that the will is infinite whereas the execution is confined²⁷. Claudius at prayer is a case in point. Unable to direct his thoughts to heaven the king rises and says:

"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

A certain disproportion between discourse and occasion may be detected in Hamlet's "Words, words, words" when he teases the old Polonius. Words have lost the gloss with which they were made to shine in the earlier plays: "all's golden words are spent" is Horatio's comment in the presence of Osric. This helps understand the hero's "acting". In fact, Hamlet consciously strives to suit the action to the word or feeling. Finally there is no connection between the character and the deed. Hamlet says he has that within himself which cannot be unfolded in action. And that which can be unfolded in action disagrees with "the expectancy and rose of the fair state".

In *The Tragedy of Othello* the external action of the Turkish threat and the storm at sea serve as background dramatizations of the main plot strand, the inner drama of the titular character. This is the descent of his soul to the level of the brute. In fact, originally a man of truly heroic stature with the superior strength both of spirit and body of a vanished ideal, Othello is gradually but unrelentlessly stripped of ideals

25 Theodore SPENCER. Shakespeare and the Nature of Man. New York. Macmillan. 1981. p. 108

26 Wolfgang CLEMEN. The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery. London, Methuen. 1977. p. 108-109.

27 SPENCER. Op. cit. p. 118

first and of human dignity then. Once his imagination is perverted its "enormous dimensions and power"²⁸ beget monstrous notions and horrible fancies. The angelic Desdemona is seen as a whore in a brothel, "himself among her purchasers"²⁹. His soul wallows in filth and vileness, his body wriggles in epileptic fits.

Differently from Hamlet, whose view of humanity and the world is already jaundiced when we first see him, Othello's undergoes a process of deterioration. At first a reflection of the perfection of his soul, it shines with the glitter of distant ideals. Then a projection of his defiling mind, it mirrors those half truths of which he holds secret knowledge³⁰. He is black, unpolished in speech and manners, already aging. The equipoise of his personality is a hard won one and one which he will be hard pressed to retain. There was a time when chaos ruled supreme, and chaos will come again when Desdemona, the fountain from where the current of his life flows changes from his fantasy of woman to "the actual woman of natural varying impulse"³¹. Othello's blissful vision of reality will go wry when he is made to see and hear what he actually fears to see and hear. Jago works on matter which is already in Othello's mind³²:

"I told him what I thought, and told no more
Than what he found himself was apt and true."

The core of the action in *Othello*, the estrangement of the Moor from his wholly oblivious wife, and her death, are totally divorced from circumstance. The past weighs too

28 CLEMEN. Op. cit. p. 125

29 Harley GRANVILLE-BARKER. Prefaces of Shakespeare: Othello, Love's Labour's Lost. London. B. T. Batsford, 1971. p. 119

30 Maud BODKIN. "The Hero and the Devil" in Lawrence LERNER's Shakespeare's Tragedies. Middlesex, Penguin, 1963. p. 104

31 BODKIN. Op. cit. p. 103

32 GRANVILLE-BARKER. Op. cit. p. 107

heavily on Othello³³. His rootedness in it³⁴ is evidenced by his constant references to his glorious past of fighting and regal origins. His barbarian nature is only too close to the surface³⁵. Jago, a busier and more sinister counterpart of the witches in *Macbeth* succeeds because Othello is ready to listen to him. Similarly with the ghost in *Hamlet*, Jago echoes his innermost thoughts and strengthens his fatal decision. The end is the murder of Desdemona and then suicide.

The nature of the action in *Othello* is unsettling. There is no correspondence between the enormity of the thought, the yearning of the heart, and the aberration of the deed in the Moor. There is correspondence between mind, heart and hand in Desdemona, but it is suicidal in her. There is in Jago, too, but with a demonic effect.

The Tragedy of Macbeth follows closely upon the path trodden by previous tragedies. Inner drama is more important than the outer course of events. The external world of turmoil, treachery, and terror of the second scene serves as violent anticipation to our entry into the inner world of greater tumult, horror, and cruelty of Macbeth and his lady. The effect is totally uncanny.

The main theme is the dehumanizing process to which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth lend themselves after the temptation to take the short way to the throne. The perilous journey towards unknown regions of the spirit starts early for Lady Macbeth. In fact, it begins the very first scene we see her when she addresses the murderous spirits of darkness that tend on mortal thoughts to unsex her turning her into another of the asexual witches. Physically the stronger of the pair she early steels herself into the ruthlessness to wade their bloody way to the throne and to fight the qualms she knows her husband has about it. But the first crack appears soon when her feinting becomes fainting³⁶ when Macbeth goes

33 Mark VAN DOREN. Op. cit. p. 203

34 Rolf SOELLNER. Shakespeare's Patterns of Self-Knowledge. Ohio State University Press, 1972. p. 274

35 Mark VAN DOREN. Op. cit. p. 202

36 GODDARD. Op. cit. p. 121

beyond her in slaying the grooms to Duncan's chamber. Short spurts of weary action will follow after the fashion of a puppet with little winding. The end is a diseased mind in a weak body walking in her sleep and reliving the horrors of their crimes. Then suicide.

Macbeth spiritually the weaker of the two at the beginning; grows in physical strength as he hardens in crime. Driven by guilt to further guilt he grows into an unfeeling monster who life leaves "like a peeled onion, all exfoliated and no center"³⁷, leading him to the "nadaism" of the Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow speech³⁸.

Macbeth's universe of superior strength and daring, undisputed loyalty to king and friend, and total love committal, changes into the universe of night's predominance:

"... Stars, hide of fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires..."

"... Come, seeling Night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day..."

when his vaguely guilty ambition is consolidated by the unlooked for prophesies of the witches. Their "knowledge fits in with Macbeth's repeated imaginative experience of what he hoped might be"³⁹. Nothing is real any longer to him except his thoughts. Reality is made to match them. Macbeth sees what he desires and hears what echoes his thoughts. On his way to send Duncan to his death he gazes at an imaginary dagger guiding him to the king's room. After the murder of Duncan there is a knocking at the south entry which startles Macbeth "with tragic imagination". In the knocking he hears "all the powers of hell and heaven knocking simultaneously at his

37 GOLDMAN. Op.cit. p. 45

38 Robert B. HEILMAN. "The Criminal as Tragic Hero: Dramatic Methods". Sh S 10. 1966, p. 12.

39 CHARLTON. Op. cit. p. 182.

heart". Lady Macbeth hears it only with her senses⁴⁰.

On his way back from Duncan's chamber he hears a voice proclaiming that he who has murdered the sleeping Duncan has also murdered sleep -the chief nourisher in life's feast- and will sleep no more. Fears and scruples shake the royal couple. Their efforts at reaching some assurance binds them into further fears and doubts. Macbeth's comment on the natural nobility of Banquo recalls the daily beauty of Cassio which arouses Jago's desire to deface it. Macbeth is similarly aroused. He is made to feel at a disadvantage and distorts reality:

.....He chid the sisters
When first they put the name of king upon me...

He sees the gost of Banquo, a vision which like the air-drawn dragger, is the very painting of his fear. In her sleep-walking Lady Macbeth is racked by her memories which cling fast to her until her death. Her fears and torments and Macbeth's scorpions represent the haunting of the present by the past. Macbeth's "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" speech portray the aridity, emptiness and meaninglessness of his new vision.

Deep-seated memories of unexpressed possibilities are clearly the mainspring of the action in *Macbeth*. Both Banquo and Macbeth are introduced into comparable situations: both of equal triumphant personal success, both objects of the king's loving trust, both unwitting foci of the witches' prophesies. Yet Macbeth flinches at their words as one whose secret thoughts have been surprised. His ambition is newly whetted and things forgotten come back to his excited brain. Banquo instead addresses them with the curiosity and serenity of someone beyond their reach. Thus memory encourages the unfolding into action of Macbeth's cursed thoughts. It strikes to thwart purpose in Lady Macbeth. Waiting for her husband to come back from Duncan's chamber she fearfully admits: "Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done't."

Differently from his tragic predecessors the corruption

40 GODDARD. Op. cit. p. 119-20.

in Lear's world is not of his own making. In fact, he is a man more sinned against than sinning. A similar case obtains with the tragic end of those around him. Lear's spiritual journey is the search of a sensitive response to the motives, weaknesses and yearnings of humanity. His inner struggle is "to absorb the assumptions of the world he lives in and transmute them into something meaningful"⁴¹. Differently from Hamlet, Othello, and Macbeth, Lear's mind is a point of "refuge and new growth". His retreat into his mind is not a descent into fiendish regions but "into the seedbed of a new life"⁴². Similarly with madness. Madness in Lear is not a defence against the cruelty of the world but "an abnormally sensitive realization" of it⁴³. In effect, in madness Lear penetrates to the true nature of things. His most enduring experience about humanity is met in his madness triggered by the appearance of Poor Tom, "the embodiment of naked poverty and fearful madness"⁴⁴. Stripped of his kingliness, then of his human dignity and finally of his sanity, Lear descends all the rungs down to the beast. Beneath the sophistication one is met only by naked vileness.

Lear's inner drama includes the growing nightmare that the world and he are not what he thought they were. It is not the world of absolute power and devotion he knew but a world of intransigent nature, Kent's "the rack of this tough world". It is not the world of feeling and affection represented by Cordelia and Kent, but the "sullen, rancorous", and malign world of Regan and Goneril⁴⁵, of the faithlessness and self-advantage of Edmund. Luckily this world does not win in the end. Lear's does, although Cordelia is snatched from him for ever.

It becomes clear that "Lear's conduct is the result of

⁴¹ HUNTER. Op. cit. p. 209.

⁴² Ibid. p. 203-204.

⁴³ DEAN. Op. cit. p. 17.

⁴⁴ Kenneth MUIR. "Madness in King Lear". Sh S. 13. p. 35.

⁴⁵ HAZLITT. Op. cit. p. 258.

those elements which are deep within his nature and not of circumstance"⁴⁶. His very first act answers a "childish scheme to gratify his love of absolute power and his hunger for assurances of devotion"⁴⁷. He believes in his daughters' love avowal and is enraged by Cordelia's refusal to comply because "the images he has created of his three daughters' love are quite false"⁴⁸. Regan and Goneril's protestations of love are mere verbalisms which they are able to mouth whenever it is expedient. Cordelia's refusal is interpreted as grievous wrong done to his majesty. Lear's mistake is to equate the word to the person and feeling. It is as ominous in his case as it was in the case of Desdemona. Neither Cordelia nor Desdemona's love can be evaluated rationally. Their evaluation can only be instinctual.

Cordelia is sacrificed to Lear's ideal of love and authority. Rejected, deprived of love, dignity, and country, she remains a living presence throughout the action. She appears briefly at the beginning before her banishment, and briefly at the end before her death. Yet her memory serves as backdrop to the action. She is constantly in Lear, the Fool, and Kent's mind:

"...O most small fault..."

"...I did her wrong...."

are Lear's laments. She is the embodiment of those values foolishly violated and momentarily denied that must be refund and reaffirmed. She like Duncan and the late king Hamlet serve as the standard whereby degrees of worthlessness in other characters may be measured.

King Lear will be subjected to an assault to his human dignity similar to that inflicted upon Cordelia. In his world where he has denied all feeling and affection, he will soon begin

46 CHARLTON. *Op. cit.* p. 198

47 A. C. BRADLEY. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. A Premier Book. 1965. p. 205

48 G. Wilson KNIGHT. "King Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque" in HARBAGE'S. *Op. cit.* p. 124

"to learn what it means to have false values turned against oneself"⁴⁹. First he is stripped of his authority, kingliness, and dignity. Then of warmth, shelter, and food. In the storm, of his clothes, and finally of his sanity. He is awakened to a new truth which he reveals after he is reunited with Cordelia after defeat. It will be too late. Yet Cordelia's death speaks only too eloquently in favor of the new understanding Lear has earned. Cordelia is as silent now as she was at the beginning. But Lear dies "affirming in the face of the facts that Cordelia still lives"⁵⁰.

In this paper I point out that the reality represented in Shakespeare's great tragedies is different from its counterpart in his earlier plays. It is no longer the reality of the senses but the reality of the mind. Yet it is not the reality as it is when registered but a reality coloured or downright distorted by an emotionally biased memory. Finally, the mainspring of human action which before was to be looked for in external stimulation now comes from inside.

I characterize Hamlet, Othello, Macbet and King Lear's visions of reality as reflections of their inner states. I analyze how the previous experiences of the characters influence their visions and the motives and interests behind their actions. The purpose is to show how different ways of conceptualizing reality may determine the structure of Shakespeare's plays.

49 DEAN Op. cit. p. 14

50 Ibid. p. 17