



SHAKESPEAR'S TREATMENT OF EVIL AS A PERMEATING PRINCIPLE OF NATURE: A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr. Gopal Sinha,

Assistant Registrar (Administration)
Indian School of Mines, Dhanbad
Jharkhand, India – 826004

A Doctrine of Nature constitutes the core of the view of life held by Shakespeare. Whether or not the sonneteer unlocked his heart, it is clear that if the works of Shakespeare are considered as an integral whole, he laid bare may results of the probing amid the secrets of Nature. The present intent is to learn by this approach something about his philosophy of ethics, art, and politics. Indications are that, like Spenser in the 'Cantos' of Metabilite, he had more than an intelligent gentleman's interest in the theme. This non-professional philosophy of Shakespeare is bound up with the history of the concept of 'Nature' ("The Goddess Nature in Early Periods', JEGP, xix, 1920). The doctrine may be epitomized:

“God is good, and so is Nature, the divine agent, His agent. Man must follow the law of nature, which is the same as the law of reason. The principle postulates the existence of free will, urges the ideal of the golden mean, and involves discipline not for its own sake but the sake of a higher purpose. In the vehicles of comedy and satire, at times indeed of tragedy, the object often is to indict and punish the unnatural, the artificial, and to expose the character, the pretender, the hypocrite. Warnings are addressed to the master humor and the master passion. In tragedy the aim tends to reach beyond folly, which is associated with the unreasonable, and to grapple with vice, and with sins against love, such as disloyalty and ingratitude. In conduct man should behave with temperance, but on occasions when fidelity is at stake he should be willing even to lay down his life. The purposes of conduct and of art are to know Nature and to follow her, by

reason to learn her principles, to practice them, and not to eliminate feeling. In this view there is nothing incompatible with experiencing a sense that the innocent suffer and that life is stern and mysterious.

The main ideas represent the central thought of the Renaissance, as well as of Greek philosophy, Roman law and medieval speculation. To the tradition belong Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Alan of Lillie, Jean de Meun, Chaucer, Dante, Petrarch, Castiglione, Rabelais, Ronsard, Montaigne, Signey, and Spenser. Shakespeare's treatment may be derived from a series of definitions of his employment of Nature (nature, kind in the same sense) and an analysis of especially significant passages.

The word nature, as was pointed out long ago, has numerous meanings, a fact which has led to confusion among critics of literature, art, law, and so on. Nicolai Hartmann, in an interesting discussion of Aristotle's account of moral virtue, has called attention to the difference between the contrariety of opposed vices and the contrast of certain virtues. The 'akpa' or extremes, somewhere, between which Aristotle thought that any morally virtuous disposition (with the possible exception of justice) must lie, are not conciliable. The same man cannot combine or reconcile, in the same action, cowardice and bravery, intemperance and insensibility stinginess and thriftless ness, passion and lack of spirit. These are pairs of contraries, between which a virtue lie; but the virtue is not a synthesis of the extremes in a pair. It is true that on one interpretation of the doctrine of the mean, the mean is a synthesis of contraries, but not of contrary vices. According to this interpretation, which Burnet adopted there are contrary tendencies or impulses, e.g. fear and delight in danger, and the virtuous disposition combines these in right proportion; but the vicious dispositions also combine them, in other and wrong proportions, the contrariety of these dispositions arising from the fact that either impulse may be unduly preponderant over the other. In support of this interpretation Burnet appealed to Aristotle's theory of bodily health, which was held to depend on a proper combination of the primary contraries, hot and cold, moist and dry. Many objections might be brought against this theory of health, both speculative and empirical, though they do not concern us here, and it may also be doubted whether the theory of virtue is to be interpreted in analogy with it. Among other reasons for rejecting that view it may be noted that to the only illustration of the relativity of the

mean to the individual which Aristotle offers it is quite inapplicable; the right quality of meat for one man is not the right quantity for another.

In the dramatic world of Shakespeare we witness – something universal – a conflict not so much of particular persons as of the powers of good and evil in the world. And the treatment of many of the characters confirms this feeling. Considered simply as psychological studies few of them, surely are of the highest interest. Fine and subtle touches could not be absent from a work of Shakespeare’s maturity; but with the possible exception of Lear himself, no one of the characters strikes us as a psychologically wonderful creation, like Hamlet or Iago or even Macbeth; one or two seem even to be somewhat faint and thin. Shakespeare to whom the idea of the transmigration of souls was familiar and had once been material for just, seems to have been brooding on humanity in the light of it. It is remarkable, and somewhat sad, that he seems to find none of man’s better qualities in the world of the brutes(though he might well have found the prototype of the self-less love of Kent and Cordelia in the dog whom he so habitually maligns); but he seems to have been asking himself whether that which he loathes in man may not be due to some strange wrenching of this frame of things, through which the lower animal souls have found a lodgment in human forms, and there found – to the horror and confusion of the thinking mind – brains to forge, tongues to speak, and hands to act, enormities which no mere brute can conceive or execute. He shows us in King Lear these terrible forces bursting into monstrous life and flinging themselves upon those human beings who are weak and defenseless, partly from old age, but partly because they are human and lacks the dreadful undivided energy of the beasts. And the only comfort he might seem to hold out to us is the prospect that at least this bestial race, strong only where it is vile, cannot endure: though stars and gods are powerless, or careless, or empty dreams, yet there must be an end of this horrible world:

“It will come;
Humanity must perforce prey on itself
Like monsters of the deep.”

The influence of all this on imagination is very great, it combines with other influences to convey to us the wider or universal significance of the spectacle presented to the inward eye. A similar conflict between imagination and sense will be found if we consider the Storm-scenes.

The temptation of Othello and the scene of Duncan's murder may lose upon the stage, but they do not lose their essence, and they gain as well as lose. It is a comparatively a small thing that the theatrical storm, not to drown the dialogue, must be silent whenever a human being wishes to speak, and is wretchedly inferior to many a storm we have witnessed. Nor is it simply that, as Lamb observed, the corporal presence of Lear, 'an old man tottering about the stage with a walking stick', disturbs and depresses that sense of the greatness of his mind which fills the imagination. There is a further reason, which is not expressed, but still emerges, in the words of Lamb's:

“the explosions of his passion are terrible
as a volcano: they are storms turning up
and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his
mind, with all its vast riches.”

For imagination, that is to say, the explosions of Lear's passion, and the bursts of rain and thunder, are not, what for the senses they must be, two things, but manifestations of one thing. It is the powers of the tormented soul that we hear and see in the 'groans of roaring wind and rain' and the 'sheets of fire'; and they that, of intervals almost more overwhelming, sink back into darkness and silence. Nor yet is even this all; but as those incessant references to wolf and tiger made us see humanity reeling back into the beast' and ravening against itself, so in the storm we seem to see Nature herself convulsed by the same horrible passions; the 'common mother',

Whose womb immeasurable and infinite breast
Teems and feeds all,

turning on her children, to complete the ruin they have wrought upon themselves, surely something not less, but much more than these helpless words convey; is what comes to us in these astounding scenes; and if translated thus into the language of prose, it becomes confused and inconsistent, the reason is simply that it itself is poetry, and such poetry, and such poetry as cannot be transferred to the space behind the footlights, but has its being only in imagination. Here then is Shakespeare at his very greatest, but not the mere dramatist Shakespeare.

As we contemplate this world, the question presses on us, what can be the ultimate power that moves it, that excites this gigantic war and waste, or perhaps, that suffers them and overrules them? References to religious or irreligious beliefs and feelings are more frequent than is usual in Shakespeare's tragedies, as frequent perhaps as in his final plays. He introduces characteristic differences in the language of the different persons about fortune or the stars or the gods, and shows how the question 'What rules the world?', is forced upon their minds. They answer it in their turn: Kent, for instance:

"It is the stars,
The stars above us, govern our condition:"

Edmund:

"Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound:"

and again

"This is the excellent foppery of the world,
that, when we are sick in fortune – often the
surfeit of our own behavior – we make guilty
of our disasters the sun, the moon and the
stars; as if we were villains by necessity, fools
by heavenly compulsion,.... and all that we
are evil in by a divine thrusting on:"

Gloster:

"As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport;"

Edgar:

Hamlet, it is pursued by remorse. Shakespeare no longer restricts the action to purely human graves, an unearthly light flickers about the head of the doomed man. The special popularity of Hamlet and Macbeth is due in part to some of these common characteristics, notably to the fascination of the supernatural, the absence of the spectacle of extreme undeserved suffering, the absence of characters which horrify and repel and yet are destitute of grandeur. The solemn majesty of the royal Ghost in Hamlet, appearing in armour and standing silent in the moonlight, is exchanged for shapes of horror, dimly seen in the murky air or revealed by the glare of the caldron fire in a dark cavern, or for the ghastly face of Banquo badged with blood and staring with blank eyes. Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over Macbeth. It is remarkable that almost all the scenes which at once recur to memory take place either at night or in some dark spot. The vision of the dagger, the murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night-scenes. The Witches dance in the thick air of a storm or, 'black and midnight hags', receive Macbeth in a cavern. The blackness of night is to the here a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play. The faint glimmerings of the western sky at twilight are here menacing: it is the hour when the traveler hastens to reach safety in his inn and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins; the hour when 'light thickens', when 'night's black agents to their prey do rouse,' when the wolf begins to howl, and the owl to scream, and withered murder steals forth to his work. Macbeth bids the

stars hide their fires that his 'black' desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hell. The moon is down and no stars shine when Banquo dreading the dreams of the coming night, goes unwillingly to bed, and leaves Macbeth to wait for the summons of the little bell. When the next day should dawn, its light is strangled', and 'darkness does the face of earth entomb.' In the whole drama the sun seems to shine only twice; first in the beautiful but ironical passage when Duncan sees the swallows flitting round the castle of death; and afterwards, when at the close the avenging army gathers to rid the earth of its shame.

All the natural agencies – the darkness, the lights and colours that illuminate it, the storm that rushes through it, the violent and gigantic images – conspire with the appearances of the witches and the Ghost to awaken horror, and in some degree also a supernatural dread. And to

this effect other influences contribute. The pictures called up by the mere works of the witches stir the same feelings, - those for example of the spell-bound sailor driven tempest-test for nine times nine weary weeks, and never visited by sleep night or day; of the drop of poisonous foam that forms on the moon, and falling to earth, is collected for pernicious ends; of the sweltering venom of the toad, the finger of the babe killed at its birth by its own mother, the trickling from the murderer's gibbet. In Nature, again, something is felt to be at work, sympathetic with human guilt and supernatural malice. She labors with portents:

“Lamenting heard in the air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible.”

The owl clamours all through the night; Duncan's horses devour each other in frenzy; the dawn comes, but no light with it. Common sights and sounds, the crying of crickets, the croak of the raven, the light thickening after sunset, the home-coming of the rooks, are all ominous. Then, as if to deepen these impressions, Shakespeare has concentrated attention on the obscurer regions of man's being, on phenomena which make it seem that he is in the power of secret forces lurking below, and independent of his consciousness and will such as the relapse of Macbeth from conversation into a

reverie, during which he gazes fascinated at the image of murder drawing closer and closer; the writing on his face of strange things he never meant to show; the pressure of imagination heightening into illusion, like the vision of a dagger in the air, at first bright, then suddenly splashed with blood, or the sound of a voice that cried 'Sleep no more', and would not be silenced.

In Hamlet and Othello, Shakespeare has again depicted Nature as an agent relentless and often cynically neutral to the evil designs that are thrust upon the protagonists of the play. The atmosphere is one of darkness and gloom and the actions of the main characters are actuated by fate and irony. In Hamlet, the supernatural is made to take a lead in the shape of the Ghost which appears in the first Act itself. It is an agent of retribution, but can very well be the agent of evil as well. It is urged by some critics that Shakespeare's characters, Macbeth, Brutus and Hamlet, highly gifted with the imagination are susceptible to the phenomenon of ghosts. In the bed-

Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.”

Lily B. Campbell says that it is a ghost from Purgatory (an intermediate stage between Hell and Heaven where the soul is purified from sins) according to all the tests possible. They believed also in evil spirits, and these evil spirits might lure an innocent man to a crime and self-destruction. The Devil might take the shape of the departed one, dear to the victim, in order to embroil his soul when the ghost first appears to Hamlet, his natural impulse is to invoke the protection of the angels (I.iv):

“Angels and ministers of grace defend us:
Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com'st in such a questionable shape,
That I will speak to thee.”

Hamlet's mind is assailed with doubt and fear at the first sight of the ghost whose reality is not, and cannot be questioned. The Ghost tells him things that none could have known but Claudius who murdered his father. In spite of the disclosure of the hidden crime which Hamlet may be very much disinclined to disbelieve, the doubt and fear that it might be an evil spirit, linger on his mind. When the ghost appears again remaining invisible and inaudible to Hamlet's mother, Hamlet, cries out (III.iv):

“Save me, and hover o'er me with your wings,
You heavenly guards:”

Hamlet is caught in the toil because the ghost merely confirms the hideous suspicion of his own 'prophetic soul'.....though he would slip from its grasp, he cannot, neither could any man in his position. The revelation of his mother's animality, his dreadful doubt concerning the manner of

his father's death – these have already meant the shattering of a whole moral universe. There is little influence of the ghost, in the fifth Act. As Murry says:

“Hamlet is now rid of the ghost, and becomes a new Man – a man who is no longer such that a ghost (or that of which a ghost is the emanation, or the Symbol) can shake his disposition.”

Works Cited:

- Bradley, A C.: Shakespearean Tragedy: 1992
- Boulton, Marjorie: The Anatomy of Drama, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1963
- Campbell, Lily B.: Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes: Slaves of Passion
- Dante: The Divine Comedy
- Jones, Ernest: Essay: Pub. in The American Journal of Psychology: 1910
- Kraensei, F.: Nicolai Hartmann's doctrine of ideal values: An examination: 1984:
www.springerlink.com
- Kolbe: An Analysis of Shakespeare
- Lamb, Charles: An Analysis of the Play and characters of King Lear: Revised with Alterations by N. Tate: London: 1681
- Lucas, F L.: Literature and Psychology, London: 1951
- Murry, A C.: Selected Criticism
- Moulton, Richard Green: The Moral System of Shakespeare: Ed. 2008 History
- Meister, Wilhelm: Lehrjahre: pub. 1796: wikipedia.org.wiki
- Sen Gupta, S C.: Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy
- Spenser, Edmund: Cantos of Metabolite: JEGP: Ed. 1920
- , The Goddess Nature in Early Periods, JEGP, xix: 1920
- Wilson, Dover: Essays on Shakespeare