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L. C. Knights

Excerpt

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I

An Approach to *Hamlet*

LECTURE I

HAMLET is, I suppose, that play of Shakespeare's about which there is most disagreement. There is no need for me to remind you of the bewildering variety of different things that have been said both about the Prince of Denmark and his play; it is enough to remark that more has been written about *Hamlet* than about any other of Shakespeare's plays, and that if, in the twentieth century, *Hamlet* has yielded to *King Lear* the distinction of being the play in which the age most finds itself, there is still no lack of widely differing interpretations of the former piece. Indeed I once decided that if ever I should write or talk about *Hamlet* at any length—a task that I have shirked up to now—I should use as my title 'Through the Looking-Glass', so clear is it that, more than with any other play, critics are in danger of finding reflected what they bring with them to the task of interpretation, so difficult is it, once you are in the play, to be sure of the right direction. And it is not many months since a writer in the *Listener* remarked that 'every fresh critic who sets out to define the intentions of the author of *Hamlet* ends up in his own particular dead-end in queer street'. So the hazards are, it seems, considerable.

Let me, therefore, call attention to my title, which is not 'An Interpretation of *Hamlet*' but 'An Approach to *Hamlet*'. Interpretation is of course involved; but

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what I want to emphasize is, first, that the interpretation is tentative—a kind of thinking aloud which I hope will be found useful by other people; and, secondly, that I propose to set the play in relation to other plays of Shakespeare, to try to see it in a particular perspective, rather than to attempt a detailed commentary.

Hamlet belongs to the year 1600 or to the early months of 1601. It thus comes near the beginning of a period when Shakespeare was much concerned with the relationship between the mind, the whole reflective personality, and the world with which it engages. Particularly he seems to have been preoccupied with distortions in men's way of looking at the world; and the plays in which this preoccupation is active raise, in various ways, the problem of the relation of 'knowledge' to the knower, to what a man is, to the true or distorted imagination. What I wish to do in this first lecture is to bring some of these plays together, not in strict chronological order, nor indeed in any strictly systematic way, but simply to elicit what—for all their difference—they have in common, and to see if their linked preoccupations may not form a context for the play towards which, in the remaining three lectures, our attention will be mainly directed.

There is no need for me to tell you that Shakespeare, from time to time, showed a very considerable preoccupation with man's subjection to illusion, 'the seeming truth which cunning times put on To entrap the wisest' (*M. of V.* III. ii. 100-101); it was a preoccupation that noticeably deepened in the period immediately preceding the great tragedies. Now the

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question posed by the undoubted power of illusion branches in two directions, towards the deceiver, and towards the deceived. Shakespeare, like many another writer, was certainly interested in the deceiver, especially the one who does not merely assume a deliberate disguise, like Iago, but is false in subtler ways, like Cressida, or deceives himself as well as others, like Angelo—of whom the Duke said, 'Hence shall we see, If power change purpose, what our seemers be'. But his main interest seems to have centred on the deceived, and a question that he asks with some insistence is how men come to make false or distorted judgments about other persons or about the world at large—what it is in their own natures that makes them capable of being deceived. This preoccupation seems to be present in two of the middle comedies. At all events, in *Much Ado about Nothing* (1598) the credence given to the slanderer may well be intended, as Mr. James Smith has suggested, to precipitate a judgment on the society represented by Claudio and Don Pedro (*Scrutiny*, XIII, 4, 1946). And I would tentatively suggest that *All's Well that Ends Well*—that unsatisfactory play (1602-3)—only makes sense when it is seen as a kind of morality play in which Bertram is for long unable to recognize his true good in Helena.

Both *Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1602) and *Othello* (1603) pursue the problem at a much deeper level. *Troilus and Cressida* is far too complex a play to be dealt with briefly, and here a few words must suffice. I have tried

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to show elsewhere¹ how both Greeks and Trojans are presented as subjected to time and appearance—the Greeks, because they stand for public life and an impersonal 'reason', divorced from feeling and intuitive intelligence; the Trojans, their complementary opposites, because their way of life is based on a passionate and wilful assertion of the untutored self. The play, as I said, is complex. For our present purposes it is enough to note how Shakespeare presents Troilus, not simply as the victim of Cressida's unfaithfulness but as, to some extent, self-deceived. The way in which he meets experience is both presented and, I think, criticized in the poetry that is given him to speak—the poetry through which his attitude to life is defined. Of this, Mr D. A. Traversi, in an essay published twenty years ago (*Scrutiny*, VII, 3, 1938) gave a classic account. In the imagery of the love poetry, there is, he says, 'a poignant thinness', which conveys simultaneously 'an impression of intense feeling and an underlying lack of content'. Of a characteristic passage he remarked: 'The emotions are intense enough, but only in the palate and the senses; they scarcely involve any full personality in the speaker'. And Traversi further pointed out that the expression of Troilus's 'idealism' through the imagery of taste underlines its unsubstantiality and its subjection to time. It is, we may say, the over-active element of subjective fantasy in Troilus's passion that gives to his love poetry its hurried, fevered note, with a suggestion of trying to realize something essentially unrealizable; it is his intense subjectivism that commits him to a world of time and appearance. At the risk of

¹ In *Some Shakespearean Themes*, Chapter IV.

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drawing an over-simple moral from a complicated play, I would put the matter thus: if both Troilus and the Greeks are shown as 'fools of time', this is not because there is something hostile to men's hopes and aspirations in the very nature of things, so that 'checks and disasters' necessarily 'grow in the veins of actions highest reared'; it is because of some failure at deep levels of the personality, which can be called indifferently a failure of reason or of the imagination. If this is right it marks an interesting connexion with *Othello*, where attention centres on those elements in Othello's mind and feelings, his attitudes towards himself, that make him so vulnerable to Iago.

On *Othello* there are two brilliant essays—one by Wilson Knight, in *The Wheel of Fire*, and one by F. R. Leavis, in *The Common Pursuit*; to both of them I am very much indebted, and I wish to mention them before going on to suggest how the play develops the theme—the relationship between self and world—that is our present concern.

Othello, we may say, defines the peculiar weakness and vulnerability—the capacity for being deceived—of a particular attitude to life. That attitude is defined and made present to our imaginations through a mode of speech. Othello's character is given us not only by what he says but by the way he says it, within the accepted conventions of poetic drama,¹ and I must ask

¹ This is an obvious instance of what Mr Arthur Sewall, in his most helpful book, *Character and Society in Shakespeare*, calls 'the distillation of personality into style'.

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you to call that style to mind before I go on to make the observation that will link this play with those others with which I wish to associate it. Almost any of Othello's utterances when he is truly himself will serve. Take for example his reply to Iago's excited account of how Brabantio is incensed against him:

Let him do his spite:
 My services, which I have done the signiory,
 Shall out-tongue his complaints. 'Tis yet to know—
 Which, when I know that boasting is an honour,
 I shall promulgate—I fetch my life and being
 From men of royal siege, and my demerits
 May speak unbonneted to as proud a fortune
 As this that I have reached.

Consciousness of worth is expressed in every line, not only in explicit statement but in tone and movement; and the lofty tone is emphasized by phrases that are the opposite of common or idiomatic. A moment later we have,

But that I love the gentle Desdemona,
 I would not my unhoused free condition
 Put into circumscription and confine
 For the sea's worth . . .

—where there is suggested for the first time Othello's nostalgic feeling for the life of action, 'the pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war'. Our impression is made up of a sense of calm and assured dignity, of something a little exotic, and of Othello's consciousness of worth—'My parts, my title and my perfect [fully prepared] soul'.

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This is the Othello whom we see in the next scene, when, with grave deliberation, he makes his defence against Brabantio before the Venetian Senate:

Most potent, grave, and reverend signiors,
 My very noble and approved good masters. . . .

How different this is, in tone and manner, from the quick, nervous phrasing of Macbeth! Of course Othello goes on to tell us something about himself which would be important however he told it: he has been a soldier all his life,

And little of this great world can I speak,
 More than pertains to feats of broil and battle . . .

but the manner is equally important. 'Pertains' brings out the unidiomatic quality; the phrasing is 'monumental'. At the same time there is a suggestion of poetry in the way Othello sees himself:

For since these arms of mine had seven years pith,
 Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
 Their dearest action in the tented field.

A romantic glamour is thrown over the kind of life Othello has lived, and over himself as someone eminently suited to lead that kind of life. The romantic note is developed when he goes on to tell of his wooing:

Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances,
 Of moving accidents by flood and field,
 Of hair-breadth scapes i' the imminent deadly breach,
 Of being taken by the insolent foe,
 And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,
 And portance in my travel's history . . .

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'Imminent', 'redemption', 'portance'—all have a latinized or foreign flavour, just as the Cannibals—the Anthropophagi—who come in a moment later, are obviously exotic. And with this goes an unconscious egotism:

She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them.

It is also important to realize that what Wilson Knight calls 'the Othello music', the Othello idiom, is one that does not engage very closely with actuality. Value is insistently attributed to what is remote, or to that world of simplified action where Othello was, so to speak, at home—the world so far removed from that Cyprus where he is called on to meet the new experience of getting to know the wife who loved him.

Now it is precisely this Othello who succumbs—and succumbs so promptly—to Iago in the temptation scene. This is in essentials the point that Leavis makes so well in the essay to which I have referred. The speed with which Iago successfully develops his attack Leavis explains in terms of something self-centred and self-regarding in Othello's love—something that prevents him from seeing Desdemona fully as a complete person. What Iago can exploit is not only Othello's romantic naïvety, his ignorance of all but the world of external affairs, but Othello's consciousness of his own worth—'I would not have your free and noble nature Out of self bounty be abused'. On the tremendous and awful vow that Othello makes when he finally commits himself to revenge—

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Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb . . .
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back . . .

Leavis comments: 'At this climax of the play, as he sets himself irrevocably in his vindictive resolution, he reassumes formally his heroic self-dramatization—re-assumes the Othello of "the big wars that make ambition virtue"'. The part of this conscious nobility, this noble egotism, this self-pride that was justified by experience irrelevant to the present trials and stresses, is thus underlined. Othello's self-idealization, his promptness to jealousy and his blindness are shown in their essential relation.'

It is for reasons such as these that Othello is vulnerable to Iago—that Iago who is so much less than a fully drawn 'character' whose motives we are invited to examine, and so much more than a mere 'necessary piece of dramatic mechanism'. What we have to notice here is that Iago's mode of speech is at the opposite pole from Othello's. It is idiomatic, whereas Othello's is rhetorical; it is realistic, drawing readily on the commonplace and everyday, whereas Othello's is exotic; and it conveys a persistent animus.¹ Iago's vocabulary, his idiom, imagery and allusions, come from a world in which the common is the commonplace: cumulatively, the suggestion is of a world not only without glamour but without ideals, the world of conventional jokes about women—'to make fools laugh i' the alehouse',

¹ Leavis speaks of Iago's 'deflating, unbeglamouring, brutally realistic mode of speech'.

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as Desdemona says. There is of course nothing wrong with common idiom as such. The point is that Iago uses it to deflate: there is almost invariably animus either against the object to which he applies his comparisons, or against the subject from which his comparisons and references are drawn. Iago's world is one in which things and people are manipulated, a world completely without values; and his manner of speech gives expression to a view of life that attributes reality to nothing but the senses and the will: 'Virtue! a fig! 'tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus.' Taking notice of these things we may say with Wilson Knight that Iago is 'the spirit of denial, wholly negative', adding also that it is precisely this coarse, reductive cynicism against which an egocentric romanticism is so defenceless. Iago, as Maud Bodkin says, is 'the shadow-side of Othello'.¹ What the play gives in the temptation scene and later is something like possession — possession by foul imaginings. This too is reflected in Othello's language when it becomes as coarse and brutal as Iago's.

Let me now draw these reflections to a point where they may be seen to fit into the general argument. Grace Stuart, in her book *Narcissus: a Psychological Study of Self-Love*, speaks of Othello as a Narcissist who tries to make of the woman with whom he fell in love a mirror for his idealized self, or for those qualities in himself that he found most acceptable, and it is clear that it is, fundamentally, a failure to love that makes the tragedy. But besides this, the moral centre of the play, there is what may be called the metaphysical

¹ *Archetypal Patterns of Poetry*, Chapter V.