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Elmer Edgar Stoll

Excerpt

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## Chapter I

### THE PRESENT UNDERTAKING

THE core of tragedy (and of comedy too, for that matter) is situation; and a situation is a character in contrast, and perhaps also in conflict, with other characters or with circumstances. We have ordinarily been taught that with the author character comes first and foremost, not only in importance but in point of time, and (cause of no little confusion) that the action is only its issue. But there is no drama until the character is conceived in a complication; and in the dramatist's mind it is so conceived at the outset. This is when the whole is invented, as nowadays it is supposed to be: when, as with the ancients and the Elizabethans, an old story was used anew, then, obviously, the plot came foremost in time and the characters were invented to fit it. And not only in those days, but in any when drama has flourished, plot—not intrigue, of course, or external activity, but situation, which is its centre of energy—has been first in importance too. Even in this era of anarchy and chaos a drama in which the characters are presented *not* in a complication, is really none. Aristotle, who by literary and psychological critics has, regretfully, been taken to task for saying it, is justified by the facts: “We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is the Plot; and that the characters come second.... We maintain that Tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the

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personal agents".<sup>1</sup> And not really out of harmony with this is the subsequent precept, that "whenever such-and-such a personage says or does such-and-such a thing, it shall be the probable or necessary outcome of his character".<sup>2</sup>

Unlike many critics to-day, the Stagirite did not so much explore his own opinions and sensibilities as examine the practice of dramatists, who, then as now, were so eager for a good situation that, wherever found, they seized upon it, whether new or old. And the situation they have deemed the best is that in which the contrast or conflict is sharpest and most striking, the probability or psychological reasonableness of it being a secondary consideration. Indeed, in the greatest tragedies (and comedies and epics too) the situation has been fundamentally improbable, unreasonable. What are the greatest stories in the world? Those of Orestes, Oedipus, Achilles, and Odysseus; of Iphigeneia, Dido, Phaedra, Medea, and Herod and Mariamne; of Tristram and Isolt, Siegfried and Brünnhilde; of the Cid, Faustus, and Don Juan; of Lear, Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet: all of them embodying situations improbable to an extreme degree. Their improbability is the price of their effectiveness: such fine and fruitful situations life itself does not afford. The sharper conflict provokes the bigger passion; the more striking contrast produces the bigger effect: and to genius the improbability is only a challenge.

<sup>1</sup> *The Art of Poetry*, Bywater (1929), p. 38 (§ 6). In my humble but insistent justification, at this point, of the first of critics I am delighted at last to receive, whether he himself is aware or not, the support of one of the exquisites. See Bonamy Dobrée, *Restoration Tragedy* (1929), p. 33: "The conception of character being the playwright's object has vitiated, not only criticism, but also playwriting, for longer than it is agreeable to think".

<sup>2</sup> § 15.

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In the list above Shakespeare's greatest plays are numbered; but most of the others, tragic, or comic, or even historical, are as little the sort of thing we meet in life. *Timon*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado*, *As You Like It*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *All's Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*: these, and the greater ones already mentioned, are stories of disguise, mistaken identity, feigning, or substitution; of tyranny or trickery, deception or slander; of eavesdropping, or the fateful finding of rings, letters, or handkerchiefs; of apparent deaths and revivals; of riddling wills, vows, or oracles; of love or generosity suddenly and irrevocably turned to hatred; and of Fate or the Supernatural, villainy or magic, love or revenge, triumphant over all. These devices, as artificial and outworn, are nowadays taboo. But alike they are only the traditional means of attaining the contrast or conflict, the compression and condensation, which drama of necessity seeks. In themselves they are devices of accumulation and simplification.

Now "the impossibilities are justifiable", says Aristotle, "if they serve the end of poetry . . . if they make the effect of some portion of the work more striking". For, as Longinus observes after him, "the effect of genius is not to persuade [or convince] the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves; . . . and the object of poetry is to enthral".<sup>1</sup> To these primal and primordial critics, then, as not to the Shakespearean, and to the world-famous dramatists, if not, in such measure, to the modern, the whole is more important than any part, the dramatic and

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poetic structure than the characters, and emotional illusion than verisimilitude. And they are, I think, to Shakespeare.

In the study of these matters in relation to him I shall for the most part keep to the tragedies; and because of the special difficulties there presented, to the four generally considered the greatest. The situation in these I have, here or there, discussed already; and I shall of necessity incur, though I have endeavoured to avert, the reproach of repetition. If only those who join the ranks of scholarship could from the outset know their appointed day! Then, however insistently and diligently they should apply themselves, they might securely refrain from print till a twelvemonth or so before it, and spare the world both repetition and revision. Not that I am myself aware of having anything to retract; I hope, indeed, that I have something of importance to add; but this I cannot present, in its due relations and proportions, without gathering up the threads and presenting the subject as a whole. In a work of art (and therefore in the interpretation) everything depends upon, and supports, everything else. To a work of art there are no additions or appendages; and to criticism, no postscripts. And here of mere repetition there is little: there is reconstruction, or adjustment, instead. What I am intent upon is the positive, not the negative, is truth, not widespread and prevailing error; ideas produced in the articles and monographs I develop, and relate anew; and the book is a synthesis of my opinions concerning Shakespeare's central structure, now put upon paper, as it has naturally (or unnaturally) come about in

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my mind. The subordinate structure I pass over, having recently discussed it.<sup>1</sup>

The study is one in dramatic art, not in dramatic evolution; and that is the reason I shall not take up the plays in chronological order. My object is to show an essentially identical method, for an essentially identical purpose, in the finest work of Shakespeare and not only of the ancients but even of some of the moderns; and I begin with *Othello* because it is the crucial case. Here, in its most complete and fruitful, but also most improbable, form, is the situation as I conceive of it; and the relation of character to action; and the supremacy of dramatic effect and illusion over both. And thereupon I show something of the same art elsewhere.

<sup>1</sup> *Poets and Playwrights* (1930), Chap. III, "Shakespeare and the Moderns".

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## Chapter II

### *OTHELLO*

#### § 1

*OTHELLO* and *Macbeth*, as the two wholly original tragedies—founded, that is, directly upon a story or legend, not a play—offer the clearest indication of Shakespeare's tragic conception and procedure. What of this becomes apparent may most fairly be accounted his deliberate or spontaneous choice; and in both cases it involves the sort of situation that I have been describing, as improbable and as rich in contrast as any. The hero, particularly in *Othello*, is a prey to passions foreign (in a sense) to his nature, and is led into conduct to which he is not inclined.

In my monograph,<sup>1</sup> years ago, I pointed out the want of any jealous, or sexually suspicious, nature in the Moor previous to the temptation; the certainty that the passion then ensuing was jealousy nevertheless; and the propriety of considering the transition from the one state to the other, without evidence for the accusation or likelihood on the face of it, to be impossible as psychology, and owing to the convention, not infrequent in tragedy and comedy, as in myth and legend, of believing at the critical moment the detrimental thing that is cunningly told. Though less obvious and external, it is an artifice of constructive character, like other traditional forms of deception in fiction, such as disguise and eavesdropping.

<sup>1</sup> *Othello* (1915).

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## OTHELLO

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And I showed that the use of this convention is no isolated instance in Shakespeare; being employed not only in the tragedy almost immediately preceding (or succeeding), where kindly old Gloster, without reason, and without staying for a reason, believes his ambitious bastard son, who “has been out nine years”, as he slanders the earl’s legitimate and favourite son, who has been at home; but also, shortly before that, in *Much Ado*, where the noble Claudio, with consequences almost as tragic, believes the sour Don John, who, he rightly thinks, loves him not, as the scoundrel slanders his sweetheart Hero; as well as afterwards, in *Cymbeline*, where the noble Posthumus, with consequences for both heroine and hero more terrible still, believes the stranger and foreigner Iachimo as he slanders Imogen. (Perhaps the most remarkable and most patently unpsychological instance is still another—that in *Macbeth*, where Malcolm repeatedly and ever more grievously slanders, not others, but himself, Macduff, in turn, with no conceivable motive or possible predisposition, credits his words, and then, on Malcolm’s contradicting them, credits his words once more.) In all these cases, but most conspicuously and effectively in *Othello*, the generous and unsuspecting hero, believing a person whom he does not love or really know and has no right reason to trust, to the point of disbelieving persons whom he loves and has every reason to trust, falls, in the self-same scene, without proof of the accuser’s or inquiry and investigation of his own, into a jealous rage, and resolves publicly to repudiate or secretly to kill the person suspected. And in all these cases the story told is unlikely on the face of it—how could any of the women incriminated, if to her lover not really a

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stranger, have been suspected, even if frail or faithless, of anything so gross and bestial as Hero's admitting the low Borachio into her chamber the night before her wedding; or as Imogen's total and unconditional surrender to the "yellow" and lascivious Iachimo at sight; or (a matter of fact here as well) as Desdemona's granting Cassio so many favours, or any, since her arrival in Cyprus, which was but yesterday? Yet the grossness—the improbability—of the charges only serves to enrage the hero the more.<sup>1</sup>

And this situation, in which acquaintance and evidence count for so little, is to be found, though without the denial of a suspicious or jealous nature to the hero (but also without Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic effectiveness) in other Elizabethan and Renaissance tragedies and comedies, such as *Philaster*, and even in modern ones, such as Voltaire's *Zaïre* and Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe*; and in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides and the tragedies of Seneca and Racine founded upon it; not to mention old stories like those of Joseph and Potiphar, Bellerophon and Proetus, and the various others, in divers tongues, of false stewards and malignant stepmothers. In these, certainly, it is not the image of life; and if Shakespeare's use of the convention, though vastly superior, be intended for such, is this greatly to his credit?

## § 2

I am now not quite alone in taking this sceptical but, as I think, rational, and, in the long run, poetical and dramatic, point of view. Many critics, indeed, as in the earlier

<sup>1</sup> This is, psychologically, on a level with Hippolito's believing that his sweet and innocent wife Infelice had compromised herself with Bryan, the Irish footman, in Dekker's *Honest Whore* (c. 1604), III, i. Like Malcolm, she had, for a purpose, brought the charge against herself.



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## OTHELLO

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discussion I noticed, have had misgivings concerning the psychology of Othello's transition or transformation, though with a different result. But recently Mr Granville-Barker, in considering the case of Gloster, observed that "Shakespeare asks us to allow him the fact of the deception, even as we have allowed him Lear's partition of the kingdom".<sup>1</sup> That is, in all three instances, it is simply an initial postulate, and the very same in two—which, so far, is exactly what I hold. And still more recently Mr John Bailey declared that "nothing can palliate the absurdity of it. Why Edgar writes to Edmund, who is with him in the same house, why Gloster does not know his son's writing, why he accepts so clumsy a forgery as genuine, why he never insists on seeing Edgar and why Edgar never insists on seeing him, are all questions impossible to answer, yet certain to be asked, even by casual spectators in the theatre".<sup>2</sup> This last objection, that the doubter and the doubted are not in frank and sober inquiry confronted, applies equally to *Othello*;<sup>3</sup> as well as the more fundamental one of their failure at this juncture, despite long acquaintance, to enjoy any knowledge of each other's character, or to suspect (and resent) the highly suspicious activity of the intermediary—his echoes and shrugs, questions and misgivings, feints and

<sup>1</sup> *Prefaces, First Series* (1927), p. 203. But Mr Granville-Barker does not keep to this point of view, and blames Gloster more than the dramatist does.

<sup>2</sup> *Shakespeare, English Heritage Series*, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> In this play they are confronted, but only after the hero is incapable of inquiry. As in all the tragedies of jealousy (whether so-called or not)—in *Much Ado*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*, as in Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Congreve's *Double-Dealer*, the jealous rage comes first, and the inquiry, if there be any, afterwards.

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dodges, pretences and denials, and whisking of evidence under the person's nose and sticking it in his pocket.<sup>1</sup> An honest man who undertakes to tell you that your son—or that your wife, along with your dearest friend—has played you false, makes a clean breast of it, I suppose, without flourish or ado; and does not twist and turn, tease and tantalize, furtively cast forth the slime of slander and ostentatiously lick it up again. And certainly, though Iago's imposture is far subtler and cleverer, the situations are, psychologically and dramatically, one and the same. Indeed, the improbability here is in some regards greater, the convention more manifest. For Othello is in his prime, Gloster is old and a little maundering; Othello is explicit and repeatedly declared not to be suspicious by nature, of Gloster in this connection nothing is said: and Othello is made to believe a man whom he has officially slighted, and with whom he is little acquainted, to the detriment of his newly wedded wife and his most intimate friend, while Gloster merely believes one son as against another. And of such aspersions and pretences, as found in either play and in life itself, the difference in effect, upon a character similarly unsuspecting and sensible, plainly appears on comparison with other great fiction (even where, as in the first of these cases, such an entanglement is by the tale-bearer desired), like *The Ring and the Book*, *Tom Jones*, and *War and Peace*. Guido's imposture, by letter or message sent to Caponsacchi as from Pompilia, or as from him to her in reply, fails of its purpose, as it should do, with either, though they had seen one another but once; while Honour's truthful report from

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller account of Iago's subtle, but (if Othello be an autonomous personality) highly questionable conduct, see the monograph, pp. 21–2.