SHAKESPEARE'S SEARCH FOR A HERO

(II)

HARRY the King intervenes between Falstaff and Hamlet. He is Shakespeare's last successful version of the natural man. And by this I mean that he is the last of those heroes who is himself a success. He has all the natural graces and he has them in abundance. He meets no problem which he does not solve. He is victorious in arms, just though stern in government. He is a Hotspur sobered by responsibility and a Falconbridge of the blood royal. What he successfully answers are, of course, those questions on the nature of kingship which history had posed for Shakespeare in Richard II. The royalty in Harry is no mere lineal prerogative. It is a quality of the soul. It is an earthly echo of what we mean when we talk of the kingship of Christ. It draws its power from its capacity for fellowship with men, and it makes the humblest of men a king in his own kind. It operates with the discriminating generosity of grace and is at the disposal of all who seek it worthily.

After Henry V comes the great bend in the road of Shakespeare's search. He begins to see into the depth of the human soul and into the extremities of human circumstance; and what he sees is his subject for the next few years. He sees the failure of the human nature he had glorified. He sees tragedy. His hero becomes Brutus and Antony who divide a play between them. There is no doubt that Shakespeare sympathized with Brutus, but he cannot help making him illustrate the thesis which is now hammering at his mind. I mean the futility of action, or rather the incompatibility of action and thought. Brutus is a philosopher-politician; the Arthur Balfour of republican Rome, intellectual, honourable, and detached. His material is thought, not men. But he becomes the General Franco of this particular conspiracy. He is drawn in reluctantly, but once in he assumes a full share of responsibility. It is his name which wins moderate Romans to the condonation of a bloody

deed. Yet he fails because he is no match for the opportunism of Antony and the easy principles of Cassius. And within his honour there lurks a small demon of conceit.

Antony has many of the graces which Shakespeare has admired before, but there are signs that he has already begun to notice the seamy side of the average man. You can see the calculation of Antony at war with his impulsiveness, his histrionism at war with his sincerity. No, Shakespeare has seen a possible development of Henry V, and he does not like it.

Meanwhile, there is Hamlet. Dr. Bradley has very wisely said that Hamlet is the only one of Shakespeare's characters who could have written Shakespeare's plays. He is the classical statement of the failure of civilized human nature, and the European mind has been littered with his progeny for three hundred years. He is, to begin with, everything that Shakespeare would have had a man to be. He is the "rose and expectancy of the fair state," "the glass of fashion and the mould of form," "the observed of all observers." Fortinbras tells us that "he was likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royally." He is heroic. But he is also an amateur of philosophy. He is a patriot prince, like Henry V, but he has discovered, as Shakespeare's own age had discovered, the fatal gift of self-consciousness. He would like to have done all that Harry had done. If you had met him in the street you would have supposed him victorious in all his undertakings. It is untrue to say that Hamlet was not a man of action. He was capable of violent action when he was violently moved. What he found impossible was to make his action spring from his resolve.

You will notice that all Shakespeare's characters have this capacity for action, and the action of Hotspur and Harry was glorious. But the action of Hamlet and Macbeth, of Othello and Brutus, is disastrous. Why? Because these men are disunited in themselves. They are the victims of a spiritual civil war. Hamlet should have killed Claudius; that was his sacred mission. But he kills Polonius by chance, Rosencranz and Gildenstern by intention; the Queen, Laertes, and finally himself are the victims of his

procrastination before he kills his uncle; and he is only King in Denmark for a few moments. Why? Because his right arm has never marched with his right mind. Because, in a word, he is incapable of true spontaneity.

Macbeth, too, is at war within himself. Of him I once wrote what I take leave to repeat now:

"Macbeth is among the aristocrats of failures. He is too credulous to be really religious and he is too intelligent to be really simple. He is too good to be really wicked and he is too weak to be really good. He has the sense to let his imagination run away with him, but he is without the strength to prevent it from running in the wrong direction. He is tragic because he is unsuccessful."

Macbeth is no mere assassin. He too has the nobility of Henry V, but if Henry V had not been born to a kingdom and if Henry V had possessed Shakespeare's own gift of imagination, what then? These are the questions which I believe Shakespeare asked himself. These are the questions which turned the man of action into the "secret'st man of blood."

Then there is *Othello,* and Shakespeare's third essay on the subject of human love. The second is *Troilus and Cressida* and of that I shall speak in a moment. Othello is never less than noble, and though this play was my first love among the tragedies I do not think it is quite successful on the plane of psychological plausibility. There is a great deal of truth in the old lady's criticism when she shouted from the gallery during the temptation scene: "Use your eyes, you damned fool!" And indeed one may well ask why that noble warrior, the noblest in all Shakespeare's creation, should have suspected so easily the woman he loved so well.

But I think Shakespeare was operating on a plane higher than psychological logic. I think the great cloud of pessimism, of which I have already spoken, was beginning to encompass him and what he was trying to show was human love defeated by its own intensity. He was trying to show how love and hate were terribly complementary and were somehow united in the same complex. He was showing how the complex could bring to ruin the noblest of its component

parts. And it is interesting to see how the easy cynicism and bluff good fellowship of Falconbridge now sit upon Iago and are turned to satanic purpose. Shakespeare now sees his "natural humanity" as the deepest of the devil's disguises.

After *Othello, Antony and Cleopatra*—now my favourite of the plays. The man who became Hamlet now dies as Antony, though Mr. Murry will have it that he died on the throne of Denmark. But Antony is surely the end of the natural man. There is no more glory left in him, yet his end is glorious and his epitaph among the greater miracles of language:

> O wither'd is the garland of the war,
> The soldier's pole is fallen.

Antony was none too splendid when we met him in the forum. But this is how he is introduced to us at the beginning of the later play:

> Take but good note and you shall see in him
> The triple pillar of the world transform'd
> Into a strumpet's fool.

And yet he is never less than superb in his procession from folly to defeat. All through the play Shakespeare's hero passes judgment on Shakespeare's hero, until in the end he passes sentence of death upon himself. In other words we sees Antony at each point through the eyes of Enobarbus. We hear how he met Cleopatra:

> . . . our courteous Antony
> Whom ne'er the word of "No" woman heard speak,
> Being barber'd ten times o'er, goes to the feast,
> And for his ordinary, pays his heart
> For what his eyes eat only.

Then after his marriage with Octavia, Enobarbus says to Menas, the old pirate:

> Antony will use his affection where it is; he married but his occasion here.

Later on when Cleopatra's galleys have fled, she asks him:

> *Cleo.:* What shall we do, Enobarbus?
> *Eno.:* Think, and die.
> *Cleo.:* Is Antony or we in fault for this?
> *Eno.:* Antony only, that would make his will
> Lord of his reason.

Then, as he sees the extent of Antony's folly, he speaks these lines which Falconbridge might well have spoken in his mellow years:

> The loyalty well held to fools does make
> Our faith mere folly; yet he that can endure
> To follow with allegiance a fallen lord
> Does conquer him that did his master conquer
> And earns a place i' the story.

Then we have the return of desperate resolution to Antony when he has commanded the whipping of the messenger who stooped to Cleopatra's hand:

> I will be treble-sinewed, hearted, breath'd,
> . . . . . .
> Let's mock the midnight bell.

But Enobarbus has no illusions about this febrile courage:

> And I see still
> A diminution in our captain's brain
> Restores his heart.

Yet these two halves of the man whom Shakespeare once saw whole were strangely loyal to each other. One of Antony's soldiers follows Enobarbus and says:

> Antony
> Hath after thee all thy treasure, with
> His bounty over plus.

This is too much for the great heart of the man and he goes out to die.

In Antony, of course, we see the death of honour and the ruin of reason itself. The limelit magnificence of the man topples over into folly and defeat. Nature in her fabulous bounty is too much for Antony, just as thought is too much for Hamlet. He has the royalty of Harry, and it is rather suggestive to see how Shakespeare re-wrote the scene before Agincourt. He writes it after the battle now. It is a picture of kingship in defeat, haunted by the recurring sense of honour, and, in the last analysis, it is wounded humanity taking leave of its friends. It is perhaps the saddest scene in Shakespeare, and here again I commend to you Mr. Murry's comments.

After it we have Antony's shame, only mitigated by the lover's expectation of his mistress, whom he believes is dead:

> Where souls do couch on flowers well hand in hand
> And with our sprightly port make the ghosts gaze.

Then Cleopatra's trick is laid bare and the second incarnation of Shakespeare's hero dies in her arms before the monument.

I need not linger over the plays of obsession; over *Lear, Timon,* and *Troilus,* because they lie a little off our road. In *Troilus* Shakespeare gives us his pessimism over love and war; he was repenting of Romeo's faith and Harry's patriotism and a piece of Falconbridge passed through Thersites on his way to Enobarbus. In Lear, perhaps, he was saying that man must become as a little child before he could enter the Kingdom of Heaven, that he must pass through folly and despair and self-annihilation before he could attain the second childhood of the soul. But Shakespeare was saying nothing very clearly in *King Lear,* certainly nothing finally. He was obsessed, but not yet clearly illuminated. *Lear,* and in a lesser degree *Timon,* represent the Gethsemane of his imagination.

The women have the best of it in the lovely, later plays. We think of Imogen, Perdita, Marina. The jealousies of Leontes and Postumus are not, it seems to me, from the inmost heart of Shakespeare. They are the excuse for that reconciliation which was now the primary need of his spirit. Not until the last great play of all does the Shakespearean Hero reappear in his ultimate form. He is Prospero, and his shape is superman.

That instinct which seeks to identify Prospero with Shakespeare seems to me a sound one. He represents the supremacy of the imagination; the final plenitude of poetic power. Shakespeare has looked at the world, and behold—it was very good. He has looked at the world, and behold—it was very bad. Now, therefore, in the last exercise of his magic, he becomes himself the magician and gives to us a world which is new created. In *The Tempest,* more than

elsewhere, he is preoccupied with right and wrong, and he sees the solution in rebirth.

Thus we can say that while his early heroes were simply successes, and the tragic heroes were tragic failures, Prospero is a success which is also a solution. Himself soured by treachery and the usurpation of power, he sets himself to remake the world. Infallible art, acting upon innocent nature, gives to us the new woman in Miranda. The grace of supernatural music changes the sophisticated young soul of Ferdinand and makes it fit for hers. Yet to reach innocence he must be stripped of power and must temper his soul with patience, as we see in the scene where Prospero disarms him after first bringing them together.

Shakespeare-Prospero, though he can command the forces of pure spirit, has in himself some share of Caliban. He can dispense justice like any High Court judge, but it requires Ariel to teach him the mystery of forgiveness. This is the turning point in the sense of being the last turning of the road. Prospero has done all he can. He has made a new man of Ferdinand and a new woman of Miranda. He has restored fidelity to love and purity to passion. He has purged his former enemies of their guilt and blessed them with his forgiveness so that now, in Gonzalo's words, they "found themselves." But his power has this invincible limit: he is unable to forgive himself. By authority he has redeemed three-quarters of his world; the rest he can only do by abdication. For there is always Caliban to remind him of the sin he had discovered in humanity, the sin which resides within himself.

I do not need to quote to you the words with which he lays down his art, but these lines from the Epilogue are less familiar:

> Now I want
> Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
> And my ending is despair,
> Unless I be relieved by prayer,
> Which pierces so, that it assaults
> Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
> As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
> Let your indulgence set me free.

When Prospero begs forgiveness of those whom he has himself forgiven we feel that the mystery of human power and human impotence has been resolved by the poetic imagination; that the Superman is looking to the Saint.

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