

Evolution of Shakespeare's Dramatic Art: A Short Survey

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Abstract

Human life is a tragedy as well as comedy; tears and smiles, sighs and shouts of joy, marriage and funeral go side by side. No doubt, Shakespeare was pre-eminently a writer of tragedies. Yet he wrote a number of comedies, which though not so elevating and inspiring, as his tragedies are, certainly maintain a standard, elsewhere in the history of dramatic comedies. Shakespeare wrote his tragedies when he was in serious mood, and when he felt mentally exhausted and too much occupied in serious problems, he sought for a mental relief and rest. Then he went to the fountain of comedy to drink the nectar of peace and relief, forgetting the heaviness of tragic impression.

When we study the development from the early Shakespeare to the later Shakespeare, or the Elizabethan Shakespeare to the Jacobean Shakespeare we find that there are four stages in the development of the dramatic art of Shakespeare. The speed with which Shakespeare transferred the character of dramatic blank verse is also remarkable. Many attempts have been made to explain the change in his art from tragedy to tragi-comedy and how far this change was his deliberate choice and how far it reflects a change of spirit. While considering this pattern of his development we ought not to be surprised to find him refusing to continue in a kind of drama which he had already carried to perfection and moving on to an experiment in a new kind. Present paper is a study of the evolution of Shakespeare's dramatic art and various reasons behind the changes that took place time to time during his literary journey.

Keywords: Shakespeare, dramatic art, tragedies, comedies, blank verse, Elizabethan, Jacobean

Introduction

There are four stages in the development of the dramatic art of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's first period represents the time of his apprenticeship to the art of dramatist. The first period is called 'In the Workshop' when Shakespeare was learning his trait as a dramatic craftsman. The Second period shows in general a great advance in power of characterization and in the command of poetic resources. This period is called 'In the World', that is, in this period Shakespeare gets some experience of human life. The third period extends from the beginning of the 17th century to about 1608. This is called the period of Sadness and Philosophical

Contemplation. The fourth period is the period of Calmness and Serenity and extends from 1609 to 1613.

The speed with which Shakespeare transferred the character of dramatic blank verse is remarkable. Shakespeare shook it free from the stiffness and brought tragic and comic intention into one totality of design. The new complexity which he gave to blank verse is noticeable in *Love's Labour's Lost*. From the opening scene there is a resonance in the verse, an assured strength of diction and musical phrasing, a boldness of imagery, far beyond the early comedies of Shakespeare. No one before in English comedy had spoken with such authority and brilliance. Ideas and images crowd into his verse from reserves that seem inexhaustible. To adapt the words of Holofernes, here is spirit full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions ...the gift is good in those in whom it is accurate, and we are thankful for it.'

When we study the development from the early Shakespeare to the later Shakespeare, or the Elizabethan Shakespeare to the Jacobean Shakespeare, the first illustration will be taken from that underrated comedy, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and the second will be from *Henry IV*, a play that has never been underrated, though critical discussion has been too much confined to analyses of the character and alleged cowardice of Falstaff. In *King John* and in *Henry IV* Shakespeare departed from the pattern of historical tragedy to which he had adhered in *Richard III* and *Richard II*. The main preoccupations are political and social, not tragic which is distributed over a wide range of interests and characters. The humor of Faulconbridge and Falstaff is fundamental which irradiates the serious scenes and provides a powerful commentary upon them.

Shakespeare had not been neglectful of tragedy in his early plays, but the gulf which separates his Elizabethan histories from his Jacobean tragedies as works of art makes it seem uncritical to use the same word 'tragedy' about a Richard II and a King Lear. In the catalogue *Titus Andronicus* goes for a tragedy, but not 'in the valued file'. Nor is this gulf accounted for merely by the enrichment and development of his dramatic art and the advance in his command over all the resources of language to express imaginatively in word, rhythm, phrasing, and figure the growing complexity of his ideas.

If the Histories are tragedies of a divided state, the tragedies are tragedies of a divided mind. 'My mind is troubled like a fountain stirr'd; And I myself see not the bottom of it'- these words of Achilles are applicable to most of the heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies. If these distinguishing marks of mature Shakespearean tragedy are present in the History plays, they are not present at the centre but the circumference. The centre is politically England and morally the evils of civil discord.

How many thousands of my poorest subjects

Are at this hour asleep. O Sleep, O gentle Sleep,
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,
That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,
And steep my senses in forgetfulness? (Henry IV part 2 Act3, Scene-1)

The imagery looks forward to that of mature Shakespearian tragedy, and already Shakespeare's power is such that he can make a character come alive by an image or a turn of phrase or can create scenery or an environment or a way of life in a few words, 'infinite riches in a little room'.

But Henry is not at the centre as are Shakespeare's heroes, and if we look for the Jacobean Shakespeare, Henry V takes us farther from him, not nearer. But in Julius Caesar, written in 1599, we find a tragic hero in the character of Brutus the foundations of whose soul are shaken and torn by dissension within himself as was England during the Wars of the Roses. Now, when Shakespeare's powers are ripe for tragedy, he turns from the tragedy of disorder in the state and from Holinshed to the tragedy of disorder in the soul and to Plutarch. Here and in the two other Roman plays, for almost the only time, he was fashioning his plays from the work of a great writer. In Shakespeare the power of the whole is implicit in each part, and each part is an epitome of the whole.

O, wither's is the garland of the war,
The soldier's pole is fall'n: young boys and girls
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon. (Antony and Cleopatra, Act iv, Scene-xv)

Cleopatra's words might be taken as a touchstone of what is supreme in poetry, but they are greater yet as part of the flesh and bone of the play. In Goethe's words he does the people of history the honour of naming after them his own creations.

But in Julius Caesar the pattern of his tragedy is not yet complete. With Brutus the disorder is not brought about by evil and wickedness from without. He can say:

My heart doth joy that yet in all my life
I found no man but he was true to me, (Julius Caesar, Act v, Scene-v)
and no woman, too. In Hamlet, in Othello, and in the great plays that follow, Shakespeare's characters are symbols of good and evil, of love and fidelity and endurance, and of lust and treachery. There is the Jacobean Shakespeare.

If there is terror and pity, there is also love and admiration, except Troilus and Cressida. It is a play which sometimes intellectually and sometimes passionately analyses moral values, a play in which chivalry and love are beaten down by treachery and lust, a play in which the characters who suffer are not purified as by fire but foully done to death or tortured or warped by their suffering. References to the contemporary views on the Trojan War or on the story of Troilus and Cressida do not explain the uniqueness of *Troilus and Cressida* among the serious plays of Shakespeare. There are in the play two potential tragedies- a tragedy of war and a tragedy of love, a tragedy of treachery and a tragedy of lechery. But it is not so much the disunity of action which separates Troilus and Cressida both from the tragedies of Shakespeare and from what Coleridge calls his 'profound comedies'. A Shakespearian tragedy usually ends in quietness, but here 'the bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolv'd, and loos'd, and what remains is anger and hope of revenge.

Hamlet offers a convenient illustration of the road Shakespeare had travelled in such a short time. *The Murder of Gonzago* with its designed antitheses and end stopped verse, its lack of articulation between the speeches, is a deliberate attempt to recapture an old fashioned mode, and it is in striking contrast, as it was meant to be, with Shakespeare's new style. Subtler is the humour of Polonius's addiction to an outworn rhetoric. It is one way of emphasizing his dotage. That he had not grown with the times is shown by the fondling of fine phrases ('that's good; "mobled queen" is good'), of antimetabole ('tis true' tis pity, And pity' tis' 'tis true. A foolish figure') and of agnomination (in his play upon the word 'tender'), or by the examining of the circumstances by gradation with climax in:

And he repelled- a short tale to make-
Fell into a sadness, then into a fast, (Hamlet, Act ii, Scene-ii)

And when he exasperated Queen seeks to stay this *copia verborum* she does so in words which represent one aspect of the Jacobean revulsion from the Elizabethans: 'more matter with less art'.

As Shakespeare's art became more 'matterful', the choice of a suitable theme became increasingly important. The unfinished state of *Timon of Athens* may be a confession that he had blundered in choosing this theme for a tragedy; and it is arguable also. The non-naturalistic temper of Shakespeare's plays admits always an element of the morality play, though this is more disguised with him than with his contemporaries because of his unparalleled gift of creating character.

Othello is based upon an old story, but no critic has called it a problem play. Its outlines are clearer, its shape comelier, its 'meaning' less abstract, and its hero and heroine known to us

intimately, as we never know the Duke and Isabella. The utmost abstraction that we find is that the Powers of Light are at war with the Powers of Darkness, that Darkness triumphs for a time, but is frustrated in the hour of its triumph.

The setting of Othello is narrower, more restricted, and more domestic than in the tragedies which follow. It is not distanced in time as they are, and does not possess the great aura of association and dignity of *Julius Caesar*:

When beggars die, there are no comets seen;
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes. (*Julius Caesar*, Act ii, Scene-ii)

Or of *Antony and Cleopatra*:

The death of Antony
Is not a single doom; in the name lay
A moiety of the world. (*Antony and Cleopatra*, Act v, Scene-i)

Or of *King Lear*:

A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch,
Past speaking of in a king! (*King Lear*, Act iv, Scene-vi)

But what distinguishes Othello still more from the tragedies which follow is the absence of the iterative imagery of storm and tempest by which the storm within the soul is echoed and enhanced by storm and disturbance and prodigies in nature, so that not only the mind of man but the whole frame of nature, the macrocosm as well as the microcosm, seem to be convulsed. In Othello the storm in nature is spent before the storm in Othello's mind breaks out. The later plays offer the most obvious and the most sublime examples of 'some favorite vein of metaphor or allusion' running through each play of Shakespeare, to which Walter Whiter drew attention one hundred and fifty years ago.

The language of these plays surprises us as much by its fine excess as by its simplicity. Othello's magnificent line 'keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them' as much as the blunt Iago's:

Not poppy nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou ow'dst yesterday. (*Othello*, Act iii, Scene-iii)

show how timid are all the rules about decorum and verisimilitude in character. Othello and Iago speak the lines, and there is power, there is authority, and there is poetry. Of the last 'dreadful

scene' in this play Dr. Johnson said, 'it is not to be endured'. But the nobility of spirit and language alleviates the pain and makes it endurable.

It is this power of bringing great things into a sense of order and of musical delight in phrasing and rhythm that makes bearable to us the spiritual darkness revealed in *Othello* and *King Lear*. Iago, Goneril, Regan, Edmund, these are symbols of that evil. Not only they are credible representations of human being, but they are greater than that. In their actions, above all in their words, they express the load of evil that is in these plays. Gluttony and Sloth are not there, but all the other deadly sins, Pride, Lechery, Envy, Wrath, Covetousness.

Exceptionally Shakespearian tragedy is as powerful in its expression of good as in its expression of evil. There are no more moving lines than Lear's words to Cordelia as they are taken away to prison:

Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,
The gods themselves throw incense. (King Lear, Act I, Scene-i)

The lines move us not because the image is from religious worship, but because they express in little the quality of human endurance and of love which are released in this play.

No compensatory heaven is offered. Man has only himself and his own power and endurance to fall back on. These are very real, but when they fail only madness or death remains, and death is, if not nescience, escape into the unknown. Power and endurance, these help to give strength to this tragic world. In Shakespeare there is no dichotomy between terror and pity as there is in the sentimental tragedies of the naïve Heywood or the sophisticated Beaumont and Fletcher.

Shakespeare's unexampled gift of creating character led many nineteenth – century critics to confine their attention to this aspect of his plays at the expense of the dramatic ideas which lie behind the characters or of the language in which these ideas are given expression. The minor characters appear and disappear at Shakespeare's will. The fool is dropped without notice when his function in the main purpose is fulfilled. In *Macbeth* many characters are brought in with no attempt to make them individual: the sergeant, the messenger, the doctor, the waiting – woman, the murderers, the 'Old-Man, and we may add Ross, Angus, and Lennox. The core of the play's experience is expressed through Macbeth, and these characters are without personality as much as characters in morality –play. They act as chorus to 'the swelling act of the imperial theme. Nothing indeed is more remarkable than Shakespeare's power of subduing all his material to one prominent purpose, so that without exaggeration it has been said that his greatest tragedies may be considered as an extended metaphor. Even the comic characters are brought into a unity. (Except the clown in *Othello*). They are not introduced for the 'comic relief' or to relieve tension

by making an audience laughs. If they relieve tension it is by variety rather than laughter. We return for a moment to simple people, or a gravedigger, a porter, a countryman, and to the goings on of every day, the feeling for bread and cheese, and when we go back to the high tragic mood we do so with a heightened sense that we are moving in a world fully realized, a world in which the moral values are those of our world, which fulfils *all* the conditions of our world.

These tragedies take the shape they have, not only from the nature of Shakespeare's genius, but from the spirit of the age. Shakespeare is continually interpreting the old Roman world in terms of his own, and in idiom and imagery never hesitates to interpret the remote by the familiar. The description of the triumphal entry of Coriolanus into Rome would do for the entry of King James into London.

It cannot
Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where nothing
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile:
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rent the air
Are made not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy: the dead man's knell
Is there scarce ask'd for who, and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken. (Macbeth, Act V, Scene- iii)

Again, in the last two acts of *Timon* there run, side by side with the best imagery, repeated references to the plague; and when Timon urges Alcibiades to

Be as a planetary plague, when Jove
Will o'er some high-vic'd city hang his poison
In the sick air. (Timon of Athens, Act IV, Scene- iii)

He mentions three common causes to which London doctors, astrologers, and preachers attributed this scourge of their city: the evil conjunction of the planets, the corruption of the air, and God's instrument for the punishment of sin. Unlike the other contemporary writers Shakespeare does not impoverish his art by localizing it.

Throughout the great tragedies there is condensation, made possible in part by the powerful use of imagery. While the plot is conducted, and the characters talk, there is this complex of imagery establishing the ideas which lie behind plot and character. And without condensation great tragedy is impossible. But Shakespeare's latest style –in *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* and still more in the plays that follow –there is yet greater compression,

accompanied by a liberty of syntax and rhythm which in Shakespeare leads often to obscurity. As he shifts rapidly from metaphor to metaphor, jumbles parts of speech, omits connecting particles, harshly elliptical, breaks up the rhythm with internal pauses and light endings, his commentators often toil after him in vain in the effort to follow the sequence of his thought.

In the two Roman plays of his last years critics have seen some slackening of the tragic tension which remains taut from Othello to Macbeth. Antony and Cleopatra is not excelled by any play in magnificence of conception and style, but its effect upon us is different from that of the tragedies which precede it.

Beside the strains and tensions, the themes that are balanced or reconciled in this many-sided play, *Coriolanus* is simple in its lines, as simple as the character of the hero. Here the reconciliation comes inside the play, when Coriolanus's eyes 'sweat compassion' and he yields to the entreaty of his wife and child and mother. After the reconciliation his death is felt to be almost accidental and in no sense tragic. The lightening of the tragic atmosphere in these two plays has seemed to many an anticipation of the spirit of his latest comedies. *Coriolanus* especially, Bradley has said, 'marks the transition to his latest works, in which the powers of repentance and forgiveness charm to rest the tempest raised by error and guilt'.

Many attempts have been made to explain the change in his art from tragedy to tragic-comedy. Some critics, indeed, have argued that in turning from tragedy to tragic-comedy Shakespeare was influenced by the success of Beaumont and Fletcher, two new heirs of his art. One can argue that *Pericles* –which is almost certainly earlier than *Philaster* –is essentially a different kind of play from *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* and the *Tempest*. Yet many of the themes and images presented in these plays are first announced in the Shakespearean parts of *Pericles*. As in *The Winter's Tale* there is a reversion to the motives of Greek romance popular in the fifteen-seventies. And with these motives goes a background of sea or mountain or desert. The theme is one of loss and reunion, of misunderstanding and reconciliation after a long passage of years. Marina, Perdita, and Miranda are shown in the dawn of the womanhood, heroines quite different from the older self-reliant witty heroines of the comedies. Here, too, there is a kind of reversion to an earlier type of heroine –the type of pure and idealized girlhood which Greene was creating when Shakespeare was beginning to write plays –but the setting in which Shakespeare places them and the over-tones of his verse make the resemblance superficial. This innocence of youth is set against the vices of civilization: Marina is in the brothel, Perdita bred in the innocence of nature far from the intrigues of her father's court, Guiderius and Arviragus reared in the Welsh mountains, Miranda on her desert island. In *As You Like It* Shakespeare had taken his characters into a romantic forest, but in his treatment of the Duke and his followers there is ironic criticism. Touchstone is the touchstone by which we judge the artificiality of their existence. 'In respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect

it is not in the court, it is tedious.’ But Boult, Autolycus, Trinculo, Stephano, these do not serve as touchstones, and the contrast holds good between an innocent life in close contact with nature and the rank pastures of the Court. In smaller ways, too, Pericles looks forward to the last plays as the essentially different and inferior art of Beaumont and Fletcher does not. Who does not see the resemblance between Marina’s

I will rob Tellus of her weed
To strew thy green with flowers; the yellows, blues,
The purple violets, and marigolds,
Shall as a carpet hang upon thy grave,
While summer days do last. (Pericles, Act 4, Scene i)

and the dirge said by Arviragus over the body of Fidele, or feel that Cerimon is a fresh sketch of Prospero? Regarding the influence it seems more likely that Beaumont and Fletcher, young dramatist just beginning to write for the company which Shakespeare’s genius had hallowed for almost twenty years, took a leaf out of the master’s book and blotted it in the taking. Even supposing that Shakespeare were following in the train of Beaumont and Fletcher, his last plays would be yet another example of his power of transmuting the conventions of contemporary drama and touching them to finer issues.

Literary Criticism

Many critics assume that Shakespeare was losing grip upon his theatre and upon his art. In a sense any change from the high tragedy of a King Lear to the tragi-comedy of a Winter’s Tale or a Cymbeline or even to the serenity of a Tempest is a falling off. But there is no need to suppose that Shakespeare was losing grip. The art of Jonson remains static but not of Shakespeare. Some contemporary admirer reproaching Shakespeare for turning to tragi-comedy and complaining that he did not go on writing tragedies, just as earlier admirers complaining that he did not write another Henry V or continue in the vein of As You Like It and Twelfth Night. The seeds of the last plays are already sown in Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, and while considering this pattern of his development we ought not to be surprised to find him refusing to continue in a kind of drama which he had already carried to perfection and moving on to an experiment in a new kind.

How far this change was his deliberate choice and how far it reflects a change of spirit admit only of a wavering solution. Dowden’s picture of the Shakespearian ship ‘beaten and storm-tossed, yet entering harbor with sails full-set, to anchor in peace’ may be reconciled with The Tempest but sorts ill with the variety of mood and feeling of Pericles, a Leonatus Posthumous, or Leonatus. There is a change in the poet’s attitude to time and death as it had been expressed in the sonnets, the problem plays and the tragedies. Now he is as much concerned with

‘things new born’ as with ‘things dying’. An assured Providence is on guard, not only in The Tempest where it watches over the beast nature of Caliban, the almost sub-human natures of Trinculo and Stephano, and the evil plots of Sebastian and Antonio, but in the other plays too. We perceive in

Pericles, his queen, and daughter, ...
Virtue preserv'd from fell destruction's blast,
Led on by heaven, and crown'd with joy at last. (Pericles, Act V, Scene- iii)

Some of the critics call these plays myths of immortality. Behind the apparently simple statement and rhythm of Ariel's lyric 'Full fathom five thy father lies' is a lifetime of reflection upon change and mortality, and we are tempted to say with Ferdinand:

This is no mortal business, nor no sound
That the earth owes. (The Tempest, Act 1, Scene- ii)

The reverberations of Shakespeare's latest verse give a sense of timelessness of a spiritual world beyond place and time, which is new in his art. It's a spirit deeply set in the woven strands of imagery, and the complexities of syntax and rhythm.

But what music?.....
The music of the spheres...Most heavenly music:
It nips me unto listening, and thick slumber
Hangs upon mine eyes; let me rest. (Pericles, Act V, Scene-i)

The lines seem to symbolize the visionary qualities of some passages in these last plays, suggest the poet's intuition of the mystery of life and immortality. It is as if he himself had heard 'the music of the spheres' and humanity was beginning to grow dim.

Human life is a tragedy as well as comedy; tears and smiles, sighs and shouts of joy, marriage and funeral go side by side. No doubt, Shakespeare was pre-eminently a writer of tragedies. Yet he wrote a number of comedies, which though not so elevating and inspiring, as his tragedies are, certainly maintain a standard, elsewhere in the history of dramatic comedies. Shakespeare wrote his tragedies when he was in serious mood, and when he felt mentally exhausted and too much occupied in serious problems, he sought for a mental relief and rest. Then he went to the fountain of comedy to drink the nectar of peace and relief, forgetting the heaviness of tragic impression.

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