

## SOME MEDIEVAL CONCEPTS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

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Modern Shakespeare criticism tends to move away from the old-fashioned romantic attitude with its characteristic phrase: "in Shakespeare's world as in nature's" — as formulated by Algernon Charles Swinburne and accepted unchallenged for many years. The immediate result of this obsolete attitude is our inability to see in his plays anything for which naturalism does not provide an answer. However, two modern critical approaches — one English and one American — have, fairly recently, provided a new understanding of the native medieval tradition in which the dramatist found his dramatic nourishment. In 1958 Bernard Spivack published in New York his exciting and perceptive book: *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (Spivack 1958); while in 1977 Emrys Jones published in London a book entitled *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Jones 1977),<sup>2</sup> which is, in a way, a continuation of Spivack's unusual approach.

It is the enigma of Iago that provides a starting point for Spivack's five hundred pages of carefully chosen material. As early as 1830 the Duc de Broglie (de Broglie 1830) asked the question, that ever since has seemed to fascinate Shakespeare critics: "Qu'est-ce qu'Iago?". The question was asked in his article printed in *Revue Française* and it was provoked by the appearance of *Othello* upon the French stage in translation by Alfred de Vigny. Nor was de Broglie the only baffled critic during the ensuing years. Tucker Brooke in *Yale Review* (1918:359), had attempted to solve the mystery of Iago's character by talking of "The Romantic Iago" and "the tragedy of this honest, charming soldier". Iago's tragedy is also a prominent theme for Andrew Cecil Bradley in *Shakespearean Tragedy*. (1978:175—242 — *Othello*). However, in 1945 there was the first glimpse of light provided by Granville-Barker, when he wrote these memorable words:

"—that Iago the actor would seem to be, as the phrase goes, "lost in his part". But in that lies his talent; and behind all the mutability there is, perhaps, no Iago, only a poisoned and poisonous ganglion of cravings after evil."

(Granville-Barker 1952:219)

In the first chapter of his study Spivack turns to his readers and asks the disturbing question: "What indeed is Iago?" A psychological interpretation of his motives is oddly unsatisfying; there is a profound ambiguity in each of his ostensible reasons for his behaviour and such ambiguity destroys his dramatic plausibility. It would seem that he is moved to his revenge by the desire for Cassio's office but he also says:

I hate the Moor,

And it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets  
He has done my office: I know not  
if 't be true, But I, for more suspicion in that kind,  
Will do as if for surety.

(*Othello*, I. iii. 392-396)

Although he is aware that only a rumour accuses his wife of being unfaithful to him with Othello, and he does not really believe it, he will use it as a pretext for the Moor's downfall. The same suspicions are voiced about Cassio:

For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too,

(*Othello*, II. i. 319)

but this second motive is never mentioned again in the play. We begin to realise that his suspicions are mere fantasies which, even by him, are never really taken seriously; the flippancy of his language defeats their gravity. His behaviour towards Emilia is one of amiable contempt rather than an injured husband's rage of jealousy. There is a curious lack of conviction in his explanations — the more he explains the less we understand since his words and his deeds do not correspond. There is no traditional resentment or injured dignity in his bearing — it seems rather that his real passion lies in indulging himself in a sardonic laughter:

Thus credulous fools are caught;

(*Othello*, IV. i. 46)

or

Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.

(*Othello*, II. iii. 388)

His real passion lies in gloating over his success in bringing innocent people to ruin:

So will I turn her virtue into pitch,  
And out of her own goodness make the net  
That shall enmesh them all.

(*Othello*, II. iii. 369-371)

We notice that he has no emotional affinity with anybody on the stage except his audience; his soliloquies clearly show his complete detachment from all those who surround him. In a certain sense he lives in an emotional vacuum; he manipulates people and makes them his dupes but remains uninvolved. Then he is frankly boastful to his public:

When devils will the blackest sins put on,  
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,  
As I do now;

(*Othello*, II. iii. 360-362)

The logic of Iago eludes us — the usual purpose of drama is to throw light on human behaviour rather than to obscure it; yet his character seems impenetrable to rational analysis.

It is to get out of this psychological dead-end that Spivack had to undertake his immense task. After examining a huge number of mystery and morality plays left over from the Middle Ages — he realised that there were stage personalities then, who used to boast in asides to their audiences about their evil deeds. It was, among others, the voice of Titivillus in *Mankind*<sup>1</sup> that used to boast as openly as Iago:

Farewell, everyone! for I have done my game;  
For I have brought Mankind to mischief and shame!

(*Mankind* 27)

Now we realise, why Iago has no psychological consistency like other people in the play, he belongs to another world. He came straight from pre-Reformation world of Psychomachia or the allegorical fight between absolute good and absolute evil. He had strayed into a more "naturalistic" drama of Elizabethan age straight from the homiletic world of medieval morality play.

Nor was Shakespeare alone in using an obsolete dramatic concept in his more "modern" plays. Barrabas in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* is, like Iago, another allegorical figure of Vice. A score of major figures in quite a few plays written between 1585 and 1616 reveal the common features of this heritage. Among Shakespeare's plays the problem of Iago is not peculiar to *Othello*. Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, Richard in *King Richard the Third*, the bastard Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Edmund in *King Lear* are all figures of Vice personified. In all of them there is a certain psychological discrepancy between their deeds and their ostensible reasons for them. Their motives have neither a logical connection with their actions, nor any emotional affinity to their psychology. They say, for instance, that they are moved by hatred or

<sup>1</sup> *Mankind* in J. S. Farmer (ed.), 1907.27.

resentment, but we do not see them behaving as if they were. And they are all characterized by a certain hilarity and a zest in making mischief, so much so, that they can not contain it and have to share with their audiences. Aaron is a good example of it:

O! how this villany  
Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it.  
Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace,  
Aaron will have his soul black like his face.  
(*Titus Andronicus*, III. i. 202–205)

Dramatic characters who came over into Elizabethan drama from medieval morality plays are shown simultaneously on two levels of meaning: as seemingly real characters and as preachers and practitioners of evil. Hence the critical confusion and bafflement.

Plays, that look back to medieval scenic concepts, may well be called "hybrid" since they combine two irreconcilable elements: allegorical and „naturalistic". When compared to Iago, Othello and Desdemona are consistent psychological portraits — their actions complement their verbal utterances. They exist within the ordinary world of cause and consequence and have a convincing resemblance to people we all know. They never address their soliloquies directly to the public, as Iago does, because they live *inside* the play and not *outside* it. "Hybrid" criminals compulsively insist that they are criminals and invite the public to admire their skills in bringing innocent people to ruin. Their relationship to their crimes is not really moral — they do not experience qualms of conscience — but artistic, they are outside the common morality shared by the other characters. However, in Shakespeare's time such figures had already lost their original meaning of the allegorical Vice. Therefore they had to undergo a certain "reprocessing" to meet a new demand for "realism" in his theatre. Iago and other "artist-criminals" invariably announce themselves as possessors of special talents in corrupting people and that is how we recognize them as hybrids. Their aggressions are always directed towards true virtue as were those of Tittivillus and other medieval Vices. They demonstrate their wit and euphoria in perpetrating evil.

They are always one and the same "artist-criminal" whether they are called Aaron, Richard The Third, Don John or Iago; all of them separate lover from lover, husband from wife, friend from friend. They particularly excel in the destruction of the peace and harmony and love which create the order of human society. Shakespeare himself has aptly described them in *King Lear* in Kent's words:

Such smiling rogues as these,  
Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain  
Which are too intrinse t'unloose;  
(*King Lear*, II. ii. 78–80)

The laughing intriguer — a highly popular figure on the medieval stage — had to be disguised in a slightly "naturalistic" way so that Elizabethan audiences were able to accept him, since the stage has already shifted from one dramatic convention to another. But it is precisely because Shakespeare's vision of the world has such a profoundly metaphysical significance that we can still believe in him as a dramatist; he recognized that there are certain "bonds" that knit together nature, human society and indeed the whole world into the hierarchic order of divinely created harmony of the universe. In all his great tragedies there is a vision of virtue that suffers destruction, therefore spiritual harmony in the universe suffers defeat and "the time is out of joint". That is why the murder of a person in authority, filial ingratitude and betrayal of love or friendship are seen as "unnatural" acts. They shake the foundations of society and destroy the universal harmony. This cosmic vision is actually expressed more than once:

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits  
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,  
It will come,  
Humanity must perforce prey on itself  
Like monsters of the deep.  
(*King Lear*, IV. ii. 46–50)

In his great tragedies Shakespeare treats evil in its medieval significance: it severs the "holy cords" of love and loyalty and destroys the great bond that keeps the universe in order. He uses the ironic epithet of "honest" in relation to Iago to stress that he is, in fact, evil incarnate. In case the audience misunderstands his purpose, Shakespeare provides us with a clue in the First Folio: there are explanations for most of the roles and Iago is described as "a villaine". This word defines a formula that reigned over the English stage between 1400 and 1580 and maintained itself in disguise for several decades afterwards until it was displaced by the different formulas of literal drama.

As the morality play, at the end of its reign, surrendered to the literal drama, it gave way to the separate types of tragedy and comedy. The figure of Vice, however, with equal facility moved into both because of its great popularity. It outlived by many years the dramatic convention that had created him for homiletic purposes. He is now a self-proclaimed villain, but he is still essentially the same Vice — the laughing, teasing, amoral author of the moral ruin of his victims. His psychological motivation is always rather superfluous, it never really fits. And the critics are puzzled when confronted with this lingering medieval tradition.

The Christian allegory of the Psychomachia produced for two centuries a type of play that was half tragedy, half a farce. The soul of a man was at stake with good and evil forces contending for it. While good forces — like Mercy in *Mankind* — were shown rather as tedious and moralizing characters,

the forces of evil with their gaiety and blasphemous mockery must have been a source of delight to the audience; hence their popularity on the stage. By the end of fifteenth century the morality play became a victim of the secular revolution of the Renaissance. Yet the morality survived by shifting the ground of its serious issue from heaven and hell to reward and punishment in this life of this world. The Vice continued to function with undiminished vitality in plays that were no longer in the allegorical tradition. The abstract Vice had to give way to the individualized men and women of the literal drama. The play gradually freed itself from its sermon-like quality and achieved an autonomous life as a dramatic spectacle. The stage ceased to be a pulpit and the audience a congregation, while the influence of classical and Italian drama distilled the morality's mixture of tragic farce into two separate kinds of comedy and tragedy. Plot and characterization became diversified, deriving their dramatic energy from history — true and fabulous. But the Vice refused to disappear — having disguised himself with the motives of a "natural" man he went on to conduct in Elizabethan tragedy a *Psychomachia* but without medieval allegorisation.

As late as in 1517 John Rastell, printer and suggested author, produced a morality play: *The Nature of the Four Elements* (Farmer 1905:1—45) which belongs to a new kind of humanistic morality — it extols the new Renaissance values: reason, science and the classic virtue of moderation, against which are shown Idleness and Ignorance. Its hero indulges in the pleasures of taverns and brothels; in this play the Vices assemble after the summons come to them in the mist of their revels and this set of images had survived on the stage until Shakespeare put them together, with new freshness and vigour, in the person of Falstaff. Falstaff's origins are in the character of Gluttony whose pseudonym is "Good Felyshyp". This character protests loudly that cheese and bottle are sufficient "harness" to him because he does not intend to go fighting, anyway. Falstaff's catechism on the theme of honour is directly borrowed from *The Nature of the Four Elements*.

During the Renaissance that vision of life which had originated during the Middle Ages was slowly crumbling away; this vision saw the human race within a single spiritual destiny. The spread of the secular spirit during the Reformation constricted this world view: from the area of Christian metaphysics the action of the drama moves to the arena of the world and even more particularly — London. The transcendental subject is replaced by a world of particulars and specialised topics. But in the sixteenth century these two dramatic conventions merged to produce transitional hybrid plays. This evolution towards concreteness has a curious effect upon the Vices: for almost the entire sixteenth century a didactic purpose in the play remained the only respectable standard for the popular stage. But the art of Shakespeare and the other Elizabethan dramatists changed the homiletic formula of vice and virtue into

more disturbing and penetrating images of men in their wordly pursuits. In this literal world the Vice acquires a certain biographical reality and even covers himself with conventional human motives for his traditional aggression. At times, however, his behaviour is bewildering as in the case of Iago. He has lost his old status as an abstraction without quite gaining a new one within the literal world of the secular drama. Vice becomes partially humanized while remaining in a large part curiously abstract. It finds its motives in the impulses of human instincts; but its unique intimacy with the audience survives although with slight modification.

*Titus Andronicus* is the work of a youthful Shakespeare. It is a tragedy of revenge in the popular style in imitation of Seneca and with influences from Ovid. Emrys Jones also sees the influence of one of lesser known plays of Eurypides — *Hecuba* (Jones 1977:90,91). The classical sources, however, give us no hint of Aaron. Aaron is not a "complete Vice", of course, for he is a hybrid. The other half of him is properly Aaron the Moor. But the older stage image weaves in and out of him and we can see it best by placing him alongside Tamora — his partner in evil. She is also villaneous, but she is perfectly credible as a person. She does not protest her villainy, she acts it. Her actions are organic to the plot, while Aaron gives a stylized performance based on premises outside the plot. As queen of Goths she is a natural enemy of Rome. Her wickedness belongs to her character, while in Aaron the homiletic projection creates, once more, a familiar hybrid. The old metaphor is gone but its traditional stage features remain. Aaron has his text for a sneering commentary — the bravura deceit that was once a moral metaphor for the existence of evil in a human heart:

(Aside.) If that be call'd deceit, I will be honest,  
And never, whilst I live, deceive men so;  
But I'll deceive you in another sort,  
And that you'll say, ere half an hour pass.  
(*Titus Andronicus*, III. i. 188—191)

In addition to mischief of every kind through which his deceit and cunning can show themselves, enmity and civil strife are his special achievements; having become the wife of Saturninus Tamora says "this day all quarrels die" and her husband proclaims "a love-day". Aaron's "excellent piece of villainy" has its social and moral point in his assault upon this newly-found harmony and peace. He aims to produce "deadly enmity between friends". His end is consistent with his beginning; he confronts the torments awaiting him with defiance. His last words are:

If one good deed in all my life I did,  
I do repent it from my very soul.  
(*Titus Andronicus*, V. iii. 189, 190)

The features of the morality convention that survive in Aaron also survive in *Richard III*, and show him as another exponent of the art of bringing people to ruin. Even more than Aaron, he is characterized by a fearful energy towards spreading evil. Even at the end he clings to it:

I have set my life upon a cast,  
And I will stand the hazard of the die.  
(*King Richard The Third*, V. iv. 9, 10)

On the other hand, his actual motives for perpetrating evil are far more "naturalistic" psychologically than Aaron's; since he is misshapen he can not inspire love, therefore he will have power at its most brutal. Yet, like Aaron, he reveals his true aims in his asides — still as the Duke of Gloucester:

*Gloucester*: (Aside.) So wise so young, they say, do never live long.  
*Prince*: What say you, uncle?  
*Gloucester*: I say, without characters, fame lives long.  
(Aside.) Thus, like the formal Vice, Iniquity,  
I moralize two meanings in one word.  
(*King Richard The Third*, III. i. 79—83)

His identity and the nature of his timeless activity in the world are frankly revealed. He can not help boasting about his mastery in the art of deceit. No "formal Vice" weeps more often or more convincingly than Richard when pretending virtue, or enjoys a greater intimacy with his audience. Richard's ability to create dissension in place of unity and love is shown in his last action in *The Third Part of King Henry The Sixth*, where he announces his role to follow in the play which bears his name:

And, that I love the tree from whence thou sprang'st,  
Witness the loving kiss I give the fruit.  
(Aside.) To say the truth, so Judas kiss'd his master,  
And cried "all hail!" when as he meant all harm.  
(*Part 3, King Henry The Sixth*, V. vii. 31—34)

He masquerades under a "virtuous visor" while cheating a succession of victims — "simple gulls" by the "gentle shape" of love and honesty. The homiletic mood of the old allegory is there:

I am determined to prove a villain,  
And hate the idle pleasures of these days.  
(*King Richard The Third*, I. i. 30, 31)

As in medieval moralities there is even a certain repetition in displaying his skills in destruction. The most memorable is his manipulation of Lady Anne which is perhaps his most difficult undertaking. This scene is Shakespeare's masterpiece and matched only by the great seduction scene in *Othello*. Both are amplifications of the typical beguilement performed by Vice upon his victim. At the end of the scene, Anne has made the same moral reversal that mark-

ed the career of Mankind and his many descendants; she has thrown over virtue and embraced evil. When left alone, Richard shares with his public his diabolic merriment:

What! I, that kill'd her husband, and his father  
To take her in her heart's extremest hate;  
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,  
The bleeding witness of her hatred by;  
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,  
And nothing I to back my suit withal  
But the plain devil and dissembling looks,  
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!  
Ha!

(*King Richard The Third*, I. ii. 232—240)

The ancient situation is here displayed wonderfully vividly with Shakespeare's dramatic richness without defacing its familiar features. Anne yields, because like other characters in moralities, she is afflicted with human frailty.

Shakespeare's vivacious villains exist in tragedy and are, in fact, a comic variation within the serious, tragic theme. In comedy, which needs a variation in reverse, his villains have solemn, even sombre natures. The distinction is moral, as well as dramatic: when the good world is serious, its villainy is hilarious; but, for instance in the gay world of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the poet creates his effective contrasts, both dramatic and moral, through a gloomy, unsociable Don John, the bastard. Yet in this light-hearted comedy, where the mood is set by the comic pair, villainy is little more than a mechanism to trigger the plot. Although barely sketched, Don John is a psychologically plausible villain and his links with medieval patterns are slight. Being a bastard, his grievances are against the ordered, legitimate and gay society. As Benedict puts it:

The practice of it lives in John the bastard,  
Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies.  
(*Much Ado About Nothing*, IV. i. 190, 191)

In this discontent he resembles Richard III whose own ugliness is also a stigma and it turns him against the "idle pleasures" of the courtly world, and Edmund who is also illegitimate. Shakespeare carefully establishes Don John's motives: he has recently been in rebellion against the authority of his half-brother Pedro, has been "subdued" and is now seemingly "reconciled" to the other's authority. Yet he cultivates his discontent and awaits his chance at revenge:

If I had my mouth, I  
would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my  
liking; in the meantime, let me be that I am,  
(*Much Ado About Nothing*, I. iii. 36—38)

Against Claudio his resentment finds specific ground in the fact that what

he has lost the other has gained:

That young  
start-up hath all the glory of my overthrow: if  
I can cross him any way, I bless myself every way.  
(*Much Ado About Nothing*, I. iii. 68–71)

Don John does not soliloquize in front of his audience, but addresses himself to his friends, Conrade and Borachio, lacking in this respect the traditional attitude of the Vice. Yet, as any Vice, he is perfectly frank about his own villainy. He is speaking about his brother Don Pedro:

I had rather be a canker in a hedge than a rose in his grace; and it better fits  
my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any: in this,  
though I cannot be said to be a flattering honest man, it must not be denied but I  
am a plain-dealing villain.

(*Much Ado About Nothing*, I. iii. 28–34)

Borachio speaks with equal homiletic candour about "my villainy". They are both dedicated to destruction of a happy love affair.

The same technique is used during the earlier part of Edmund's role in *King Lear*. He demonstrates the types of moral evil increasingly more prominent in plays after 1600 — the revolt of man's lower nature against the sanctities understood by his higher nature. Edmund's rebellion against the limitations of his bastardy, his assertion of the "natural" qualifications of his cleverly used strength of character, his contempt for the well-ordered society, shows him as an heir of the medieval Vice. His gay energy in deception, his deep awareness of his own moral position is even more characteristic. As he himself says:

A credulous father, and a brother noble,  
Whose nature is so far from doing harms  
That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty  
My practices ride easy! I see the business.  
Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit:  
All with me's meet that I can fashion fit.

(*King Lear*, I. ii. 201–206)

The credulity of his dupes is contrasted with his own villainy exactly as it was in medieval homiletic drama. Emilia sums up thus the whole moral situation in *Othello*:

O mistress! villainy hath made mocks with love.  
(*Othello*, V. ii. 149)

which also bears a strong resemblance to *Psychomachia*. As a poet, Shakespeare dramatizes in this story his own conviction that a "marriage of true minds" (already known from his sonnets, transcends mere sex in a spiritual union of two people. Such an union finds its full expression in the marriage of Othello and Desdemona — their love is neither the fancy of the eye (Othello is not

young, he is "declin'd into the vale of years") nor the urge of the blood, but the essential attraction of one soul to another, disregarding the differences of race, habits and years. Desdemona says as much:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,  
My downright violence and storm of fortunes  
May trumpet to the world; my heart's subdu'd  
Even to the very quality of my lord;  
I saw Othello's visage in his mind,

(*Othello*, I. iii. 250–254)

When in Act IV, scene iii Emilia cries:

I would you had never seen him! (Line 18)

Desdemona answers:

So would not I; my love doth so approve him, (Line 19)

*Othello* shows the refinement of the courtly love — another medieval theme — which treated love as the rich spiritual source of experience, second only to the love of God. The evil in the play, on the other hand, is constructed of two different elements; the first is a contemporary concept of a "new man" or a Machiavelli — man of infinite potential and cunning relying solely upon himself to achieve his ends, and disregarding the virtue which is God's grace. Iago says:

Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we  
are thus, or thus.

(*Othello*, I. iii. 323, 324)

Man, as a king of beasts, can achieve his appetites better than they because he is equipped with reason. Loyalty in service is merely the dotage of "honest knaves", who should be whipped for their folly. Lack of diplomacy whereby word and action show the feelings of the heart is as silly as wearing the heart upon the sleeve "for daws to peck at". Generous masters like Othello are there to be cheated. There were quite a few Machiavellis on the Shakespearean stage: Falstaff, Richard III, Edmund in *King Lear* and Antonio in *The Tempest*. But there is also another side of these characters: any love above purely animal appetite offends Iago. He shocks Brabantio in the very first scene by his images of animal copulation. For him "love is merely the lust of the blood and a permission of the will". He genuinely can not understand anything else, hence his hatred towards the Moor.

The medieval pattern in the play is clearly discernible by the fact that Iago is able to deceive absolutely everybody — all the major characters are his dupes and his victims. In scene after scene he works upon them, at the same time cynically inviting the audience to admire his skill and dedication. He invites us to participate in his "game" just as Tittivillus and the Vices did. Everything that is done is done for Iago's "sport and profit". In this tradition sardonic humour is the native mood of evil.

Iago, in hating Othello, displays the moral dualism of the Psychomachia — evil must hate virtue and seek its destruction. In the original medieval allegory, personified Vice was pitted against personified virtue on the field of battle which is the most obvious metaphor for the eternal feud between them in the human soul. When this military image disappeared from the moralities, one side had to drive out the other either by violence or intrigue — coexistence was impossible. In *Impatient Poverty*<sup>2</sup> Envy says:

I hate Conscience, Peace, Love and Rest;  
Debate and Strife, that I love best,  
According to my property.

(*Impatient Poverty*:329)

Similarly Iago can not help hating all godness according to his nature — “his property”. And what he abhors more than anything is good order, peace and spiritual love binding people more strongly than death. His is allegorical hatred which has no real psychological explanation — in the same sense Envy hates Peace, Love and Rest. The villain hates virtue and the persons in whom they are dwelling because, as he says, he is a villain. Similar note is once struck by Shylock when he says:

I hate him for he is a Christian;  
But more for that in low simplicity  
He lends out money gratis, ...

(*The Merchant of Venice*, I. iii. 43—45)

Shakespeare has obviously undertaken to give a new brilliance to the old stage pattern. In Iago this old pattern still retains its integrity in action, but its verbal structure has already somewhat disintegrated. Yet, all the fragments are still visible. In various places he re-affirms his will to evil, the virtue of his victims and his hate towards them. But the linked psychological elements in his make-up now yielding to the new pressures of “naturalism” have almost fallen apart. One can imagine Iago saying: I hate the Moor because he is a paragon of Christian and romantic virtue and I am a villain; but his hatred, having become divorced from its allegorical roots survives unattached and is somewhat thinly explained away by a variety of reasons — all of them unconvincing. As for his hatred towards Cassio he says:

He hat a daily beauty in his life  
That makes me ugly;

(*Othello*, V. i. 19, 20)

this, of course, is Psychomachia all over again, slightly adapted and “naturalised” by language. Iago’s predecessors are not more numerous than his successors but they are more obvious. Here are a few villains who come after him chronologically but are in the same hybrid mould: one is the wicked Duke of Epire in *The Dumb Knight* (c. 1608) by Gervase Markham and Lewis Machin;

<sup>2</sup> *Impatient poverty* in J. S. Farmer (ed.) 1907:329.

there is a villain called Proditor in Thomas Middleton’s *The Phoenix* (c. 1607) and also the villain Francisco in Philip Massinger’s *The Duke of Milan* (c. 1616) (Spivack 1958:449—450). The medieval tradition had survived until the beginning of the seventeenth century.

Emrys Jones in his book *The Origins of Shakespeare* stresses that: “A major obstacle to a close historical understanding of Shakespearean drama, and particularly the histories and tragedies, has been the failure to bring into relation with it the great body of dramatic writing known as the mystery plays, the Corpus Christi cycles written in the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (Jones 1977:31). And it is true that Shakespeare’s tragedies, especially, would have been impoverished without this rich native source of dramatic patterns and images.

For there are countless examples of ready-made visual patterns — as was the case of Falstaff — which have been adapted for Shakespeare’s dramatic use. The well-known example is Kent being put into stocks in *King Lear*; in the morality play routine, virtuous people were often put there to underline the moral point of the story. A Porter in *Macbeth* is in himself an allusion to the Harrowing of Hell plays, while in phrases like “it out-Herods Herod” Shakespeare actually appealed to his public’s collective memory of a stock figure in the old plays.

On the whole, Shakespeare criticism thought it unnecessary to search for the origins of his drama in the native medieval soil of England. Yet, the Catholic past of the country still survived in people’s inward mental habits and assumptions. Certain dramatic forms also survived as the pre-Reformation theatrical inheritance. The last performances of the mystery cycles in Coventry were as late as 1579 and Stratford-upon-Avon is in close proximity. It is quite unimaginable that young Shakespeare with his interest in the theatre would neglect seeing at least some of the current mysteries and moralities.

One of the themes running through the whole of Elizabethan life was secularisation, the making Protestant and secular what had previously been Catholic and sacred. In the realm of popular festivity, Queen Elizabeth seems to have attracted to herself something of the devotion formerly shown to the Virgin Mary, so much so, that contemporary Catholic writers did sometimes accuse the English of honouring the Queen’s birthday more than the Virgin’s. A similar process, where traditional Catholic practices became converted to secular uses occurred in drama. There is a continuity between medieval plays and Shakespeare’s; as an example, it can be shown that in *The Second Part of King Henry The Sixth* the dramatist has taken over late medieval tragic forms and gave them a new lease of life — all his own. The fall of Duke Humphrey is a good example of how former dramatic patterns are adapted to a new use. The way Humphrey’s enemies plotted against him and secured his downfall, through seemingly legal processes, closely resembles ensnaring of Jesus by the Jews. The

passion of Christ is a cataclysmic event but so is Humphrey's legal murder — it is a turning point in England's history when the horrors of civil war are unleashed. Two scenes remind us strongly, visually of mystery cycles depicting the life and passion of Christ: those which isolate Humphrey and expose him to group hatred; with all the sadistic cruelty in the situation there is a strong element of ceremoniousness and pretence that everything is being done legally. In one such mystery play entitled *The Conspiracy to Take Jesus* (Cutlers Play in the York Cycle of Mystery Plays) (Jones 1977:49—52) there is a general resemblance in concept and structure to the Humphrey situation inasmuch that both men are isolated from friends as soon as they are arrested. Queen Margaret and Cardinal Beaufort recall strongly the roles of Caiaphas and Annas; their affinities to the two priests are demonstrated in their conception as strongly vocal personalities — they are loud, harsh and sanctimonious. There is an atmosphere of pure hatred — unsatisfied until it had destroyed the victim. The person of Henry VI, on the other hand, seems to combine in itself two roles: that of Pilate sympathetic to the victim yet powerless to help him and, curiously enough, also exhibiting some of the qualities of Virgin Mary; he faints on hearing of Humphrey's death; also, in his speech, Henry compares Humphrey to a "calf" and himself to a "dam" — the wailing mother robbed of her darling. In this situation the ages of Henry and Humphrey are forgotten to bring out the feeling of maternal loss felt by the King. Yet, it is impossible to see in Humphrey's death a Christ-like figure of Redemption. The resemblances are merely theatrical.

The last of the trial scenes in *The Second Trial before Pilate Continued; The Judgement of Jesus* (York Cycle XXXIII) (Jones 1977:54) shows Him whipped by soldiers before being crowned with thorns; this anticipates dramatically Margaret's long speech to York, set on the molehill, in the course of which she puts a paper crown on his head. She also jeers at him:

What! was it you that would be England's king?  
Was't you that revell'd in our parliament,  
And made a preachment of your high descent?  
(Part 3, *King Henry The Sixth*, I. iv. 70—72)

The jeering is on the same topic: how dare you call your self a king. In *King Richard The Second* in the scene of his deposition Richard says:

... yet you Pilates  
Have here deliver'd me to my sour cross,  
And water cannot wash away your sin.  
(*King Richard The Second*, IV. i. 240—242)

Again, the similarity is only in dramatic pattern used, not in comparing Richard, in any way, with Christ; on the contrary, Shakespeare makes use of the fact that Richard sees himself as Christ-figure to stress how different he is, in fact, from Christ.

In *Coriolanus* there is a strong dramatic prominence given to the two tribunes — Sicinius and Brutus. It is they, rather than Aufidius, who are real enemies of Coriolanus. They are mean-spirited in the mould of Caiaphas and Annas of the mysteries; they dread losing their power to the newcomer. Shakespeare had extended their role in the play, while in Plutarch their appearance is limited to that part of the narrative which corresponds to Shakespeare's third act. The poet built them up into figures of menace who oppose the hero at each stage of his tragedy. They are not only Coriolanus's enemies but also his judges. Sicinius expresses this strongly:

... in the name o' the people,  
And in the power of us the tribunes, we,  
Even from this instant, banish him our city,  
In peril of precipitation  
From off the rock Tarpeian, never more  
To enter our Rome gates: i' the people's name,  
I say, it shall be so.

(*Coriolanus*, III. iii. 97—103)

These lines recall the speech of Pilate when sentencing Christ to death. This scene is, in fact, a kind of trial scene in which the tribunes are determined that the accused shall be found guilty. Coriolanus with his helpless intrasigence is as vulnerable to their political machinations as Christ was in the hands of the priests.

It is highly probable that Shakespeare's mind was unconsciously preoccupied with visual scenes of the Passion sequence; at the beginning of the scene three (Act IV) there is an odd episode described as follows: *Enter a Roman and a Volsc, meeting*. This sequence is not absolutely necessary as it relates what we already know — when performed on the stage it is often cut out of the text by a director. But this queer episode strongly resembles a scene which has been obligatory in the mystery plays — in which two travellers on the road to Emmaus meet Jesus after his Resurrection. If the figure of Christ is omitted, what we have in *Coriolanus* is remarkably close to the occasion dramatized in *The Road to Emmaus* (York Cycle XL) (Jones 1977:64). In both, two travellers meet on the highway and discuss recent events in the city; both scenes end with a promise of supper. There is no such episode in Plutarch.

The most visually striking scene in the entire play is in the last act in which the women of Coriolanus family appeal to him to spare the city; this sequence bears strong resemblance to the visit of three Marys to Christ's tomb. Although Volumnia, Valeria and Virgilia do not resemble the biblical figures and — once again — Coriolanus does not represent Christ — yet in visual stage terms there is unmistakable influence.

Certain perceptive literary critics have noted some similarities in Shakespeare's plays to biblical episodes. As early as 1936, John Middleton Murry in his book *Shakespeare* (Murray 1936:362), when talking of *Antony and Cleopatra*



draws our attention to the fact, that in Act IV, scene two, Antony asks his servants to wait on him at supper for the last time — this episode is reminiscent of Jesus's last supper with His disciples.

The medieval influence is even more striking in *Othello*. In the second scene of Act I Brabantio has just discovered Desdemona's elopement and has been worked up into a rage by Iago. But despite Iago's attempts to rouse passions, Othello remains calm. When Brabantio threatens violence, he refuses to fight saying:

Keep up your bright swords,  
for the dew will rust them.  
(*Othello*, I. ii. 59)

For the moment Iago's schemes come to nothing. There is a similar scene in one of *Ludus Coventriae* plays when after the Getsemane sequence Jesus encounters armed men; Judas kisses Him and Peter draws his sword and cuts off Malchus's ear. Jesus replaces the ear saying:

Put thi swerd in the shode fayr and wel  
For he that smyth with swerd  
with swerd xal be smete.  
(*Ludus Coventriae* edited by K. S. Block (1922) 266 lines 999—1000)<sup>3</sup>

In both episodes the hero behaves with calm and dignity acting as a peacemaker.

In another scene, Jesus is accused of witchcraft and so is Othello. Brabantio accuses him of "enchanting" his daughter with "chains of magic". Othello is not a Christ figure either and the resemblance is purely a theatrical one. Incidentally, Iago does play the part of Judas. His words are evocative of Judas's kiss:

Though I do hate him as I do hell-pains  
Yet, for necessity of present life,  
I must show out a flag and sign of love,  
Which is indeed but sign.  
(*Othello*, I. i. 155—158)

As regards post-Spivack approach to the problem of Iago, a book by Stanley Edgar Hyman *Iago — Some Approaches to the Illusion of His Motivation* (1971) is probably most remarkable. He is not a Shakespeare scholar but most certainly a gifted critic and writer. He has chosen Iago as a good "display case" for pluralist criticism. Consequently his approach to Iago is pluralistic. Hyman considers him as a Stage Villain, as Satan, as a Machiavel and as a latent homosexual. He also contrasts him with Prospero from *The Tempest*, thus showing two contrasting portraits of Shakespeare himself as the artist. The real merit of the book lies in listing by Hyman every book written on the subject of Iago and in this way at least his work is a must for every student of *Othello*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ludus Coventriae* edited by K. S. Block (1922).

Emrys Jones says he is convinced that the native dramatic influence on Shakespeare went much deeper than his classical learning. It was only his use of ready-made dramatic patterns and situations which appealed to him visually in the old plays — the real influence goes much deeper. The Passion sequences contributed to his tragedies in a much more essential way by presenting him with a dramatic sense of "value". They enabled him to endow his heroes with a universal meaning in their tragic predicament. All his great tragic figures possess a certain suggestion of spiritual greatness even if their characters are flawed. However much he owed to the humanists in literary terms, it may be that the great imaginative power of his protagonists derives not so much from Renaissance ideals as from traditional medieval concepts of "God as hero". During the sixteenth century, the religious power which up till then centred in the figure of Christ was transferred slowly to secular figures in a drama played for secular purposes. But a certain residue of religious feelings persisted into Shakespeare's tragic writing and gave it its depth and universality; and when in the next century the drama lost finally all contact with those old medieval religious forms, it quickly degenerated into triviality.

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