

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Shakespeare: The Last Phase
Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V
Shakespeare: The Roman Plays
An Approach to Shakespeare II.
Trails and Crests to The Tempest

AN APPROACH TO SHAKESPEARE

I
HENRY VI
TO
TWELFTH
NIGHT

DEREK TRAVERSI

Third edition
revised and enlarged
in two volumes

INV. 21336
Filed. Moderna

HOLLIS & CARTER
LONDON SYDNEY TORONTO

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

The edition used as a basis for the act, scene, and line references printed next to the quotations in the text is the Oxford University Press *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by W. J. Craig.

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THIRD EDITION

The present study, *Henry VI to Twelfth Night*, is conceived as a supplement to my earlier book, originally published as *An Approach to Shakespeare* as long ago as 1938 and re-issued, in a considerably extended form, in 1957. It has long been apparent to me that this study suffered by being concentrated exclusively on the later stages of Shakespeare's dramatic career. I hope that the present book may go some way towards correcting the balance. In the companion volume, *Troilus and Cressida to The Tempest*, I have re-written the work already published to take account of changes of view or emphasis in the intervening years and to include discussion of all the plays not originally covered.

There has been, inevitably, some overlap with the earlier book, and with other previous publications. Chapter IV on the Sonnets reproduces, with some amendment, what I first wrote in 1938, and Chapter VII on the later series of English History Plays largely sums up the argument of my book, *Shakespeare: From 'Richard II' to 'Henry V'*, first published by Messrs. Hollis and Carter in England and by the Stanford University Press in the United States in 1958. Chapter III on the Early Comedies also owes a good deal to an essay on the same plays published in the *Writers and Their Work* series (Longmans and the British Council) in 1960. Eleven plays, however, are studied entirely for the first time and I hope that the argument as a whole will throw some light on the development of the dramatist's art in its earlier stages.

The book was conceived, and largely written, during a semester spent in the autumn and early winter of 1965 as Visiting Professor at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania. I am conscious of a great debt of gratitude to my colleagues and friends there, and also to my seminar students in discussion with whom not a few of the points here made were formulated or clarified. The views expressed are, of course, entirely my own, but without these advantages the book might well not have been written.

DEREK TRAVENSI
Rome, November 1967

This edition © Derek Traversi 1968

ISBN 370 00357 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain for
Hollis & Carter Ltd

9 Bow Street, London, WC2

by William Clowes & Sons Ltd, Beccles

Set in Monotype Bembo

First published 1938

Second edition revised and enlarged 1957

Third edition revised and enlarged 1968

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION, 9

I. THE EARLY CHRONICLE PLAYS, 23

1. *Henry VI—Part I*, 23
2. *Henry VI—Part II*, 28
3. *Henry VI—Part III*, 37
4. *Richard III*, 46

II. TITUS ANDRONICUS, 62

III. THE EARLY COMEDIES, 75

1. *The Comedy of Errors*, 75
2. *The Taming of the Shrew*, 83
3. *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 89
4. *Love's Labour's Lost*, 95

IV. THE SONNETS, 106

V. FROM 'ROMEO AND JULIET' TO 'RICHARD II', 116

1. *Romeo and Juliet*, 117
2. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 142
3. *Richard II*, 159

VI. 'KING JOHN' AND 'THE MERCHANT OF VENICE', 176

1. *King John*, 176
2. *The Merchant of Venice*, 188

VII. 'HENRY IV'—PARTS I AND II, AND 'HENRY V', 199

1. *Henry IV—Part I*, 200
2. *Henry IV—Part II*, 226
3. *Henry V*, 248
4. *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 260

VIII. THE GREAT COMEDIES, 263

1. *Much Ado About Nothing*, 264
2. *As You Like It*, 282
3. *Twelfth Night*, 302

NOTES, 322

INTRODUCTION

IT IS PLEASANT worth recalling at the outset of this study that its origins lie in a very short and perhaps rather dogmatic essay originally published thirty years ago and entitled, like the present volume, *An Approach to Shakespeare*. The point of departure for this essay was an assertion that the great nineteenth-century tradition of Shakespearean study—running from Coleridge and Goethe to Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*¹—had reached 'something like the limits of its usefulness'. Little more, it was suggested, remained to be discovered in that particular direction; nor, at the time of writing, were the assumptions which this school of criticism had taken for granted entirely acceptable. More particularly, the Victorian insistence upon *character*, when carried to the point of excluding other aspects of an essentially *dramatic* action, had its foundation in the subjectivism of 'Romantic' thought. *Hamlet* the tragedy—to take the stock example—became, when considered in the light of this tradition, a fruitful mirror for the dissatisfactions of the romantic self, and even the greatest students of the plays—who gave us a great deal that was very valuable—found it difficult to avoid confusing Shakespeare's aims with their own, often quite different concerns. Above all—and to this we shall return—this type of criticism found its theatrical counterpart in a conception of the stage, and of the dramatic action as a whole, which tended to distort Shakespeare's intentions and even to make some of the greatest plays² almost impossible to represent.

This, however, as the introduction to the 1938 essay also suggested, was not the whole of the story. 'We all know that to discuss Hamlet's life *outside* the limits of the play, to attempt to deduce the manner of his upbringing in order to explain his subsequent behaviour, is an illegitimate extension of the critic's proper function. Nor can we share the confidence with which some writers fathered their own philosophies on to Shakespeare's work. But, although we are certain that the old outlook was incomplete and sometimes misleading—just as we know that the sumptuous and realistic productions, which were its theatrical equivalent, were not the last word in the production of the plays—we are far less sure what is to replace them.' The essay went on to say that

many valuable lines of approach had been opened out since the beginning of the century; we might now add, thirty years later, that many more have become available. Among these is a notable advance in our knowledge of the Elizabethan background of thought in cosmology, psychology, rhetoric, and in ideas on literature in general and drama in particular, which has the negative virtue of discouraging us from reading the plays too directly in the light of subsequent experience. Side by side with this, and largely complementary to it is the remarkable growth in our understanding of Elizabethan stage conditions and of their relevance for a proper understanding of the plays; already in 1938, it was possible to mention the pioneer work of Granville Barker,³ and a great deal has been accomplished in this direction in subsequent years. Finally, the introduction to the original essay mentioned the rise of a double-edged approach to the plays in the kind of *interpretation* proposed by Professor Wilson Knight and still a relatively new development in the thirties.

Each of these 'approaches', however, though important and fruitful, brought with it its accompanying dangers. The increased modern interest in Elizabethan thought and knowledge has led us back, truly and significantly, to the contemporary setting of the plays and so has helped, among other things, to avoid the nineteenth-century errors of misplaced emphasis; but—it must be added—the criticism which has followed from this approach has shown itself apt to ignore the element of essential *discontinuity* which separates a genius from the common-places of his age. A writer of Shakespeare's stature is of his time in the ideas he uses, and we shall always be unwise to forget this; but he uses these ideas in ways of his own, which are not necessarily those of his time alone. Shakespeare's plays on English history, for example, lean heavily upon contemporary notions concerning such subjects as monarchy, its origins, its rôle, and its justification; but to interpret the series of chronicles from *Richard II* to *Henry V* as no more than exercises in Tudor patriotic propaganda is, in my submission, seriously to underestimate their originality. What truly emerges from these plays—as I shall seek to show⁴—is a thoroughly personal vision, increasingly tragic in its implications, of man as a political being; so that, properly read, they speak to us not less than they did to the late sixteenth-century, and speak moreover in ways that very few minds of that age—with the possible exception of Machiavelli—would have fully understood. To compare Shakespeare, as a mature dramatist, to almost any other Elizabethan writer is to be made aware of the degree to which he

evades, escapes from the current Elizabethan limitations. Such a writer, in other words, and to adapt a critical commonplace, both is of his time and transcends it. The scholar is by the very nature of his task inclined to stress those aspects of a Shakespeare that relate him to his own times. In the process of so doing he helps to save us from committing fundamental errors of appreciation; but the critic—if I may be allowed, *for my present purpose alone*, to separate him from the scholar—is there to redress a necessary balance, the failure to appreciate which will prevent a response to his subject's true originality.

Something of the same kind, though to a lesser degree, can be said of an 'approach' too exclusively limited to a knowledge of the theatre and, more particularly, of contemporary stage conditions. As I suggested in 1938, Granville Barker's very considerable contribution to our understanding of Shakespeare as a working dramatist was to some extent limited by the tendency to rest on established judgements where both poetry and the definition of characters were concerned. He stressed, in the body of his work, an important truth, and one that his immediate predecessors had tended to neglect; but it was possibly too much to expect that he should also transform our understanding of other and not less important aspects of Shakespeare's work to correspond to that truth and to produce a new vision in its totality. His Hamlet and his Othello, were, in other words, still close to those proposed by Bradley, though our view of the stage on which these characters appeared was re-vivified, largely transformed, by the line of study which he did so much to originate.

The third of our new lines of 'approach', as seen thirty years ago, was that which led finally to the methods of 'interpretation' largely associated with the work of Wilson Knight. The effect of these methods was to move away from the more traditional readings in terms of character or 'philosophic' content to another, by which a given play was regarded, to use Wilson Knight's own phrase, as 'an expanded metaphor'. In the light of this contention the critic's task became very largely that of tracing in the plays significant threads and patterns of imagery within a 'spatial unity', recurrent themes through whose study and correlation the full 'meaning' of the work as a whole was to emerge. This line of approach can be associated, on a more academic level, with that of Professor Caroline Spurgeon, who—in a pioneer study published at this time—card-indexed and catalogued Shakespeare's images, following up the repetition of particular images in a

given play, and who even claimed as a result to be able to tell us something about the writer's own tastes and prejudices. Because, for example, the dramatist can be shown repeatedly to associate spaniels with cloying flattery, and because this association tends to produce in his poetry a sense of almost physical revulsion, we are asked to conclude that Shakespeare the man—that dim and unsatisfactory abstraction—felt a particular dislike for this species of dog, and perhaps for dogs in general. Whether this deplorably un-English trait contributes anything to an appreciation of his work remains uncertain.

To leave the matter thus is clearly to be less than fair to what Professor Spurgeon, and her method as developed by others in various directions, in fact achieved. The best parts of her study were valuable and important: how important we are perhaps now prevented from seeing by the fact that not a few of her discoveries have become common currency in later criticism. It helps us to understand *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, to know that there can be found in it a notable concentration upon imagery of taste; it is relevant to the study of *Macbeth* to remember that images of ill-fitting clothes appear repeatedly in the course of the play. These real discoveries called for a development which Professor Spurgeon herself was not always ready to give them: a development that, in one way or another, takes us beyond the card-index, beyond the more or less mechanical collation and counting of the images used, into a response to the poetry as a living and dynamic whole, a whole moreover that looks for its completion beyond itself, through incorporation into the ultimate unity of the dramatic action to which it belongs. This is the incorporation at which Professor Wilson Knight has consistently aimed in what is possibly the most ambitious attempt to interpret Shakespeare that the last half century has produced.

There can be no doubt that Wilson Knight to an eminent degree, and Professor Spurgeon in her own possibly more pedestrian way, have greatly extended our understanding of Shakespeare, and for this we have reason to be accordingly grateful. We shall do well, however, whilst recognizing this, to look a little closely at the 'methods', so to call them, upon which these real discoveries are said to be based. In the case of Professor Spurgeon we shall see at once that the 'method', in its essence, consists of card-indexing and counting images with a view to establishing their relative frequencies and drawing the corresponding conclusions. The image 'X' appears so many times and the image 'Y' so many: from the preponderance of either we can draw all kinds of

conclusions, which seem to be 'scientifically' based, perhaps about the dramatist's own tastes and certainly, it is suggested, about the intentions which underlie a given play. We shall find, I think, on reflection, however, that the poetic image, even if we accept it as a kind of ultimate constituent of poetry, is not readily susceptible to this kind of treatment. Some images belong primarily to literary convention, others impress us as deeply personal in their effect; some, again, belong exclusively to the dramatic personage in whose mouth they are placed and to the situation in which he finds himself, others seem to answer more directly to the expression of the author's own experience. Above all, the poetic image is, more particularly as used by Shakespeare, a living and not a dead thing; and it lives, not dissected and placed in a card-index, but in a context, in relation to the intensity with which it is conceived (which varies greatly from one case to another), to the rhythm of the verse that conveys it, and to the total conception of the play in which it is found. Images, in fact, cannot be abstracted from their context, or counted up by a mechanical process as if they were all identical or similar in value. They live, develop, and change by their very nature, and it is precisely the life, the development, and the change which escape classification and call for the critic, or more simply the theatre-goer, to make his similarly living response. If the result is, as it must surely be, something less than a scientific certainty, that may be considered by some a pity; but the rest of us may derive some encouragement from the reflection that there are certain areas of life (it may well be the most important) which are, of their very nature, irreducible to the card-index and its overgrown and monstrous successor, the computer.

The case of Wilson Knight, which I have associated with that of Professor Spurgeon only on account of the tendency of both to start from a consideration of the poetic image and its function in the complete dramatic effect, is a good deal more complex. Whether we accept his conclusions or not, there is nothing of the card-index or the computer about Professor Wilson Knight's work; and it is just and necessary to say that there has been probably no writer on Shakespeare, in the period which here concerns us, who has opened out more new fields of vision to an understanding of the dramatist in his full life and complexity. Practically everyone who has since written on Shakespeare has had occasion to express his disagreement with many of Wilson Knight's conclusions, in which highly personal applications of ideas derived in varying degree from Nietzsche and from Christian tradition play a

large part; but practically all those who have done so have also repeated or developed findings that he was the first to express. And yet, we must add, when all the debts have been fairly acknowledged, the numerous insights recognized for what they are, we often find ourselves asking, as we read or re-read these studies, how exactly all this was achieved. The moments of vision are unquestionably there, many and true (and not always recognized as a source by those who have subsequently used them): but there too, surely, are an almost fantastically confused set of religious, 'philosophical', and patriotic preoccupations often based, scarcely less than in the case of the card-indexers, upon an extraordinarily naive conception of what image and metaphor really are. The interrelation of these two aspects—remarkable, genuine insights and the tendency to force the text to say what the critic wants it to say—is not difficult to illustrate. An entire book by Wilson Knight—*The Shakespearean Tempest*⁶—sets out to show, for example, the existence through all the dramatist's work of a music-tempest opposition, and traces the presence of this line of imagery in every play that he wrote. The intuition is, beyond doubt, valid and important. The opposition between these two sets of constantly repeated images is *there* and, moreover, *means* something for our understanding of Shakespeare. In the proving of it, however, we are asked to believe that images taken from the early *Henry VI* plays are as valuable, have much the same degree of significance, as others from the unquestioned masterpieces, from *King Lear* and *The Tempest*; and that a burlesque piece spoken by Bottom in his first rehearsal for the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*⁷ has to all intents and purposes as much meaning as others drawn, for example, from the undoubtedly Shakespearean part of *Pericles*. This is surely absurd. Similarly in *Antony and Cleopatra*, perhaps the supreme test for a balanced criticism of Shakespeare, the romantic estimate of Antony in terms of 'vitality', 'transcendence', and 'immortality' is stressed by Wilson Knight, if not exclusively, certainly unduly in relation to the merciless realism that accompanies the poetry at each stage in the development of the action. This is, no doubt, for the excellent reason that Wilson Knight himself feels the play in this way; and, so feeling, he has indeed greatly extended our understanding of Shakespeare, but has also on occasion fallen into traps, one-sided and finally confused judgements which are the opposite of our author's dispassionate clarity and balanced strength.

One other tendency in modern Shakespearean studies, related to

though not directly deriving from Wilson Knight's work, can appropriately be mentioned at this point. This is the tendency, observable to-day in many academic quarters, to read into the plays explicit statements of Christian belief and morality. The greater writers of the nineteenth-century tended, on the whole, to underestimate the Christian content of Shakespeare's thought, and it is perhaps in reaction to this that many writers in our own time have tended to present him as a moralist of orthodox tendencies and even, on occasions, as something of a theologian. This reaction, if such it is, towards a new orthodoxy has no doubt been carried too far in Shakespearean criticism, and has ended in producing a set of mechanically orthodox readings which are at least as far from what the plays actually offer as the interpretations to which they are opposed. Once again, Shakespearean criticism can only benefit in this situation from the capacity to draw and to maintain necessary distinctions. In view of the admitted lack of external evidence it seems clear that little can usefully be said concerning Shakespeare's personal beliefs, and certainly none of his plays were written to illustrate religious dogmas or to point preconceived moral judgements; on the other hand, it is surely no more than natural that a writer of his time and place should be aware of Christian tradition as an influence moulding his thought and that he should even seek, more especially in his later plays, to present in terms of a highly personal reading of that tradition some of his final conclusions about life. The relation of the final romances, in particular, to Christian notions of repentance, atonement, and 'grace', is certainly in no sense a matter of simple transcription or direct reflection; but for taking the romances seriously in my final chapter, for reading them as something more than poetic fantasies in dramatic form, I offer no apology. The seriousness and originality of these plays seems to me to be clearly written on practically every page.

In the situation outlined in the preceding paragraphs it seems that the student of Shakespeare will do well to consider his own position with some care. Once again my short introduction of 1938 may serve, even in its one-sided incompleteness as a starting-point. Following a line that was more novel than it is now—though, of course, I made no claim to be originating anything⁸—I then suggested a possible 'approach' through the development of language and verse as seen in the entire course of the dramatist's work, beginning with the individual word and taking it on, in the first instance, into its verse setting. Or, as I put it at the time:

If a writer's intention is apparent in his choice of subject and general treatment, it has an even closer relation to the words and phrases in which he expresses himself. The word, as we shall see again and again in dealing with Shakespeare, is the product of the most intimate relations of thought and feeling; nervous sensitivity and conscious emotion. Indeed, word and thought, word and feeling, form part of an indivisible process of poetic creation; and, in the greatest poetry, the relation is felt as an identity, so that it becomes impossible to separate the personal development of an experience from its formal expression in words.⁹

And, since the dangers of a mechanical counting of words and images, referred to above, were already apparent, I added: 'It only remains to add that the individual word cannot be considered apart from the verse in which it performs its function. . . . The development of Shakespeare's versification is revealed in a growing flexibility of response to the increasingly complex implications of the individual word. The various stages in the process by which he masters his experience, projects it fully into his plays, are most easily traced by starting from his continual effort to adapt language and verse structure to the growing pressure of his emotions'.¹⁰

In the years that have passed since this point of view was put forward both the virtues and the limitations of this kind of 'approach' have become clearer, to the writer at least, than they were at the time of writing. I should not now be inclined to express the argument in quite the same terms as those I first used thirty years ago. In particular I should be less happy now to talk, a little less than precisely, of Shakespeare's 'experience', at least in so far as this might be held to have 'biographical' implications, to be related to facts and circumstances in his life about which we can know nothing; nor am I altogether sure that there is a valid distinction between 'thought' and 'feeling' as elements making up a work of literature, between what I called, rather obscurely as I now find, 'nervous sensitivity' and 'conscious emotion'. I would now say, perhaps more simply, that if it is our aim to define the total impact upon us of a given play, we shall do well to start with the words, the language through which that impact makes itself most immediately felt in any given moment, proceed to the incorporation of the word into the verse structure to which it belongs, see again how this bears fruit in the conveying of such things as character, motive conscious and unconscious, and, finally, draw all these connected and successively expanding aspects of the work with which we are con-

cerned into the complete concept of a *dramatic action*, which is the end and *raison d'être* of the whole.

In other words, we can now see—perhaps more clearly than I originally saw—that the kind of 'approach' suggested above is only useful in so far as it leads beyond itself, linking up with the various elements which go to make up the complete dramatic reality. No analysis of the first stage, *the word*, that does not illuminate some part of the last, the complete *dramatic action*, can be valid; but—and to this extent I would stand by my original proposal—we shall understand the *action* itself better if we proceed initially from the smaller unit to the larger, from that in which the individual intention first makes itself felt to the final unity of concept and projection which is the complete work of art. Or, as I put it in 1937, modifying and extending my intentions of 1938:

The application of this general conception will clearly vary greatly from one play, or one period, to another. When applied to Shakespeare's early work, it is bound to be largely concerned with detecting the birth of tendencies that later found full integration in the unity of his mature masterpieces. Only gradually will it become apparent how these early intuitions, these first notions of personal feeling, are assumed into an adequate dramatic form. If we wish to find traces of true individuality in the plays of Shakespeare's youth, we must look not to the complete work, which is normally still derivative, artificial in conception, but primarily to individual turns of phrase, the occasional striking choice of a word or image to be discerned in otherwise commonplace passages of verse. From these it is natural to pass to a study of the way in which the words thus personally used influence the run of the verse itself, expanding into images which are eventually seen to bear significant repetition and to form, with the presentation of character and action correspondingly developed, a more subtle and suggestive unity. It is at this last point that the poetic merges into the dramatic reality. To proceed from the word to the image in its verse settings, and thence to trace the way in which a pattern of interdependent themes is gradually woven into the dramatic action, unifying and illuminating it, is the most fruitful approach—the most accurate and, if properly handled, the least subject to prejudice—to Shakespeare's art.¹¹

To turn back to this passage, over the intervening years, is to obtain the sense of a valid, but also a notably one-sided procedure. In the study of Shakespeare's early work, to which reference is made, it would rather seem that two simultaneous lines need to be developed. The revealing personal phrase or image is important, both in itself and in relation to

the character who utters it or to the situation in which it is spoken. But, side by side with it, an equally valid field of study would show Shakespeare developing and extending his conception of a dramatic action in its entirety; it would explore progressively the way in which his dramatic personages throw light upon one another by their comments and reactions, and are defined at least as much by what others say of them as through the impact of their own words. Beyond this again, analysis of the same plays would reveal a dramatist engaged in studying the scope of the dramatic conventions he has accepted, defining the implications of comedy, extending the possibilities of the historical chronicle, even moving from relatively crude beginnings to a more unified and subtle concept of tragedy. All these things, side by side with the attention simultaneously given to the growth of his expressive possibilities in language and verse, show a Shakespeare engaged in realizing the full possibilities, for his own purposes, of an integrated dramatic action.

The stress laid in the preceding argument on the dramatic action implies, as a necessary corollary, awareness that the plays were written for the stage, and for a given type of stage at that. A growing recognition of this reality, indeed, constitutes one of the most fundamental conquests of modern scholarship. Reading in the study can greatly extend our understanding of what Shakespeare wrote, even bringing out points which would normally escape us in the rapid development of a stage action; but in the long run it is to the stage—and to a particular moment in the development of the theatre—that we find ourselves returning, not in a spirit of mere historical reconstruction, but because the conditions of the Elizabethan playhouse need to be present in the mind of those who aim to present the plays in a way that shall be at once modern and—in the deepest sense, one separated from mere historical accident—truly Shakespearean.

Every undergraduate knows that the stage with which Shakespeare was initially familiar, and for which most of his plays were written,¹² descended in a very real sense from the platform used during the Middle Ages to represent the so-called 'miracle' plays. Without entering into details, which are either too familiar to repeat or too intricate to find a place in these introductory remarks, it was like this platform, and unlike most modern stages, in being surrounded on three sides by the public towards which it was deliberately projected. Furthermore, as it seems hardly necessary to remind the reader, it was divided into various parts, corresponding to different dramatic needs and roughly distin-

guishable, to modern scholarship, by the names of main, back, and apron stages. These arrangements looked very primitive from a nineteenth-century point of view, but—as has again often been shown—they offered certain important advantages; without some appreciation of these Shakespeare's conception of a dramatic action must remain largely obscure. It was, in the first place, a stage on which contact between the actors and the public was remarkably direct and intimate: the stock example is the speaking of Hamlet's soliloquies, difficult to deal with on a modern stage without interrupting the flow of the action, but normal and natural in their effect when considered in relation to the stage for which they were written.

If *intimacy* was the first important advantage this stage offered, *flexibility* was certainly the second. The tripartite division of the stage made it easy to maintain a rapid and uninterrupted flow of action. The stock examples, again, are Romeo addressing Juliet on the balcony, Othello strangling Desdemona on the back stage after the main stage has been cleared of the 'public' action and the separating curtains have been drawn apart. We might add, in *Henry IV, Part I*, the contrast between the court scenes and their burlesque reflection in Bastard's, between the aristocratic leaders invoking honour on the field of battle and Falstaff passing his comment on that same 'honour' in a spirit at once openly cynical and indicative of life and realism. In each case, dramatic tension and the continuity of the action are maintained to important ends; and the lack of complex scenic effects, apparently an intolerable limitation when considered through nineteenth-century eyes, in fact often supported both. All this is elementary, but it seems important, in considering Shakespeare's work, to remember what a dramatic action is *not*. It is *not*, properly understood, a spectacle to be contemplated externally, still less a photographic imitation of what is sometimes misleadingly called 'real life'. It is rather, on the contrary, a spoken action, non-realist and conventional by its very nature, requiring the *participation* of the audience as a necessary element; indeed, the concept of scenery and decoration as a kind of subsidiary art added to give more visual attraction, is contrary to any serious view of the drama. An outstanding example of the kind of effect at one time lost to the theatre, but abundantly open to Shakespeare, was that of the storm in *King Lear*, where the aged king, in the process of creating the external tempest in the only way open to the poet, through his own words, fuses it with the dramatic projection of his own tragic state. Everywhere present, beneath the apparent poverty of the stage conditions available to

Shakespeare and his contemporaries, was a wealth of opportunity for the more profound poetic effects which the complication of later ages has often threatened to destroy.

To sum up, then: from a knowledge of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre it is possible to derive certain consequences which illuminate the Shakespearean conception of poetic drama. In the first place, like his mediæval predecessors, Shakespeare based his work on what was still, in its underlying presuppositions, a popular and social conception of the stage and of dramatic art. It is true that by the sixteenth-century the participation of the craft guilds, which had been the most obvious sign of this participation, had given way to a more individualistic spirit; but the tradition that considered dramatic representation as a collective act, from which none need be excluded, however illiterate or lacking in social pretensions he might be, was still sufficiently alive to find reflection in Shakespeare's work. We shall not fully understand *Hamlet* if we do not see in the hero's tragedy, besides the intricate analysis of spiritual motives which it certainly conveys, the melodramatic and blood-thirsty story of revenge which so attracted the Elizabethan public. We shall not grasp *all* of the force of *Macbeth* if we only consider the drama of contrary impulses which moves the hero to his choices against a universal background of redemption and damnation, and forget the simple story of crime and punishment, of the destruction that evil brings upon itself, which is an essential part of the complete effect. Shakespeare's greatest plays have, in reality, something of the universal appeal of myth, of the expression of a universal consciousness deeply implanted in the popular mind and accessible, though in varying degrees and ways, to all levels of society. They appeal in different fashions to different levels of understanding, related to one another by the very fact of their common participation, but not identical. There is something in these great plays for the illiterate as for the intellectual, and it is part of their greatness that the immense field of experience they offer to the latter is still intimately related to the primary emotions which constitute the chief popular appeal of the drama.

Secondly, and possibly even more important: the very structure of the theatre in which these works were shown was such as to concentrate attention, not on a spectacle or on the character interpretation of a single actor, however gifted, but on the *action*, in which the artists appeared on the raised and central platform of the stage as intermediaries between the conception of the author and the public, requiring of the latter not only that they watch and listen, but that they participate

in the development taking place before them. This sense of *participation*, which had been alive in the Middle Ages as part of a frankly religious manifestation, survived in the sixteenth-century in a form akin to that encouraged by myth and legend. In the case of Shakespeare's great tragedies, we are required to participate in the fortunes of the central protagonist—a king, a hero, deliberately exalted above common humanity—either directly or through the comments and reactions of those who surround him: the result is an emotional effect akin to that to which Aristotle, in his basic treatise on dramatic poetry, gave the name of *katharsis* or purification.

Finally (and here we return to our starting point and justify our proposal to use sensitivity to living language as a point of departure), this essentially public action is *poetic* in nature, though not—I need hardly say—tied to any particular form of versification. In the best works of the Elizabethan theatre poetry, the vehicle of emotion, and the drama into which it flows constitute a single and inseparable whole, fused in a unity that goes beyond its separate elements and to which we give the name of *poetic drama*. The personal emotions of the poet extend themselves to the public emotions of the theatre, establishing contact with society through the highly conventional and unrealistic medium of the stage. This example has a permanent validity, in so far as the possibilities of the theatre, properly considered, lie primarily neither in psychological accuracy of portrayal nor in realistic truth to the surface appearances of life. They lie, rather, elsewhere. Of all artistic forms, the drama is perhaps the most thoroughly conventional, the one that requires from the author the highest degree of identification with the special conditions which its very existence implies. This apparent limitation can, however, if properly understood and accepted, constitute a source of life, because it permits the poetic impulse, with which it is so intimately related, to flower with the greatest intensity, and because it provides the poet with a field of action that, unequalled in emotional depth, transcends the expression of purely personal sentiment. The dramatic poet is as fully poetic, as intense in his expression of emotion, as any other writer in verse; and, in addition, his chosen form obliges him to pass beyond the purely personal, to aim at the creation of a world that, in so far as it is outside himself, is beyond the accidents and prejudices of his own experience. To create is, artistically speaking, to bring into the light an obscure personal emotion, giving it the external appearance of form; the example of Shakespeare shows us how dramatic necessity can be united, continuously and harmoniously, to the ends of

personal expression. The theatrical conventions of to-day have changed in many ways since the sixteenth-century, and we should not wish to re-create them in a spirit of mere historical accuracy; but the permanent lessons of the Shakespearean theatre are still available, still actual, and still waiting to be re-applied.

I

THE EARLY CHRONICLE PLAYS

I Henry VI—Part I

THERE IS a tendency among modern writers on Shakespeare to find the early series of plays on the reign of Henry VI a good deal more impressive than previous generations would have allowed. Recent stage revivals¹ have brought out a powerful unity in the general conception, suggesting the presence—once strongly denied—of a single author in the treatment of the chronicle material of all three plays; and the discernible variations of style seem more purposeful, more deliberate in their intended effect, than was formerly believed. The author of these plays, whom we may reasonably concede to have been Shakespeare, was possibly the first Elizabethan dramatist to make coherent and meaningful use, on this scale, of chronicle material and, in the process of so doing, to advance an interpretation of historical events which, full as it undoubtedly is of traditional and patriotic echoes, is already notably personal and, moreover, develops remarkably in the process of its unfolding.²

In spite of this revaluation, we may agree that the First Part of *Henry VI* is considerably less coherent in its general effect, less marked by the clear presence of a dominating intention, than the later and more individual plays that followed. The series opens with a formal evocation of the death of Henry V, and its treatment of subsequent events turns largely upon two closely related consequences of this loss: on the one hand, what amounts to a prolonged elegiac lament for the dying chivalry of England and, on the other, the growth in England itself of the savage internal rivalry which ruined the great King's patriotic and warlike achievement. The obsessive presence of these two themes is conveyed through an episodic, pageant-like conception of drama which is notably less coherent in its effect than the action of the two

thy turn is next, and then the rest'—Edward is left to bring the action to a close by saying, with a feebleness that contrasts with the force of what we have just heard: 'here, *I hope*, begins our lasting joy' (V. vii. 46). What will in fact begin, and be brought to its logical conclusion in the next play, is the consummation of Richard Crookback's advance to power.

4 Richard III

In relation to the series of *Henry VI* plays, of which it is the logical conclusion, *Richard III* represents a new, a more elaborate and finished development. The simple construction of the earlier chronicles, which answers, generally speaking, to the sequence of the events described, is replaced by a more deliberately patterned action, in which the principal themes repeat themselves significantly or stand out in deliberate contrast. Phrase responds deliberately to phrase, either ironically or to intensify by choric emphasis a broad tragic effect; incident recalls incident, either in an intentional accumulation of horror or to stress the presence, beneath so much inhumanity, of an obscure and appropriate Nemesis working itself out through the unfolding of events. At the centre of this variously contrived structure, focussing upon his own person the elements of self-awareness which we have seen emerging, at first tentatively in York and then more firmly in the stages of his own rise to power, stands the dominating figure of its protagonist. With Richard placed at the centre of his play, which he over shadows to a degree that we shall scarcely find repeated in Shakespeare before *Hamlet*, a new type of drama is at once the necessary conclusion of all that has gone before and the expression of a new conception of what the chronicle play implies.

Given this development, and the concept of the dramatic protagonist to which it leads, it is natural that the new play should open with a long and highly individual soliloquy spoken by Richard himself. His definition of his own nature, for which the previous play has prepared us,¹⁸ is principally new in its more controlled and deliberate use of ironic effects. It operates by setting the evident villainy of his intentions against a cool realism which almost, in certain of its pungent phrases and shrewd evaluations, qualifies for definition as comedy:

I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want Love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deform'd, unfinish'd, sent before my time
Into this breathing world, scarce half made up,
And that so lamely and unfashionable
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them;
Why I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun,
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair, well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain,
And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (I. i. 14)

The speech, though based on the established attributes of envious villainy, plays down its more obvious rhetorical overtones in the interests of a less grotesque irony and a firmer delineation of character. Although a certain stilted quality survives in the movement of the verse (there is a sense, common to many Elizabethan stage heroes and villains, of the speaker playing up to a dramatically acceptable picture of himself), the general effect is remarkably concise and pointed. Richard's state of mind is conveyed primarily through a series of sharp visual touches—the vision of himself as strutting ludicrously before a 'wanton ambling nymph', as being barked at by the dogs as he passes, as spying his misshapen shadow in the sun—and through the sustained contrast with its implications of contempt and repudiation, between the 'sportive tricks' and exigencies of 'these fair, well-spoken days' and his own situation as an outsider, 'deform'd, unfinish'd', 'scarce half made up', 'lamely' put together and beyond all remedy 'unfashionable'. In this way, by making his envy express a criticism which is felt not to be altogether unjustified, the speaker is in some degree humanized, transformed from the abstract incarnation of a traditional vice exploited for melodramatic effect into something like a person: a being whose nature is twisted indeed by his exclusion from 'love's majesty' (the phrase stands out forcibly by contrast with the sneer that follows it), but who remains in the cool, pungent turn of his comments a definite human plausibility. The contrast between this plausibility and the horror of

what Richard actually achieves in the course of the action is a primary factor in the creation of the play's peculiar irony.

It is in accordance with this ironic intention that the first half of the action traces the successive stages of Richard's advance towards his goal. His initial declaration of moral autonomy is almost at once followed by the removal of Clarence, who has been Richard's associate in the preceding play and whose downfall was there foreseen, to the Tower. Richard, having himself instigated it, ascribes the responsibility for this move in characteristically pungent terms to the intrigues of the Queen and Mistress Shore:

The jealous o'erworn widow and herself,
Since that our brother dubb'd them gentlewomen,
Are mighty gossips in this monarchy. (I. i. 81)

The critical implication is clear and, once again, not without force; but the speaker, in making it, is moved not by any kind of public spirit—he has just declared his complete separation from society—but by the pleasure which his own superior insight, and the sense of his own capacity to mould the course of events to the ends he has proposed to himself, gives him. It is germane to the situation of the politically aware man, as this play conceives it, that he can only rise further by kicking away the steps that have led him to his present eminence; it is Richard's quality to know and accept this truth, as it is his final tragedy to be inexorably limited by his acceptance of it. With the elimination of Clarence already in his mind, Richard first promises him the disinterested support of a loyal friend and loving brother and then, left to himself, makes his sardonic comment upon so much capacity for self-deception:

Simple, plain Clarence! I do love thee so,
That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven,
If heaven will take the present at our hands. (I. i. 118)

The ability to *act* the villainies he plans, taking the audience into his confidence with a kind of cheerful *bonhomie* that contrasts with the real monstrosity of his intentions, distinguishes Richard from the other historical personages in this series of plays. Without making him on that account less horrifying as a human being, it adds a fresh dimension to the pattern of crime and retribution with which all the political agents in this ironic melodrama are so obsessively concerned.

Whilst engaged thus in planning death for his brother Richard continues, in his own way, to pursue his concern with life by wooing the Lady Anne. In their meeting, accusation and irony clash as the object of these grotesque advances recalls the saintly figure of the martyred Henry VI to his murderer, who is also, for good measure, the assassin of her own husband, Henry's son:

—O, he was gentle, mild, and virtuous!
—The fitter for the King of heaven, that hath him.
—He is in heaven, where thou shalt never come.
—Let him thank me, that help to send him thither. (I. ii. 105)

As she spits 'mortal poison' at him in hatred and repulsion, Richard presses his suit, offering his breast for her to stab, declaring his readiness to kill himself at her command. His confidence, of course, is fully justified by the event. Anne surrenders at the end of a protracted verbal struggle and, as she does so, the cool comment of her wooer expresses the satisfaction which his success, and perhaps his sense of having adventured successfully to the very edge of danger, inspires in his keen twisted mind:

Was ever woman in this humour woo'd?
Was ever woman in this humour won?
I'll have her: but I will not keep her long. (I. ii. 229)

Once again, as he seems to stand aside from his projects to take us, his alternately shocked and fascinated audience, into his confidence, Richard adds a new dimension to his villainy, forces us to share after a fashion in the detachment from habitual moral judgements which throughout the first part of the play qualifies the essential savagery of his actions.

A similar impression emerges from his self-presentation to the world around him. Aware of the hostility that his actions will inevitably inspire, Richard cultivates the essentially ironic vision of himself as a 'plain' man who laments the refusal of a corrupt and self-seeking world to take him at his own valuation:

Because I cannot flatter and speak fair,
Smile in men's faces, smooth, deceive, and cog,
Duck with French nods and apish courtesy,
I must be held a rancorous enemy.
Cannot a plain man live and think no harm,
But thus his simple truth must be abused
By silken, sly, insinuating Jacks? (I. iii. 47)

Once more this self-portrayal contains, beneath its essential perversity, a measure of truth. Richard, we may feel, can justly claim a certain superiority to the world of courtly intrigue in which he moves and by which he feels himself rejected; but the exclusion, of course, is also from the natural positives of living, from human sociability as such, and the isolation which he seeks throughout to turn into an asset will bring him in the long run to an appropriate ruin. Meanwhile, however, we can hardly fail to respond to the grimly comic zest which inspires his definition of himself, to those who are already marked down to be the victims of his drive to power, as 'too childish-foolish for this world' (I. iii. 142).

The 'comedy', nevertheless, if such we can call it, is projected, here and throughout, against an oppressive background of doom. Its principal mouthpiece continues to be Henry VI's widow Margaret who, having survived the ruin of all her own cherished ambitions, can now denounce all those who surround her as so many

wrestling pirates, that fall out
In sharing that which you have pill'd from me. (I. iii. 158)

Margaret, however, is by now no more than a survival from the past, a shadow of former pride. Richard is in a position to answer her by recalling her own ferocities, her part in the murder of York and Rutland so cruelly executed in the moment of her precarious triumph; and to this her only reply can be to urge, as though from the spent ashes of her exhausted passion, yet more death upon those who have replaced her on the summit of glory. To Edward IV's reigning Queen she has only this to say:

If not by war, by surfeit die your king,
As ours by murder; to make him a king!
Edward thy son, which now is Prince of Wales,
For Edward my son, which was Prince of Wales,
Die in his youth by like untimely violence!
Thyself a queen, for me that was a queen . . . (I. iii. 197)

The function of Margaret in this play is to give choral emphasis to the pattern of doom that dominates the entire course of the action, and further, in the process of so doing, to expose the essential savagery of Richard's motives:

Look, when he favours, he bites; and when he bites,
His venom tooth will rankle to the death. (I. iii. 290)

The exposure, however, as coming from one whose life is concentrated upon the sterile savagery of the past, falls upon deaf ears in an equally ruthless present. In replying to these denunciations Richard declares, once more in soliloquy and with typical ironic satisfaction, his determination to outdo the world at its own game of hypocrisy, to

clothe my naked villainy
With old odd ends, stolen out of holy writ, (I. iii. 336)

and to proceed zestfully with his preparations for the elimination of his brother.

The murder of Clarence introduces a further variation into the general panorama of bestiality and horror. The victim's premonitory dream, in particular, insinuates a new projection of poetry into the realm of sub-conscious twilight:

Lord, Lord! methought, what pain it was to drown!
What dreadful noise of waters in mine ears!
What ugly sights of death within mine eyes!
Methought I saw a thousand fearful wrecks;
Ten thousand men that fishes gnaw'd upon;
Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,
Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,
All scattered in the bottom of the sea;
Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes
Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept,
As 'twere in scorn of eyes, reflecting gems,
Which woo'd the slimy bottom of the deep,
And mock'd the dead bones that lay scattered by. (I. iv. 21)

This transformation of the reality of 'pain', of 'the dreadful noise of waters' and 'ugly sights of death', into a phantasmagorical vision of treasures beyond value scattered at the bottom of the sea, answers to a kind of poetry which the rest of this play, ferociously concentrated upon brutality and lust for power, can hardly parallel. It is, however, profoundly Shakespearean. For this imaginative transformation of the charnel, this wedding of death to a transfigured, shifting opulence on the ocean-bed, it is necessary to look far forward into the dramatist's future poetry: almost as far, we may think even as we establish firmly the essential differences, as the world of Prospero's magic spells and of the 'pearls' into which Ariel's song transmutes the supposedly drowned eyes of Ferdinand's 'lost' father.¹⁹ The effect, of course, is different,

beyond comparison less charged with significance and depth; but, having recognized this, we may also see in the poetic elaboration of this dream a content which, in the act of echoing them and taking up their obsessive rhythms, transforms the repetitive patterns of murder and retribution which principally dominate this play.

A further note of profundity, though of a different kind, is somewhat tentatively struck, again at this point, by one of Clarence's murderers in his reflections upon conscience. 'I'll not meddle with it', he concludes;

it is a dangerous thing; it makes a man a coward . . . it is a blushing shamefast spirit that mutinies in a man's bosom . . . it is turned out of all towns and cities for a dangerous thing; and every man that means to live well endeavours to trust to himself and to live without it. (I. iv. 138)

The results of this 'endeavour' on the part of man 'to trust to himself', which constitutes precisely Richard's declared programme for living,²⁰ will be made apparent in many of Shakespeare's tragedies, from the present play to at least as far as *Macbeth*. It implies, in the long run, a forcing of reality, a reversal of 'nature' which brings its own retribution with it; but the realization, in so far as the murderer's words may be said to imply it, is rejected at this point, fails to exercise any influence upon the course of events. Clarence, left in his extremity to plead for mercy in the name of 'the King of kings', is condemned by his own crimes committed in the past, and his murderer's answer is, in terms of this play's retributive pattern, unanswerable:

How canst thou urge God's dreadful law to us,
When thou hast broke it in so dear degree? (I. iv. 218)

The saving qualities of compassion can have no place in an action dominated, almost to repetitive obsession, by the prospect of man's inhumanity to man.

Against this background of gathering horror the King, old and mortally sick, flawed by his own moral worthlessness, exacts a momentary show of reconciliation. Buckingham bows to his will, swearing loyalty in terms which his own conduct will shortly turn to irony, and Richard, as usual, passes his own implicit comment on the worth of this fiction by uttering his grotesque parody of repentance immediately before announcing the death of Clarence:

I do not know that Englishman alive
With whom my soul is any jot at odds,
More than the infant that is born to-night; (II. i. 70)

so speaks the murderer, and caps his gesture with an avowal more fantastic still: 'I thank my God for my humilty' (II. i. 73). The final comment on this mockery is conveyed, in the scene which follows, through the long choric lament of the bereaved and stricken Queens:

—Oh, for my husband, for my dear lord Edward!
—Oh, for our father, for our dear lord Clarence!
—Alas for both, both mine, Edward and Clarence!
—What stay had I but Edward? and he's gone.
—What stay had we but Clarence? and he's gone.
—What stays had I but they? and they are gone.
—Was never widow had so dear a loss.
—Were never orphans had so dear a loss.
—Was never mother had so dear a loss. (II. ii. 71)

The device of patterned lamentation is familiar and, of course, artificial in conception and effect; what is new and striking is the intensity with which it is carried out through the course of the play and, still more, the contrast between these accumulations of grief and the attitude, at once ferocious and ironic, tending to a kind of grim comedy, shown by the murderer. It is, moreover, at the end of these same lamentations that Richard and Buckingham, who have just joined in public expressions of loyalty to their King, draw secretly together to plan the death of the young Princes and the seizure of the crown.^X

At this juncture the King dies, whilst the Citizens express their expectation of an even grimmer future (II. iii). The Queen and her son, set against the background of a state pitilessly dedicated to civil strife:

Blood against blood, self against self— (II. iv. 62)

'seek 'sanctuary' with the Archbishop of York. Sanctuary, however, is a concept without meaning in the world as this play conceives it, and Buckingham is at hand to give the politician's reason why it should be profaned: as he tells the prelate, not without the man of the world's cynical satisfaction in the contemplation of his supposedly superior realism:

You are too senseless-obstinate, my lord,
Too ceremonious and traditional. (III. i. 44)

Inevitably, the attitude which these words represent soon prevails. Richard commits the young Princes to the Tower, Rivers, Vaughan, and Grey are brought to their doom (III. iii), thus confirming Margaret's prophecy, and Hastings is executed for his loyalty just after he

has expressed, with further unconscious irony, his faith in his murderer's honesty:

I think there's never a man in Christendom
Can lesser hide his love, or hate, than he:
For by his face straight shall you know his heart. (III. iv. 51)

Richard, meanwhile, is busy advancing his cause by appropriate public gestures for the benefit of the unwilling citizens, whose support he requires. These, as reported by Buckingham, are bemused by the course of events which they find it hard to welcome and cannot aspire to control:

† Now, by the holy mother of our Lord,
The citizens are mum, and speak not a word. (III. vii. 2)

To exercise upon the populace the arts of politic persuasion Richard offers himself to their view, piously flanked by supporting clerics—'See where he stands between two clergymen!'—as he allows Buckingham to 'persuade' him to accept the crown.

Thus far the action of the play, concentrated upon the successive stages of Richard's advance to his goal, have been poised between the horror which his deeds inspire and a kind of detached, ironic comedy which the contemplation of his deeds provokes in him and which, actor-like, he communicates to the audience. As protagonist, he sums up and gathers into his person the savagery which everywhere prevails around him; as self-conscious actor of his own career, he passes on to us, as spectators, a detached and sardonic estimate of his own motives. The crowning, however, represents a turning-point after which the spirit of the later action undergoes a notable change. Having obtained the ends he has proposed to himself, Richard is seen increasingly as the victim of his own choices. The horrors he has instigated follow him into his new state, and bind him finally and irrevocably to the consequences of his own actions in the past. His first act as King (IV. ii) is to order the murder of the imprisoned Princes who represent an unwitting threat to his new eminence; the next is to plan the death of the Lady Anne—for whom, as he has already foreseen,²¹ he has no further use—and to prepare the way for a new marriage by which he hopes to provide for a rule which, as he admits, 'stands on brittle glass' (IV. ii). At this point his position shifts from that of the confident outsider, immersed in the contemplation of his control of the world around him, and begins to offer notable anticipations of *Macbeth*: anticipations that occasionally

produce remarkable verbal parallels, as when he says, speaking of his own state,

I am in
So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin (IV. ii. 63)²²

Words such as these, which can hardly be related to anything so concretely expressed in the earlier part of the play, indicate a fundamental shift of emphasis in its later development. Richard, hitherto so keenly aware of himself as the agent of his own destiny, is beginning to feel himself the prisoner of his own actions. The voice of natural pity, so elaborately expressed in Tyrrel's account of the Princes' death (IV. iii) is one which he can less than ever afford to recognize, which he needs, even at the cost of forfeiting such humanity as remains to him, rigidly to exclude from his thoughts. There is from now on something increasingly automatic in the royal murderer's grim references to the execution of his plans—'Anne my wife hath bid the world good night'—and even in the attempt to caricature his own behaviour as that of 'a jolly thriving wooer' (IV. iii. 43). For the first time, we sense a man engaged in whistling in the dark to keep up his own courage, to hide even from himself the sense of intimate emptiness which is beginning to hover obsessively on the edge of his thoughts.

For, in spite of these efforts to maintain the facade of ironic confidence, which are essentially a carry-over from the earlier action, the entire mood of the play is very notably changing. Margaret, backed now by the Duchess of York, continues to sound the familiar note of choric doom; but their lamentations, which Richard had once been able to shrug off, with some justification, as hollow echoes from a withered past, fall now with a fresh urgency, a new sense of tragic issues closing in upon the entire action. Seeing in their unhappy state the fulfilment of Margaret's most bitter prophecies, the royal victims of the murderer's ruthlessness feel themselves reduced to the status of participants in a common vanity to which, no doubt, their own sins, and those of their children, have contributed. As always, Margaret is the most explicit:

I call'd thee then poor shadow, painted queen;
The presentation of but what I was;
The flattering index of a direful pageant:
One heaved a-high, to be hurl'd down below;
A mother only mock'd with two sweet babes,
A dream of what thou wert, a breath, a bubble,
A sign of dignity, a garish flag

To be the aim of every dangerous shout;
A queen in jest, only to fill the scene. (IV. iv. 83)

The old Queen's words answer sufficiently, beyond her own grief and ruin, to a change of emphasis in the entire action, which is concentrated now, not on the political confidence of the protagonist, but upon the doom which radiates from his actions and drags down his entire world with it. The typical medieval themes of retribution for past sin and of the fall of the presumptuous from their high estate are in process at this point of being gathered into a final tragic resolution.

It is not, however, by these shadows of the past that Richard feels himself immediately threatened. As he returns at the tail-end of these lamentations, and as his victims turn upon him with their bitter accusations, they receive only the ironic blast of his reply:

A flourish, trumpets! strike alarm, drums!
Let not the heavens hear these tell-tale women
Rail on the Lord's anointed! (IV. iv. 149)

The emphasis, however, is now upon concealment, upon the drowning in mere sound of an unpalatable and ominous truth. Against this grotesque background Richard, as though in a final gesture carried over from his former confident self, sets out to woo the Princess Elizabeth and invites to this end the good offices of the Queen her mother. The answer he receives, setting irony against irony in an effect of accumulated bitterness, is indeed damning in its effect:

What were I best to say? her father's brother
'Would he her lord? or shall I say, her uncle?
Or, he that slew her brothers and her uncles? (IV. iv. 338)

Even ironic self-assertion has its limits, and the sombre and menacing weight of the Queen's final denunciation—

Swear not by time to come; for that thou hast
Misused ere used, by time misus'd o'erpast— (IV. iv. 396)

explicitly reveals them. The fact that before the long and elaborate exchange is brought to an end, Richard's victim has shown herself to be, in accordance with his own cynical expectations, 'Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman', cannot entirely take the edge from these denunciations or cover the decline in his own original comic energy as the revenges of time begin to take shape against him. As the scene ends, indeed, confirmation of the changing direction of

events reaches the usurper with the news of the Earl of Richmond's return. Richard receives these tidings in a mood which again closely foreshadows that of Macbeth at the end of his tragedy: the mood of a man on edge, veering and changeable, seeking the illusion of relief in what is now rapidly becoming an empty show of decisive action. As his disconnected commands, uttered in haste and stress—'Fly to the Duke': 'Post thou to Salisbury'—mingle with unfinished instructions and impatient gestures—'Why stand'st thou still and go'st not to the Duke?'—his followers are left to grope in ignorance of his intentions, alternately upbraided and confused:

—First, mighty sovereign, let me know your mind,
What from your Grace I shall deliver to him.
—O, true, good Catesby: bid him levy straight
The greatest strength and power he can make,
And meet me presently at Salisbury.

—I go,
—What is't your highness' pleasure I shall do
At Salisbury?

—Why, what wouldst thou do there before I go?

—Your highness told me I should post before.

—My mind is changed, sir, my mind is changed. (IV. iv. 448)²⁴

This is the voice of a man who feels the control of events slipping from him, who has, perhaps for the first time, no clear vision of where or how far he means to go. The pressure of events only strengthens his disorientation. Lord Stanley is already preparing to desert him, and Richard can only seek to counter this defection by holding his son as hostage; the power which has been obtained by acting against the course of nature now seeks to perpetuate itself through the imposition of unnatural fear. By the time the long scene has drawn to a close, the armies of retribution are gathering against the usurper, as they will later gather against Macbeth, and his own followers—here as at Dunsinane—'on both sides do fight'.²⁴

Richard's cause, indeed, is already in the process of destroying itself. The treacherous Buckingham, who assisted him in his rise to power, is brought to execution, paying thus for his own sins—

Wrong hath but wrong, and blame the due of blame— (V. i. 29)

whilst the armies of Richmond move forward 'without impediment', 'to reap the harvest of perpetual peace' and to restore, with the reign of ordered loyalty, the 'summer fields and fruitful vines' (V. ii. 8) which the

usurper's excesses have brought to ruin. It is interesting to see that at this point the ideas of peaceful harmony and natural fertility have already found their characteristic Shakespearean association. Faced by this rising tide of restoration, Richard shows himself still a brave man—like Macbeth after him—and one who, like Macbeth again, seeks the shadow of consolation in intense activity: 'For, lords, to-morrow is a busy day' (V. iii. 18).²⁵ His is an activity, however, which answers to an essentially febrile and incoherent condition. Unlike Richmond, Richard can barely contemplate the foreseen outcome of the action forced upon him. He continues to threaten Stanley, whom he has good reason to mistrust, through the person of his son; but, beyond the steps which immediate necessity imposes upon him, his innermost thoughts are already dominated by the prospect of annihilation, and contemplate what his own vivid phrase describes as 'the blind cave of eternal night', and are ready to make confession of foreboding:

I have not that alacrity of spirit,
Nor cheer of mind, that I was wont to have. (V. iii. 73)

By contrast to this condition we are shown Richmond consecrating himself and his army serenely to 'the just God whose captain I account myself', whilst punishment and restoration join hands in his advancing train.

As night falls, and its ghostly shadows reveal to the rival contentants their contrasted images of the past, Richard is left, in a soliloquy perhaps more searching in its implications than anything Shakespeare had yet written, to pronounce his recognition of the egoist's isolated doom:

What do I fear? myself? there's none else by:
Richard loves Richard; that is, I *am* I. (V. iii. 183)

The assassin's definition of his state is laconic and direct at the last, as befits a man who has awakened from the dream of action and ironic self-assertion in which he has hitherto sought refuge from an awareness of his real condition. The result of a life-long dedication to the egoist's desire for power is seen to be the impossibility of self-evasion, of escape from what now emerges, with dreadful clarity, as the limits of the isolated self. As Richard goes on to confess in his last vain effort to come to terms with the situation in which he finds himself:

Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am;
Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:
Lest I revenge. What, myself, upon myself?

Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? for any good
That I myself have done upon myself?
O, no! alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself! (V. iii. 185)

This is a far cry from the initial confidence of the 'Machiavellian' prince, arrogantly dedicated to his own advancement; but it is essential to understand that the end was implied in the beginning, that the whole story answers to an irreversible tragic logic. Before the final bar of a judgement he has never recognized, but which now imposes itself upon him, Richard ends by confessing the isolation which he has chosen for himself and which has now become, by virtue of this very choice, his inescapable limitation:

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;
And if I die, no soul will pity me:
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself? (V. iii. 201)²⁶

To the last Richard is haunted by the thought of exclusion from the world of 'love', which he recognizes in his own despite as the natural sign of human solidarity and in the absence of which life presents itself to the egoist as empty, simply void of meaning. This is perhaps the Shakespearean equivalent, more human and less 'metaphysical', of the vision of hell which haunted Faustus in Marlowe's great play, where it also produces a last great speech confessing to irreparable loss.²⁷ It is significant that now, for the first time, Richard confesses that he is afraid. 'O Ratcliff, I fear, I fear'; and when his servant seeks to restore him to confidence—'Nay, good my lord, be not afraid of shadows'—he can only confess that 'shadows to-night' have struck more 'terror' into his soul than the 'substance of ten thousand soldiers'.

Once again, the nature of this confession is full of meaning. In terms of an obliterated distinction between 'substance' and 'shadow', reality and illusion, the moral duality which everywhere accompanies Shakespearean evil is already presented in the form of a psychological rift, a split in the personality which is the necessary consequence of perverse and unnatural choices. It is worth noting that Richmond has, at this same moment, received the visitation of

The sweetest sleep, and fairest boding dreams
That ever entered in a drowsy head, (V. iii. 228)

and that he is in a position to tell those who follow him:

I promise you, my soul is very joyful
In the remembrance of so fair a dream. (V. iii. 233)

As so often, and so surprisingly, occurs in this play, we sense anticipations of the vastly enriched world of *Macbeth*.

It is no more than appropriate, accordingly, that in his final oration to his soldiers, Richmond should lay stress upon the return to natural order which his victory will bring with it:

If you do free your children from the sword,
Your children's children quit you in your age; (V. iii. 262)

Whilst his rival, in contrast, can only seek relief in the illusion, finally self-engendered and self-maintained, that the presages of nature are empty of significance:

Not shine to-day! Why, what is that to me
More than to Richmond? (V. iii. 286)

The battle once joined becomes for him a last means of escaping from reality, whilst 'conscience' is dismissed, in accordance with the 'philosophy' that has consistently ruled his life, as 'but a word that cowards use'.²⁸ 'Our strong arms be our conscience, swords our law': but the end of this show of confidence is seen, on its own confession, to be at best dubious:

March on, join bravely, let's to't pell-mell;
If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell. (V. iii. 313)²⁹

After this last flourish, made less to encourage his followers than to conceal from himself the sense of his own vanity, Richard in a final rousing speech revives for a moment some of his undoubted qualities as a leader of men in his lively dismissal of the enemy before him³⁰

A sort of vagabonds, rascals, and runaways,
seeing in them no more than

these basard Bretons, whom our fathers
Have in their own land beaten, bobbi'd, and thump'd. (V. iii. 334)

To the last he acts bravely in his despair. As his followers report:

The king enacts more wonders than a man,
Daring an opposite to every danger:
His horse is slain, and all on foot he fights,
Seeking for Richmond in the throat of death. (V. iv. 2)³⁰

All this frenzied activity answers finally, as we have already seen reason to suspect, to an attempt at self-evasion, a reaction against recognized vacancy. As we follow Richard to his death, we can hardly avoid establishing a further parallel with *Macbeth* at the end of his tragedy, equally facing retribution in the person of Macduff. Like *Macbeth*, he succumbs to the death which the nature of his own choices has finally implied. Richmond is duly crowned (V. v), making his appeal to 'smooth-faced peace' and announcing, with the final conquest of evil after its perverse impulse has been at last exhausted, the end of civil strife and the restoration of 'smiling plenty' and 'fair prosperous days'. Shakespeare's first series of chronicle plays has been brought, with the fulness of time, to its logical and impressive conclusion.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Shakespeare: The Last Phase

Shakespeare: From Richard II to Henry V

Shakespeare: The Roman Plays

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2

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this foundation whenever the state of the action so requires. By the side of these works, even some of the effects of the great tragedies seem to have been reached with effort, to represent a sensibility strained to the utmost in the intensity of its reaction to emotional stresses; whilst the verse of the final comedies seems at times to achieve its symbolic effects through conventions of greater and more artificial complexity.

THE ROMAN TRAGEDIES

III

SHAKESPEARE'S major plays on Roman history span between them the supremely creative years of his dramatic career. The earliest of the three, *Julius Caesar*, was separated by no great distance in time from the two parts of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* and is concentrated, like these plays, upon the interplay of personal motives and public necessity; whilst the other two—*Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*—belong to the dramatist's last years and combine an acute understanding of historical processes with the illuminating presence of a distinctive tragic vision. Thus variously situated in time, the plays, by bringing together into a mutually enriching unity two of the principal themes of Shakespeare's mature work—those expressed respectively in the historical chronicles and in the series of great tragedies which followed them—constitute one of the undoubted peaks of his achievement.

The historical matter of all three plays is principally derived from Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, as translated into English from the French of Amyot by Thomas North.¹ The fact is important for an understanding of the plays themselves; for, whereas it is, generally speaking, true that Shakespeare's acknowledged masterpieces—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*—owe little more than the barest outline of their plots to the comparatively artless narratives from which they derive, in the Roman tragedies we are conscious of dealing with what might almost be called a collaboration. It is well known that long passages from North's highly workmanlike translation were almost directly versified by Shakespeare; but a comparison of the relevant passages² shows that the dramatist, in following his original closely, was in fact developing his own conception, being fully himself. The style of these plays, far from reflecting a pedestrian process of versification, shows a unique combination of narrative lucidity, achieved through the easy, almost conversational use of spoken rhythms and vernacular phrases, with poetic intensities that flow effortlessly from

I Julius Caesar

The action of *Julius Caesar* turns, in the tense simplicity of its narrative, upon an event of unique historical importance. Round this event with its varied and often contrasted significances for the Elizabethan mind,³ Shakespeare has developed a pattern of political passions which answers to a closely knit dramatic plan. The early scenes show Caesar and his enemies converging upon the striking of a blow which has in its inevitability, in the universal concern it focuses upon itself, the quality of a tragic sacrifice. The deed itself and the action which follows from it lead, in the central episodes, to the conflict of public and personal motives involved in the clash of Brutus and Antony over the dictator's dead body. Finally, in the concluding stages, the consequences of the murder are revealed through their effect upon each of the contending parties. The conspirators, brought to see their motives in the unflattering light of reality, collapse into mutual recrimination and confessed futility; whilst, against a background of practical assertion and ruthless calculation of the odds, a new Roman order replaces that which has been destroyed.

In one sense, and in one sense only, the entire action is centred upon the murdered dictator. He disappears, it is true, at the end of the first half of the play, and his appearances before his elimination have been strangely brief and enigmatic; but the fact remains that, alive, the action turns upon him, and when he is dead his spirit remains, as Brutus unwillingly confesses,⁴ persistently and implacably alive. The emphasis, however, in the presentation of the character lies elsewhere, in a notable sense of discrepancy between the figure which the dictator, obliged by the force of circumstance, presents to the world and the reality of what he in fact is. From the first, his use of the impersonal,

royal style implies an effort to live self-consciously up to the requirements which his isolated and uneasy eminence imposes. 'Always,' in his own phrase (l. ii. 217), 'I am Caesar,' and in that 'always' there is a sense of danger, of living poised over a void, an imminent disaster, which, as we approach him more closely, his behaviour repeatedly confirms. It is true that many of the initial intimations of weakness in Caesar—Cassius' ascription to him of physical febleness, Casca's belittling report of his 'swooning' in the market place (l. ii. 249)—come from his enemies, and are to be understood as the product of envy: but true also that these same incidents contribute to the impression of one whom his circumstances oblige to play out a role, a course moreover in which he is largely supported by a vanity which will at last contribute to his disaster.

The scene (ll. ii) in which Caesar is persuaded, against his intimate will, to go to the Capitol is in this respect revealing. As Calpurnia, shaken by premonitions which the elements confirm, presses him to stay at home he clings obstinately to the determination which his situation has imposed upon him. 'Caesar shall go forth': the dangers that threaten him are always *behind* him, out of sight, waiting to assert themselves against a man whose position obliges him to outface them:

when they shall see

The face of Caesar, they are vanished. (ll. ii. 17)

Upon this illusion of constancy the dictator's position, and with it the fortunes of the Roman world, depend.

Faced, indeed, by portents 'beyond all use', threats to human conceptions of order and purpose, Caesar responds with what is at once the striking of an attitude and a touch of sincerity:

What can be avoided

Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods? (ll. ii. 26)

In the light of this implicit fatalism the renewed affirmation which follows—'Caesar shall go forth'—must seem strangely obstinate. It is followed by a further insistence upon the pose which we have come to associate with his dignity, a stressing of self-consciousness which ends by insinuating the presence of the weakness it seeks to deny:

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,

It seems to me most strange that men should fear;

Seeing that death, a necessary end,

Will come when it will come. (ll. ii. 34)

The lines answer to that sense of fatality, of subjection to the temporal process, which is present as a factor limiting human choices in all Shakespeare's plays of this period. Against this pervasive influence, Caesar is engaged in building up an impression of consistency which began no doubt as a real reflection of greatness, but which his situation, and the destiny which covers all human actions, now imposes upon him.

Caesar is revealed, in fact, less as brave and consistent at this moment than as talking himself into consistency. Beneath this determination, however, weakness once more asserts itself. Calpurnia persuades him to a course which his own instincts have already insinuated; he acquiesces ('Mark Antony shall say I am not well'), even while clinging to the excuse that it is the frailty of others that has imposed this change of plan: 'For thy humour I will stay at home.' The arrival of Decius Brutus to escort him to the Senate brings to the surface the contradictions by which he is torn. Decius is to tell the senators that he 'will not come to-day'; since it is false that he cannot, and that he 'dare not', false, only the bare affirmation of his will can meet the case:

The cause is in my will: I will not come;

That is enough to satisfy the senate. (ll. ii. 71)

The retort reveals the arbitrary nature of the consistency which circumstance imposes upon Caesar. It also covers an inner uncertainty; the pose has taken possession of the man, and will from now on lead him to his fate.

After Caesar's account of Calpurnia's dream and Decius' ingenious exercise in interpretation—both expressed in the heightened, almost hysterical language which surrounds conspiracy throughout—Decius dives home his point by a highly effective combination of flattery with an appeal to the dictator's unavowed love of power. The Senate have decided to confer a crown upon 'mighty Caesar', and if he does not attend the session, 'their minds may change'. More dangerously still, Decius emphasizes the mockery which may follow if the truth were known:

It were a mock

Apt to be rendered, for some one to say

'Break up the senate till another time,

When Caesar's wife shall meet with better dreams.' (ll. ii. 96)

The appeal to vanity supports that to ambition, and indifference to

Calpurnia—reflected in an attitude towards her that surely stands in significant contrast to Brutus' tender treatment of Portia (II. i)—is present in both. Above all—and here Decius is careful to cover his daring with a profession of love—it will be whispered that the master of Rome is 'afraid': a hint than which none is better calculated to play upon the strange complex of conflicting emotions at the dictator's heart.

With this last speech, Decius achieves his aim. The victim brushes aside all misgivings—'How foolish do your fears seem now, Calpurnia!—jokes with his enemies, and greets Antony with a manly jest. Throughout we feel a recovery of confidence, a readiness to accept willingly what has now become his fate. The emphasis on 'friendship', on taking wine together, underlines the monstrous treachery afoot; only Brutus, standing aside from the main stream, 'yearns' to think that appearances are 'false', that 'every like is not the same'. From this moment, Caesar's history marches together with that of his enemies to converge at the base of Pompey's effigy.

Caesar, however, though he dominates the action by virtue of his public position, is in no sense the principal moving force of the tragedy. This is provided, in the early scenes, by Brutus, who, in seeking the clarification of his own motives, gives the action its dynamic quality. His initial reflections are already charged with implications of character:

Yeted I am

Of face with passions of some difference,

Conceptions only proper to myself,

Which give some soil perhaps to my behaviours. (I. ii. 39)

The expression, notably reminiscent of certain utterances of Hamlet, stresses the nature, essentially inward-looking and exploratory, of his dilemma. To this Stoic theorist, tied to the contemplation of his own virtue, the 'passions' present themselves as disturbing elements, shadowing the unity and self-control which he craves as the key to action. It is of the nature of his conflict to be without communication, 'proper' to himself alone; and this inwardness, the product of his character and of his assumptions about life, affects him, when uneasily stirred to action, as a blot upon the harmonious personality at which he aims, a 'soil' upon the fair outward presentation of himself which he so persistently craves.

It is the function of Cassius, by playing upon this desire for communi-

cation, to mould him to ends not finally his own. The peculiar relationship between the pair, and the method of its dramatic presentation, are both indicated in the query which opens his attack and in Brutus' reply:

Cassius: Tell me, good Brutus, can you see your face?

Brutus: No, Cassius: for the eye sees not itself

But by reflection, by some other things. (I. ii. 51)

Under the guise of providing, in the shape of 'thoughts of great value, worthy cogitations', a 'mirror' to reflect his friend's 'hidden worthiness', Cassius will bring him to see not a reality, an objective vision of his strength and weakness, but the 'shadow' of the imperfectly understood desires which will finally bring him, not to the affirmation of his ideals, but to personal and public ruin.

Beneath these assertions of friendship and plain dealing, Cassius' approach to Brutus is fraught with calculation. Those of 'the best respect in Rome' look to him for redress: as they groan beneath 'this age's yoke', their desire is that 'noble Brutus'—the adjective initiates a line of flattery which, precisely because it contains truth, will be particularly insidious—understood his own wishes and motives, 'had his eyes'. Brutus' first reaction is honest and true to character:

Into what dangers would you lead me, Cassius,

That you would have me seek into myself

For that which is not in me? (I. ii. 63)

It is some time before he will speak so truly again. Meanwhile, it is Cassius' mission to undermine this candid self-estimate, replacing it by a false confidence which carries no inner conviction. Taking up the image of the mirror, he turns to his own ends the need for guidance which makes his friend so pliable to his purposes:

since you know you cannot see yourself

So well as by reflection, I your glass

Will modestly discover to yourself

That of yourself which you yet know not of. (I. ii. 67)

This is a dangerous proceeding, made the more so by the tendency, which the following exchanges reveal, for the two friends to vie with one another in setting up idealized images of themselves to minister to what is finally, beneath their poses of Roman virtue and public spirit, an intimate self-satisfaction. When Cassius denies that he is 'a common laughter', 'fawning' on men with the intention of later

'scandalizing' them, he is no doubt comparing himself, not altogether unjustly, with such as Antony and pointing to some true consequences of Caesar's exorbitant power; but, beneath the implied contrast, envy, the desire to debase what he has been unable to achieve, vitiates the judgment.

For Brutus, similarly, devotion to the public good expresses itself through assumption of that 'honour' which was, more especially at this time, so variously in Shakespeare's mind:

What is it that you would impart to me?
If it be aught toward the general good,
Set honour in one eye and death i' the other,
And I will look on both indifferently. (I. ii. 84)

Though expressed with a more 'philosophic' detachment, the spirit behind these words, is akin to that which prompted Hotspur to his generous but useless sacrifice;⁶ and it reveals much the same tendency to replace the balance of judgment by simpler but more illusory certainties. As Brutus concludes, not without a touch of self-esteem,

let the gods so speed me as I love
The name of honour more than I fear death. (I. ii. 88)

It will be, perhaps, one of the lessons of Brutus' tragedy that the 'names' of things, however noble and consoling in abstraction, are no substitute for a balanced consideration of their reality. 'Honour' is the way of becoming a trap set for those who, like Brutus, fail to temper idealism with a proper measure of self-awareness.

The soliloquy in which Brutus finally arrives at his decision, and thereby makes the murder of Caesar possible, is so riddled with implicit contradictions that some students of the play⁷ have judged it incomprehensible. It is, however, thoroughly in character. Brutus, not himself an evil man, is about to perform an act which will release evil impulses whose true nature he persistently fails to grasp; the discrepancy between what he is and what he does is reflected in his recognizable effort to persuade himself, against convictions intimately present in his nature, that the resolve he is about to take is necessary and just. Had he been consistently the doctrinaire republican Cassius would have him be, the admitted fact that Caesar 'would be crown'd' would have been, for him if not for Shakespeare and most of his contemporaries, a sufficient reason for his elimination. Brutus, however, as the play presents him, is no such thing, but rather a man who seeks in decisive

action the confirmation of his own virtue, whose purposes are imposed upon him by those who play upon inconsistencies, weak spots in his own nature; and it is part of his tragedy that he cannot forget, much as he now desires to do so, that his intended victim is a human being and his friend. This situation bears fruit in his recognition, which a convinced republican would have found irrelevant, that he has as yet no valid *personal* reason for the deed he contemplates. 'To speak truth of Caesar', he admits,

I have not known when his affectional sway'd
More than his reason. (II. i. 20)

'I know no personal cause to spurn at him': the admission is, for a man who sincerely values friendship, personal relationships, serious enough; but since another side of Brutus' nature craves abstract consistency, the wedding of high principle to effective action, he turns this recognition into an argument for clearing himself of dubious personal motives and seeks to place the burden of justification squarely upon an appeal to the 'general' good.

The argument, inevitably, is pressed home with less than complete conviction. 'How that *might* change his nature, there's the question,' Brutus urges upon himself, in a strangely tentative attitude, only to recognize later that

the quarrel
Will bear no colour for the thing he is; (II. i. 28)

but, since a contrary necessity urges him to conceal these doubts, calls upon him to assert a certainty which he is far from feeling; emphasis must be laid on a *possible*, an unproven danger:

Fashion it thus; that what he is, augmented,
Would run to these and these extremities. (II. i. 30)

The vagueness, the readiness to 'fashion it thus' in accordance with preconceptions in which observed reality has little part to play, is highly symptomatic. Brutus, precisely because the vacillation which has characterized his reactions since the beginning covers deep inner uncertainty, speaks to himself evasively in terms of specious 'philosophical' commonplace—

The abuse of greatness is when it disjoins
Remorse from power . . .
lowliness is young ambition's ladder— (II. i. 18)

and takes refuge in an imposed ruthlessness:

think him as a serpent's egg
Which, hatched, would as his kind grow mischievous,
And kill him in the shell. (II. i. 32)

The tendency to cover lack of intimate consistency with a show of impersonal brutality belongs to Brutus' peculiar brand of theoretical idealism. It is part of the presentation of human contradiction, whose exposure is so close to the spirit of this play. Brutus seeks at this moment to resolve an intimate, tragic disharmony through an act of decision foreign to his nature; the confusion revealed in his own motives, and in his attitude to the world of external realities, is one that will follow him through the contradictions of his career to the final resolution of suicide.

Confronted with the conspirators he has agreed to lead, Brutus further reveals his true nature. In presenting him to them Cassius stresses his need to live up to the conception of himself which his ancestors and his 'philosophy' have laid upon him. He suggests that, unlike these ancestors, Brutus is weak, indecisive; public opinion demands of him that 'opinion' of himself which every true Roman wishes to share. Brutus, in reply, urges his new associates to confirm their dedication and seeks confidence in a rhetorical declaration of his own:

do not stain
The even virtue of our enterprise,
Nor the insuppressive mettle of our spirits,
To think that or our cause or our performance
Did need an oath: when every drop of blood
That every Roman bears, and nobly bears,
Is guilty of a several bastardy
If he do break the smallest particle
Of any promise that hath pass'd from him. (II. i. 132)

The best comment on this earnest but slightly self-conscious harangue is provided by the return, which at once follows, to practical considerations. Cassius and his friends wish to enrol the support of Cicero, whose reputation will 'purchase us'—the verb is appropriately chosen—'a good opinion':

And buy men's voices to commend our deeds.

Since, however, it is Brutus' adhesion that all desire, it is enough for

him to reject Cicero as incapable of 'following' for all to agree that he should not be approached.

The basic weakness of the plot is more closely touched upon when Cassius urges that Mark Antony should die. Brutus' rejection of this advice is of very considerable interest as a further revelation of the kind of man he is. It combines an effort to be practical, revealed in the opening concession to expediency ('Our course will seem too bloody'), with failure to be so. It is finally the pose, the elevation of himself into a figure of magnanimous principle, that engages his emotions. The expression is not without a touch of the grotesque. 'Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius,' he urges, and follows up the plea with an unreal distinction between 'the spirit of men' and their material 'blood' which must so regrettably be shed:

We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar,
And in the spirit of men there is no blood!
O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit,
And not dismember Caesar! (II. i. 167)

The distinction no doubt answers in part to the desire to make credible Brutus' nobility in the face of the nature of the deed on which he has set himself. The difficulty, however, is turned into an asset, a revelation of character. Brutus the idealist is seen as one more example of that typical Shakespearean creation, the man who, willing an end, is ready to deceive himself concerning the means necessary to gain it. 'Caesar must bleed for 't,' he recognizes, but covers the admission with futile and self-conscious posing:

gentle friends,
Let's kill him boldly, but not wrathfully;
Let's carve him as a dish fit for the gods,
Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds;
And let our hearts, as subtle masters do,
Sir up their servants to an act of rage,
And after seem to chide 'em. (II. i. 171)

The speech points to the presence of a variety of motives in the process of decorating brutality with strained emotional expression. Addressing his future accomplices as 'gentle friends', Brutus, in admitting the fact of bloody death, embroiders it with the far-fetched and finally absurd evocation of 'a dish fit for the gods'. The odd mixture of impracticality and a certain unconscious cynicism is brought home forcibly in the

description of the conspirators' hearts as 'subtle masters' who, in rousing their 'servant' feelings to a simulation, an 'act of rage', seem after, for the purpose of obtaining public approval, 'to chide them'. 'We shall be call'd purgers, not murderers': the reality, as so often occurs with men of Brutus' type, is disguised by a change of name, and this becomes the justification of a decision politically unwise, if humanly comprehensible, which will finally bring the conspiracy to ruin.

Such are the main elements which, converging, unite in the blow which strikes down Caesar in the central action of the play. The victim's last utterance, claiming the constancy of the 'northern star', is the most theatrical of all his assertions of fixity. Just as his fall is about to stress his common humanity, he accentuates unnaturally the distance that separates him from other men:

men are flesh and blood, and apprehensive;
Yet in the number I do know but one
That unassailable holds on his rank,
Unshak'd of motion; (III. i. 67)

but already his own unsuspecting words—

and that I am he
Let me a little show it, even in this— (III. i. 70)

amount to a plea, an appeal to the world to support him in this self-estimate. It finds its answer in the repeated stabs of Brutus and his associates, and in his fall at the foot of the effigy of Pompey, whom he himself formerly overthrew.

The fall is followed by a tense moment of silence, set against the gathering climax which has so splendidly preceded it. Immediately after this, the emotions so far concentrated upon Caesar's overpowering presence break out with the rising hysteria of libertarian sentiment. 'Liberty! freedom! tyranny is dead!' cries Cinna; and even Brutus, after calling on those around him to maintain their calm, turns to a more emotional line of appeal:

Stoop, Romans, stoop,
And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood
Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords;
Then walk we forth, even to the market-place,
And, waving our red weapons o'er our heads,
Let's all cry, 'Peace, freedom, and liberty!' (III. i. 105)

Here, if anywhere, and in the self-congratulatory exchanges that follow, a final comment on the true nature of conspiracy is unerringly made. The gap between profession and reality, the aspiration to freedom and the deed to which it has led, is remorselessly asserted in the insistence upon spilled blood: blood not, as in *Macbeth*, horrifyingly sticking to the assassin's hands, but lavish, free-flowing, answering to the strained emotions with which the murderers have sought to disguise, even from themselves, the true nature of their crime.

In this charged emotional climate, Mark Antony—first through a messenger and then in his own person—cautiously feels his way to the centre of the stage. By the end of his exchange with Brutus, which culminates in a grotesque parody—'Let each man render me his bloody hand'—of the reconciliation which Caesar's assassin has so impossibly proposed, he knows that his position is stronger than he can have dared to hope. Left alone with his thoughts, his last speech in this scene is a further revelation of character. Couched in the facile rhetoric which comes so readily to him, it apostrophizes the dead Caesar as 'thou bleeding piece of earth' and goes on to speak of 'costly blood' and to characterize his wounds as 'dumb mouths' and 'ruby lips'. In a world so fluent in feeling, where emotion swells in accordance with the forms of rhetoric, intensely rather than deeply, like the blood which issues from the wounds it contemplates, Antony's oratory is perfectly at home. It issues, however, in a vision of chaos. 'All pity' shall be 'chok'd' with 'custom of fell deeds',

And Caesar's spirit ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war;
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial. (III. i. 270)

This conclusion to the first open revelation of his pent-up feelings carries with it an estimate of Antony's limitations as a moral being. His rhetoric pays itself with its own expression, represents emotional irresponsibility in one who can also calculate and use his rhetorical gifts for ends deliberately and cunningly conceived. The vision of chaos, far from appalling Antony, finally attracts him, answers to a necessity of his nature; and that is why his type of emotion, not less than Brutus' frigid assertions of principle, is to be seen less in its own

right than as a fragment, a partial aspect of the unity which Caesar's death has destroyed in Rome. The end of this process is 'carrion', self-destruction, death: that Antony, carried on the flow of words which reflects his emotional nature, can dwell with complacency on these dreadful realities is, by implication, an exposure of his most intimate motives.

The famous oration scene (III. ii) is too familiar to call for analysis in detail. It shows a Brutus caught in the consequences of his own act, deprived—now that the mood of exaltation which accompanied him to it has passed—of the impulse to go further. Against him is set an Antony who, in the act of affirming himself as the adventurer and theatrical orator he is, is also the instrument by which the *trifles* about murder emerges to the light of day. This clash of aims and temperament takes place before a background provided by a new element in the action: the Roman populace. The crowd has not hitherto played a decisive part in events, though its fickleness has been indicated more than once in the early scenes.⁹ It now makes the voice of its appetites heard in a more direct fashion, thereby showing from still another point of view the nature of the forces which Brutus and Cassius have so irresponsibly released from their normal restraints. At the end of the scene, as the mob moves off to burn and plunder, Antony's final comment is a revealing disclaimer of responsibility. 'Now let it work': the orator, resting on his laurels, looks with satisfaction on his achievement, dwells with a certain pleasure on the chaos he has let loose:

Mischief, thou art afoot,
Take thou what course thou wilt. (III. ii. 265)

The final effect is a revelation of irresponsibility accompanied by sinister pleasure:

Fortune is merry,
And in this mood will give us anything. (III. ii. 277)

That, later on, she will assume other moods, ultimately less congenial to the speaker, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the grim little episode (III. iii) of the destruction of Cinna the poet for a chance coincidence of name comes effectively to announce the brutality which will from now on so frequently preside over the course of events.

The unleashing of the Roman mob brings to an end the more dynamic part of the action. The last scenes of the tragedy exhibit the consequences of Caesar's murder in a spirit of notable detachment.

They show a Rome divided by covert rivalries which can only end in the elimination of all but one of its contending factions and, after that elimination, in the restoration of unity under Octavius. Apart from this resolution, the personal tragedy of Brutus is rounded off in the self-inflicted death which is its logical conclusion.

It is important to note that this dispassionate evaluation falls impartially on both parties. As the fourth act opens, Antony and a notably frigid and non-committal Octavius are seen in the company of Lepidus, contemplating the death of their relations and former friends without illusion and without feeling. The initial words of Antony, who has so recently exhibited himself in the forum as a man of sensibility, are 'These many then shall die'; Octavius, typically passing from the general statement to its particular application, adds (turning to Lepidus) 'Your brother too must die,' and obtains his companion's assent:

Upon condition Publius shall not live,
Who is your sister's son, Mark Antony. (IV. i. 4)

The callousness of the exchange, the readiness to write off human lives by marks on paper, is rounded off by Antony's complacent rejoinder: 'He shall not live; look, with a spot I damn him.' The final suggestion that the will, which Antony has so recently used to stir up mob emotion in the name of generosity, should be studied to determine 'How to cut off some charge in legacies' adds a revealing touch of parsimony to the display of cynicism in action.

The world which is to replace that formerly dominated by Caesar is indeed mean, petty, and dangerous. The triumvirs are already engaged in the first stages of a ruthless struggle for power. As soon as Lepidus has been dispatched for the will, Antony refers disparagingly to him ('a slight unmeritable man'; 'meat to be sent on errands') and proposes his elimination. Octavius, whose moment is still to come, bides his time ('he is a tried and valiant soldier') and is answered by Antony with a further display of cynicism. 'So is my horse, Octavius,' with Lepidus thus removed from consideration, the two leaders return to discussion of the 'great things' in which their own future is involved. The last words of the scene, spoken by Octavius, stress the insecurity that now surrounds the entire political future:

some that smile have in their hearts, I fear,
Millions of mischiefs. (IV. i. 50)

Such is the world which has survived Caesar, and in which his avengers are faced to move.

On the other side the circumstances of Caesar's enemies, as they are shown in the process of coming to a conception which is, in its accepted rhetorical selves, answer to a conception which is, in its accepted pessimism, finally similar. In them, division and self-doubt replace the cynical manoeuvres of their foes. Cassius, no longer the ardent friend of the early scenes, whom the prospect of action united (perhaps, in the last analysis, spuriously) to a colleague whom interest also demanded as his associate, now salutes that associate with distant correctness, no longer shows¹

such free and frankly confidence,
As he hath used of old. (IV. ii. 17)

Brutus' reaction is heavy with the sense of fatality. Lucilius has described 'a hot friend cooling', and the process by which love begins 'to sicken and decay' has its symptoms in 'an enforced ceremony'. The wish of Brutus to maintain 'plain and simple faith' is at once moving and strangely inadequate. It springs from his most deeply held theoretical conception of life, in the absence of which his integrity, his belief in himself and in the purity of his motives, must founder; but it runs against the nature of things as determined by the course of action in which he has compromised his honesty. Against the background of advancing armies we feel already the 'sinking at the trial' which, proceeding from adverse external realities, mirrors inner dejection.

The motives behind this discussion are, from the first, of some complexity. Cassius, rushing typically into the void which opens before him, complains that he has been 'wrong'd'; but it is clear from his explanation that the wrong—an accusation of complicity in accepting bribes—has been inflicted in a dubious context. Brutus, indeed, having made his point in a tone of moral superiority—'You wrong'd yourself to write in such a case'—cannot refrain from rubbing salt into the wound. By accusing Cassius of 'an itching palm', he rouses the impetuous self-respect of his friend to violent protest:

You know that you are Brutus that speaks this,
Or, by the gods, this speech were else your last; (IV. iii. 13)

and there is a touch of insensitivity in the responding reference to 'chastisement' which leaves Cassius speechless in its implication of

lofty superiority. The two characters, so precariously united against Caesar, are seen to be perfectly designed to exasperate one another to the limits of endurance.

As the gap between them widens, Brutus is led to recall the integrity which inspired their actions: 'Did not great Caesar bleed for justice sake?' This thought, contrasted with the sad reality of the present, leads him to back his reproof with a further gesture towards the idealism of the past:

What, shall one of us
That struck the foremost man of all this world
But for supporting robbers, shall we now
Contaminate our fingers with base bribes,
And sell the mighty space of our large honours
For so much trash as may be grasped thus? (IV. iii. 21)

The gesture is ample, noble, and yet it covers weakness. As always, Brutus is taking refuge in a satisfactory picture of himself as one who has dared, for 'honour' alone, to lead and inspire a conspiracy that overthrew 'the foremost man of all this world'; but where disinterested ends and egoism, the need to live up to an ennobling vision of his own motives begins, we might be hard put to decide.

Whatever the truth about Brutus' purity (and no simple judgment would be appropriate) his attitude could not be more precisely calculated to rub the raw edges of Cassius' sense of inferiority. As Brutus ceases, he describes what he has heard as a 'baiting' of himself and utters the ominous warning: 'I'll not endure it.' His touchy self-respect has been offended, and now responds by appealing to his superior experience:

I am a soldier, I,
Older in practice, abler than yourself
To make conditions. (IV. iii. 30)

The repetition of 'I' indicates the nature of the wound inflicted upon Cassius' own type of egoism. That of Brutus, though more complex, is not less strong. It impels him, where tact would have passed over the burning issue, to exasperate his companion further by contemptuous denial. 'You are not, Cassius.' 'I am.' 'I say you are not': the result is to create an ugly wrangle in which the last shreds of self-respect seem likely to be swallowed up. At the culminating moment, Cassius' threatening 'tempt me no further' is matched by the infuriating superiority of 'Away, slight man!' and by the final insult:

Hear me, for I will speak.
Must I give way and room to your rash choler? (IV. iii. 38)

At this moment, the realities of character which underlie the previous affirmations of constancy and devotion to principle are revealed for what they are. The rest of the scene is devoted to working them out fully, and to an attempt to cover them up in the interests of a cause already lost.

At first, however, it is not a matter of covering up, but of adding further irritation to Cassius' open wound. In this Brutus, by a trait which links curiously with his self-conscious idealism, but which is not on reflection incompatible with it, is a master. 'Must I endure all this?' Cassius cries, as though demanding clemency, and receives the bitter exasperation of the insult—'All this! ay more! First till your proud heart break'—and the contemptuous dismissal that follows:

Go show your slaves how choleric you are,
And make your bondmen tremble! (IV. iii. 43)

The rest of the speech, so true to the frigid egoism of the man 'armed strong in honesty', rises to a final, almost sadistic determination to inflict humiliation:

By the gods,
You shall digest the venom of your spleen,
Though it do split you; for from this day forth,
I'll use you for my mirth, yea, for my laughter,
When you are waspish. (IV. iii. 46)

The lines are rich in inflection, in the varied revelation of character. There is pleasure in inflicting humiliation, moral callousness, and contempt, together with a bitter pleasure in true characterization in the final description of Cassius as 'waspish'. The fact is that the element of egoism present from the first beneath Brutus' noble facade is coming to the surface under the stress of his growing awareness of standing intolerably in a false situation. The effect of this outburst, though palliated, can never be undone; and Cassius' broken reply, 'Is it come to this?' clearly involves a glance back to the idealistic unity of purpose in which Caesar's murder was carried out and which is now being revealed in so unflattering a light.

The healing of this breach and the return to at least the appearance of unity are accomplished with no small tact. The conspirators, seeing

the abyss opening at their feet, draw back in horror. Both, we may feel, are moved beneath the surface of their reproaches by a sense that it is their own past, their capacity for continued belief in their moral dignity, which they are in reality placing in jeopardy; and when Cassius breaks into further reproach, self-exhibition is subtly combined with a true sense of personal betrayal. 'Cassius is a-weary of the world': here it may seem that a conscious appeal to emotion prevails, but the following phrases surely strike a valid note in their criticism of Brutus' frigid moralizing:

Hated by one he loves; braved by his brother!
Check'd like a bondman; all his faults observed,
Set in a note-book, learn'd, and conn'd by rote,
To cast into my teeth. (IV. iii. 95)

Brutus, no doubt realizing that he has gone too far, meets this outburst, which culminates in Cassius' offer of his dagger, with a genuine attempt to reduce the tension. He is, however, characteristically clumsy in his effort to adjust his words to a new mood. His phrase 'Be angry when you will, it shall have scope' sounds stiffly, rather like the humouring of a self-willed child; men such as Brutus do not easily descend from the pedestal on which their lives are based. Beneath the clumsiness, however, there is now revealed a deep unhappiness, the immediate cause of which is still being held back from us:

O Cassius, you are yoked with a lamb,
That carries anger as the flint bears fire,
Who, much enforced, shows a hasty spark,
And straight is cold again. (IV. iii. 109)

The reference to feeling hardly struck as from a flinty surface, an innate coldness, reveals tellingly the diffidence, the emotional clumsiness, which is part of the character; and the sincerity of the revelation opens the way to a rueful, disillusioned reconciliation. The impression left by the whole exchange is one of the cooling embers of a passion doomed to extinction, but surviving, at least for the moment, the death of the original flame.

The immediate reason for Brutus' state, however, and for much that has gone before, has so far been held back by an admirable stroke of dramatic tact. It is now revealed. After calling for a bowl of wine, symbol—as it were—of harmony between friends, he meets Cassius' wondering comment 'I did not think you could have been so angry'

and the reproof of 'Of your philosophy you make no use' with his simple revelation: 'No man bears sorrow better: Portia is dead.' The disclosure, followed by an admirably brief and tense exchange of phrases—

—Portia is dead.

—Ha, Portia!

—She is dead— (IV. iii. 146)

gives a centre of stillness to the bitter exchanges that have gone before. From this heart of silence, Cassius' emotion speaks in a new, transformed-tone: 'How 'scaped I killing when I cross'd you so?' and backs it with the almost choric quality of his following exclamation: 'O insupportable and touching loss!'

The revelation is rounded off with the recovery by Brutus of his Stoic mask: 'Speak no more of her!' If the 'philosopher' in him dictates this assertion of emotional control, the husband's affection warns him not to give voice to a feeling which, once expressed, might shatter all containing limits. The hidden cause of emotional stress having been thus revealed, the bowl of wine is brought in, and in it Brutus pledges himself to 'bury all unkindness', receiving in return the fullness of Cassius' answering pledge:

My heart is thirsty for that noble pledge.

Fill, Lucius, till the wine o'erswell the cup;

I cannot drink too much of Brutus' love. (IV. iii. 159)

The reconciliation takes place under the shadow of tragedy. It cannot be a restoration of the original relationship, now irretrievably flawed by past choices; but, in spite of this, the human content is there, beyond all the purposes of political realism, and it rounds off suitably the issues so dramatically represented in what is, in some respects, the most interesting scene of the play.

The last stages of the tragedy represent the winding-up of the action in accordance with its underlying constants. The defeated Romans fall on their swords in a show of Stoic resolution, because no other choice is left open to them, and the victors turn away from the field 'to part the glory of this happy day'. As we follow these episodes to their conclusion, we cannot help feeling that something of the shadow of the Greek heroes in *Troilus and Cressida*, written possibly at a time not very far distant, already lies over them. Cassius commits suicide in an error caused by his own short-sightedness (as Titinius says:

'Alas, thou hast misconstrued everything!'), and the cold, practical Octavius is shown on the other side as reacting against the tutelage of Antony, who has made his victory possible and whom he will soon be ready to discard. With all his flaws, which have been so uncompromisingly revealed in the course of the play, Brutus is the only character who emerges with some measure of genuine personal stature. His last farewell rises, in contrast with so much that surrounds it, to the dignity of tragic assertion. 'Countryman,' he says, addressing through his remaining followers Rome and posterity:

My heart doth joy that yet in all my life

I found no man but he was true to me.

I shall have glory by this losing day,

More than Octavius and Mark Antony

By this vile conquest shall attain unto. (V. v. 34)

Once more it is important to avoid any simple reaction to the mood so expressed. The speech is truly noble, but is also an effort made by the speaker, in the absence of more solid ground for satisfaction, to encourage himself on the threshold of the annihilation which he has, after all, brought upon himself, and perhaps even obscurely come to desire.

The mood is, in any case, neither false nor triumphant, implies rather an acceptance of the end Brutus has come to see as inevitable, involved in the entire logic of his own past, and which he now approaches with a certain nostalgic craving for the dark:

Night hangs upon mine eyes; my bones would rest,

That have but labour'd to attain this hour. (V. v. 43)

In this mood of self-awareness, and snatching some crumbs of comfort from the fact that Strato, the instrument of his release, is 'a fellow of a good report', he dies in a mood akin to expiation:

Caesar, now be still;

I'll'd not thee with half so good a will. (V. v. 50)

In this admission, the whole contradictory nature of the enterprise to which Brutus so perversely forced himself in the name of humanity is gathered up in the prelude to a last act of self-annihilating resolve.

When Octavius enters to wind up the action with Antony, Strato is able to turn on Messala, now a bondman to the conqueror, with an assertion of the freedom that Brutus has found in death:

Brutus only overcame himself,
And no man else hath honour by his death. (V. v. 56)

For all his devotion, however, he is ready to follow Messala by joining the conqueror; the world of rhetorical aspiration and that of practical reality rarely run parallel. The contrast between personal integrity and the way of a world from which, we have good reason to believe, it will be increasingly exiled, is implicit in Antony's epitaph, in which he justifiably glorifies Brutus' personal qualities—

* This was the noblest Roman of them all— (V. v. 68)

without concealing the 'envy' which surrounded this nobility and used its inherent flaws for ends of its own. Octavius, having made the victor's appropriate gesture of generosity, now that generosity can no longer endanger his triumph, turns away with his companion to enjoy the 'glory' they have won. The results to which this sharing of the fruits of victory will lead are to be the theme for another play.

2 Antony and Cleopatra

It should be noted that in *Antony and Cleopatra* Act III the three scenes (viii, ix, and x) set on the Plain near Actium, are in the Oxford University Press edition referred to collectively as Scene viii; thus there are eleven, not thirteen, scenes in Act III. Similarly in Act IV the three scenes (x, xi, and xii) set on Ground Between the Two Camps are referred to collectively as Scene x; there are thirteen, not fifteen, scenes in Act IV.—Publisher's Note.

The critic of *Antony and Cleopatra* has, in offering an account of this great tragedy—for the fact of its greatness is plainly evident in purely poetic terms—to resolve a problem of approach, of the interpretation of the author's true intention. This problem has in the past produced a variety of strangely contrary solutions. Sooner or later, the critic finds himself faced by two interpretations of Shakespeare's invention in this play, each of them strongly defended and each of them arguing from elements demonstrably present in the text, whose only disadvantage is that they appear to be mutually exclusive. Is *Antony and Cleopatra*, to put the matter in other terms, a tragedy of lyrical inspiration, justifying love by presenting it as triumphant over death, or is it rather a remorseless exposure of human frailties, a presentation of

spiritual possibilities dissipated through a senseless surrender to passion? Both interpretations, as we have said, can be defended; but to give each its due, to see them less as contradictory than as complementary aspects of a unified artistic creation, is as difficult as it proves, in the long run, to be necessary for a proper understanding of the play.⁹

The fact that these two readings can, in spite of their appearance of contradiction, both be derived from a dispassionate examination of the tragedy can be explained in the light of the past development of Shakespeare's art, as we have sought to follow it in the preceding pages, for both correspond to aspects of that development which we have already had occasion to consider. From one point of view, indeed, this tragedy is the supreme expression in Shakespeare of love as *value*, as triumphant over time through and in despite of death; from another, it exposes, again through a consideration of human relationships in love, the weakness which makes possible the downfall of the tragic hero, a weakness, moreover, which is given a *social* reference by being consistently related to the presentation of a society in the advanced stages of decay. Now all these factors, positive and negative alike, have been given expression in Shakespeare's earlier plays, and the novelty of *Antony and Cleopatra*—which is at once the last and greatest of his chronicle plays¹⁰ and (with the exception of *Coriolanus*) his final exercise in tragedy—lies not in the fact of their presence but in the manner and complexity of their interrelation. The desire to see love as a manifestation of spiritual values derives, as we have seen,¹¹ from as far back at least as the sonnets, and in so far as *Antony and Cleopatra* succeeds in presenting it as such, the tragedy can be described as a positive counterpoise, given full depth and maturity, to *Troilus and Cressida*. The exposure of tragic weakness in the hero, first dramatically presented in *Orsello*,¹² gathers strength through the great plays which follow and is finally related to an explicit political study, similar in kind though vastly developed in conception to that originally expressed in the later works on English history, in the Roman theme of *Coriolanus*. It is the supreme achievement, rather than the problem, of *Antony and Cleopatra* to show that these two lines of development, far from excluding one another, are in fact mutually illuminating.

The presence of these various elements, positive and negative so to call them, is admirably indicated in the short opening scene of the play, which serves, in a manner highly characteristic of the mature Shakespeare, as a kind of overture to the main action, a first brief exposition