

University of Ceylon Review

Vol. XXII, No. 1 & 2

April & October 1964

The Play and its Poetry – Reflections on Some Modern Shakespeare Criticism

I

AT one point in *Principles of Shakespearian Production*, Professor Wilson Knight says with perhaps justifiable irritation :

“ I do not stop at every moment to observe that *Macbeth* and *Lear* were meant to be acted. Not that I am ignorant of this: but that I was never in doubt of it.”¹

The teacher of Shakespeare in Ceylon is denied the luxury of this position. His students rarely have the opportunity of seeing a Shakespeare play in performance, and his work, therefore, includes the task of suggesting the theatrical experience. He is not unaware that, as Professor Knight warns, pre-occupation with theatrical technique could distract him from the “deeper meanings” of the plays.² But he wishes to develop a sense of theatre in his students, for he knows that the life of a play is in the theatre, and that its form and content cannot be wholly understood except in terms of the theatrical experience. And it is with this in mind that he approaches Shakespeare criticism, seeking to extend his own and his students’ “degree of exposure to the plays”.³

When modern Shakespeare criticism is approached in this frame of mind it turns out to be rich in insight, subtle, fertilizing. But it also appears to be curiously flawed by the acting out of a historical process—one of

1. *Principles of Shakespearian Production* (1936) p. 27.

2. *The Wheel of Fire* (1930) p. vi.

3. L. C. Knights—*Some Shakespearean Themes* (1959), p. 13.

compensation. The sense of correcting an unfortunate bias is clearly present in the work of the founding fathers of this criticism :

“ I make no apology for restoring balance,”⁴

“ the modern critic, having become conscious of this partiality of outlook, is bound to look beyond it.”⁵

“ A Shakespeare play is a dramatic poem and not a collection of autobiographies. . .”⁶

“ There are two accepted and apparently opposed attitudes toward Elizabethan drama, and what I shall endeavour to show is that these attitudes are identical, and that another attitude is possible. . . . I believe the theatre has reached a point at which a revolution in principles should take place.”⁷

Well, a revolution has taken place in criticism, at any rate; its nature has been briefly described by Professor L. C. Knights when he says that in our own time

“ the essential structure of the plays has been sought in the poetry rather than in the more easily extractable elements of ‘plot’ and ‘character’”⁸

and also that

“ Whereas in the older view Shakespeare was the god-like creator of a peopled world, projecting—it is true—his own spirit into the inhabitants, but remaining essentially the analyst of ‘their’ passions, he is now felt as much more immediately engaged in the action he puts before us.”⁹

4. *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 5.

5. D. A. Traversi—*An Approach to Shakespeare* (1958), p. 3.

6. L. C. Knights—*How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?* (1933).

7. T. S. Eliot—‘ Four Elizabethan Dramatists’ (1924) in *Selected Essays* (3rd Ed. 1956) p. 109.

8. L. C. Knights—*Some Shakespearean Themes*, p. 13.

9. *Ibid.*

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

It is with the first of these tendencies that I am here concerned. One can hardly wish to see 'plot' and 'character' restored to anything like the significance they had in the work of the pre-revolutionary critics, with Hamlet "being treated in Harley Street" and "Part of the play—and that the less important element of story—(torn) out ruthlessly for detailed analysis on the analogy of human life," the rest being dismissed "with a word or two about 'the magic of poetry' or 'the breath of genius.'"¹⁰ But it does seem as if the tendency in question has made for a new critical imbalance—an imbalance illustrated by the following examples.

II

Professor Wilson Knight writes that we should "see each play as an expanded metaphor,"¹¹ and that "there are throughout each play a set of correspondences which relate to each other independently of the time-sequence which is the story".¹² Approaching *Macbeth* thus, he finds it "one swift act of the poet's mind".¹³ We are, he says, "left with an overpowering knowledge of suffocating, conquering evil, and fixed by the basilisk eye of a nameless terror".¹⁴ It is "a desolate and dark universe where all is befogged, baffled, constricted by the evil".¹⁵

This view of Shakespeare's vision of evil as expressed in *Macbeth* issues in at least one set of interpretations that one is impelled to question. All the persons of the play are described as "men paralysed by fear and a sense of evil in and outside themselves. They lack will-power; that concept finds no place."¹⁶ Macbeth, Banquo, Macduff and Malcolm: the description is applied to all of them.¹⁷ Macbeth "himself is hopelessly at a loss, and has little idea as to why he is going to murder Duncan. He tries to fit names to his reasons—'ambition,' for instance—but this is only a name."¹⁸ Again, "Macbeth may struggle, but he cannot fight: he can no more resist than a rabbit resists a weasel's teeth fastened in its neck, or a bird the serpent's transfixing eye."¹⁹

10. G. Wilson Knight—*The Wheel of Fire*, p. 13.

11. *Ibid*, p. 15.

12. *Ibid*, p. 3.

13. *Ibid*, p. 141.

14. *Ibid*, p. 140.

15. *Ibid*, p. 141.

16. *Ibid*, p. 152.

17. *Ibid*, pp. 150—52.

18. *Ibid*, p. 121.

19. *Ibid*, p. 153.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

One can but go back to what happens in *Macbeth*. The will-concept is not absent. When Macbeth uses the word "ambition" there is no question of his having little idea as to why he is going to murder Duncan, or of his casting about for names to fit his reasons. The context embodies a recognition that his reason—ambition—is too small a motive—

" I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th' other."²⁰

And the recognition leads him to a definite act of will:

" We will proceed no further in this business."²¹

The will is strong:

" Prithce, peace.
I dare do all that may become a man:
Who dares do more is none."²²

He is definite about what he does not want to be, and what he does not want to do. His resolution is then overmastered by a will more powerful than his, and by a trick which confuses his moral sense—he is shamed back into the course of action that he has just repudiated.²³ Even if Lady Macbeth affects us here as evil incarnate, we have to recognize here not a fruitless struggle but a battle fought and lost. The cornered rabbit would not admire the weasel thus:

" Bring forth men-children only
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males."²⁴

That is a movement of a distinctly human consciousness—free, mistaken, and sinful: "I am settled."²⁵ It is to be noted that after the slight but clear change in Macbeth produced by Lady Macbeth's great outburst, he is persuaded, not mesmerised.²⁶

20. Act I, Sc. vii, lines 25—28. (This and all subsequent references to the play are from *The London Shakespeare* (1958).

21. *Ibid*, line 31.

22. *Ibid*, lines 45—47.

23. *Ibid*, e.g. lines 49—59.

24. *Ibid*, lines 73—75.

25. *Ibid*, line 80.

26. *Ibid*, lines 59—73.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

Shakespeare's presentation of Macduff is misrepresented by Professor Knight much more obviously. Macduff is certainly not paralysed by fear or a sense of evil. He does not go to Macbeth's coronation;²⁷ he refuses Macbeth's "great bidding" with "an absolute 'Sir, not I'";²⁸ he takes it on himself to go to England seeking succour for Scotland.²⁹ Nor does he "share some guilt of the down-pressing enveloping evil."³⁰ There is no question of a "cruel desertion of his family"³¹ for we have been clearly informed through the speech of the unnamed Lord in III, vi that Macduff has gone to England:

"...to pray the holy king, upon his aid
To wake Northumberland and warlike Siward."³²

the enterprise being seconded by the prayers of the Lord, and Lennox—

".....with him above,
To ratify the work,"³³

and

"...Some holy angel
Fly to the court of England and unfold
His message ere he come, that a swift blessing
May soon return to this our suffering country
Under a hand accursed!"³⁴

and

"I'll send my prayers with him."³⁵

After this, we have to find Lady Macduff's view of the matter mistaken; though it is logical and effective in its particular dramatic context, we have a clearer view in terms of the larger dramatic context. Our total sense of Macduff's function and character does not permit us to see him as sharing "some guilt of the down-pressing enveloping evil" merely because he says

"...Sinful Macduff,
They were all struck for thee! Naught that I am,
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
Fell slaughter on their souls."³⁶

27. Act II, sc. iv, lines 35—36.

28. Act III, sc. v, lines 128—29, and III, vi, lines 39—40.

29. Act III, sc. vi, lines 24—30.

30. *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 151.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Act III, sc. vi, lines 30—31.

33. *Ibid.*, lines 32—33.

34. *Ibid.*, lines 45—49.

35. *Ibid.*, line 49.

36. Act IV, sc. iii, lines 224—227.

The reaction is, rather, thoroughly human and even admirable, suggesting a loving attribution of superior merits to the dead ones. It can also be interpreted in the context as a recognition by Macduff that his family was killed in his stead. Macbeth, we know, had decided "Thou shalt not live,"³⁷ and balked, had come to the new decision

"The castle of Macduff I will surprise . .
Seize upon Fife; give to the edge of the sword
His wife, his babes," (etc.)³⁸

It is only in this sense that Macduff "knows he bears some responsibility for his dear ones' death."³⁹ Since there has been no dramatization of moral inadequacy in Macduff, neither this feeling nor his actions can be taken as indications that he, too, is one of the major characters who "succumb to the evil downpressing on the *Macbeth* universe."⁴⁰

It is obvious that no interpretation of *Macbeth* can fail to recognize the extraordinarily vivid presence of evil in the play as part of its "unique quality."⁴¹ But the evil is not so pervasive as to include Macduff, nor is it so compulsive as to validate Professor Knight's view of Macbeth.

To see a play as an expanded metaphor is to see it as a poetic unit, and Professor Knight's wish to arrive at a simultaneous awareness of thickly-scattered correspondences through this way of looking at a play is of course one way of seeking its essential structure in the poetry. But Professor Knight sees correspondences in *Macbeth* which do not exist, and the unity he perceives does not seem to be quite that designed by Shakespeare. It can perhaps be argued that the errors referred to are too particular to invalidate the critic's approach completely. But it is at least clear that the principal drive of Professor Knight's criticism needs to be controlled by a system of checks and balances if it is not to lead to a definite imbalance in his criticism. We must agree that

"It is, probably, the ability to see larger and still larger areas of a great work spatially with a continual widening of vision that causes us to appreciate it more deeply, to own it with our minds more surely, on every reading."⁴²

37. Act IV, sc. i, line 84.

38. *Ibid*, lines 150—152.

39. *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 151

40. *Ibid*, p. 150.

41. *Ibid*, p. 3.

42. *Ibid*, p. 4.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

But "to see the whole play laid out, so to speak, as an area"⁴³ we may view it from too far above, and we may thus miss or misvalue essential aspects of the structure. Professor Knight's view of Macbeth works against our sense of dramatically important effects, such as the tension and conflict within Macbeth before the crisis is reached, and the acts of will which lead to his crimes. Again, the evaluation of Macduff in terms of a single speech that is related "spatially" to certain other things in the play is not consonant with the total effect of Macduff's character and conduct.

III

Mr. D. A. Traversi also seeks the essential structure of Shakespeare's plays in the poetry. His method, however, is a little different from that of Professor Wilson Knight. He describes it thus:

"To proceed from the word to the image in its verse setting, and thence to the way in which a pattern of interdependent themes is gradually woven into the dramatic action, unifying it and illuminating it, is the most fruitful approach—the most accurate, and, if properly handled the least subject to prejudice—to Shakespeare's art."⁴⁴

We see this process at work when Mr. Traversi begins a line of argument by pointing out that "Duncan's function in the play emerges. . . . from the images of beauty and fertility which surround his person and confer substance and consistency upon the 'symbolic' value of his rule," and that "the quality of his poetry is above all, life-giving, fertile."⁴⁵ But significant misdirections occur when Mr. Traversi relates this sensitive awareness of certain images to the structure of the play. He writes:

"The early, light-drenched scenes of the tragedy are dominated by this rich, vital relationship between service spontaneously given and abundant royal bounty."⁴⁶

43. *Ibid*, p. 3.

44. Traversi—*An approach to Shakespeare*, (2nd ed.), pp. 4—5.

45. *Ibid*, p. 151.

46. *Ibid*, pp. 152—3.

One is willing to concede that the reference is to scenes ii, iv and vi and not to scenes i, iii and v, though it seems odd that Mr. Traversi has not been more specific. But this comment is not completely satisfactory even when its application is limited to scenes ii, iv and vi. First, let us examine the relevance of the term "light-drenched," taken in its literal sense as well as in any possible metaphorical sense. The term would be literally applicable to scene iv, since a royal court would give an impression of movement, colour and light. It is literally inapplicable to scene vi, where the effect is of people arriving with torches, of light penetrating the darkness of night. It may or may not be applicable to scene ii, where no specific indications are given, though we must give due weight to the facts that the day is both foul and fair;⁴⁷ that no camp, even a royal one, would be drenched in light; and that drenching light would be somewhat inappropriate in a scene characterized by anxious expectation, physical and metaphysical images of blood, and long descriptions of darkly ferocious combat.⁴⁸

If scene ii exhibits the characteristics just referred to, then no metaphorical sense of "light-drenched" would fit it either. The metaphor can most suitably be applied to scene iv. Here Duncan's goodness, innocence and bounty are abundantly demonstrated;⁴⁹ images of beauty and fertility occur;⁵⁰ even the worthy death of the traitor Cawdor adds to this impression. But even in this scene, the evil of Macbeth is a felt presence. Its impact is strong in the patent dramatic irony of

"Duncan: There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.

Enter Macbeth, &c.

O worthiest cousin!
The sin of my ingratitude even now
Was heavy on me. . . ."⁵¹

This irony necessarily colours our reception of Macbeth's speech in reply, with its "repeated protestations of devotion".⁵² Finally, after we have

47. It is the same day, since the battle is ended "ere the set of sun", as that on which the witches appear, and which is described by Macbeth as "Foul and fair". (I, iii.)

48. e.g. lines 7—23, 25—33, 35—43, 50—59.

49. e. g. I, iv, lines 14—21, 27—32.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*, lines 11—16.

52. *Ibid.*, lines 22—27.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

seen Duncan's bountifulness to Macbeth—"More is thy due than more than all can pay" and "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour To make thee full of growing"—we react with a quick sense of outrage to Macbeth's hypocrisy—"The rest is labour which is not used for you—"53 and the decisiveness which reveals that he has been completely untouched:

"... Stars, hide your fires:
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see."54

In scene vi the light, metaphorically speaking, flashes out strongly but briefly. Images and associations of fertility, holiness; of "life delighting in life,"55 are richly active in the speeches of Duncan and Banquo. But we cannot possibly shut off the reverberations of the preceding scene from our consciousness,56 and the feelings inspired in Duncan and Banquo by the castle are received with an effect of awful irony by us who know the evil that threatens Duncan from within it. Further, when Lady Macbeth appears, we cannot but see *her* protestations of devotion as an acting out of

"... To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like th' innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't..."57

We could now examine the statement that these scenes are "dominated by the rich, vital relationship between service spontaneously given and abundant royal bounty". It does not hold true of scene vi—the scene that has just been discussed. There is certainly a reference to that relationship in Lady Macbeth's speech of welcome.58 But the more she talks about it, the more we are repelled by her hypocrisy, and impressed by the unnaturalness of the rejection of that relationship by herself and by her husband. The most we can say is that we are tensely aware both of what ought to be

53. *Ibid*, line. 44.

54. *Ibid*, lines 50—53.

55. L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes*, p. 136.

56. i.e. the impression made on us by Lady Macbeth's awful resolution, her invocation to "the murdering ministers," the decision to kill Duncan, the advice to Macbeth to act deceitfully. (I. v.)

57. Act I, sc. v, lines 61—64.

58. e.g. lines 14—19, lines 25—28.

and what is; of the proper relationship and of its rejection. Besides, in our total response to this scene, these awarenesses are subordinate to certain other impressions, as of the irony and pathos of Duncan's situation, his attractiveness, and the fatal craft of Lady Macbeth.

It must be agreed that scene iv is dominated by the expression of the proper relationship between loyal service and royal bounty.

But scene ii? We know that Macbeth and Banquo are performing a loyal service in fighting rebellion and foreign invasion. We know, too, that Duncan rewards Macbeth—"With his former title greet Macbeth."⁵⁹ But the scene is hardly *dominated* by the relationship between service and bounty. It is dominated, rather, by suggestions of anxiety, long reports of conflict, and the characterization of Macbeth. This characterization itself makes much of Macbeth's martial prowess (suggesting even excessive ferocity) rather than of his loyalty.⁶⁰

We have to conclude that Mr. Traversi's comments are largely applicable to scene iv, and largely inapplicable to scenes ii and vi.

Associated with these misdirections is another. Mr. Traversi says that the state

"has been, under Duncan, positive, natural and orderly."⁶¹

We cannot learn this from the play itself. We see only that Duncan is good and bountiful, and we hear that he has been "clear in his great office".⁶² We know nothing about Scotland under Duncan's rule except that at the beginning of the play there are reports of rebellion and invasion.

If Mr. Traversi's description of the state under Duncan is not supported by the play, and if he exaggerates the relative importance of one aspect of the dramatic function of Duncan in "Act I"⁶³ of *Macbeth*, then his account both of the play's meaning and of a part of its structure is somewhat in-

59. line. 68.

60. e.g. lines 15—23, 35—42, 56—59.

61. *An approach to Shakespeare*, p. 152.

62. Act I, sc. vii, line 18.

63. It is worth remembering that Act and scene divisions are mere conveniences, and that they do not figure in the theatrical experience.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

accurate. We have at least to conclude that he has not handled his own method "properly". And yet Mr. Traversi has responded sensitively to certain words and images prominently associated with the figure of Duncan. The point is that other aspects of the significance of Duncan are developed in terms of situation and action. Mr. Traversi does not seem to have paid enough attention to these elements of the play in the analysis of this part of *Macbeth*.

And more is involved than the analysis of a part of *Macbeth*. Mr. Traversi's approach through the words and images is closely related to a particular view of the Shakespearean creative process. He writes that

"The tragedies of Shakespeare's maturity, from *Macbeth* onwards, are characterized by a consistent development of the dramatic 'symbolism' which that play first anticipated. This symbolism, which derives originally from an extension of the function of the poetic image in the dramatic scheme, leads logically to a new conception of plot."⁶⁴

"Shakespeare's power of writing poetry and drama is now such that the plot has become simply an extension, an extra vehicle of the poetry. His expression has come to require not only verbal richness and complexity, not even simply deep insight into human motives and the sources of moral impulse, but this type of 'symbolic' incident as part of his purpose. . . The essence, in short, of Shakespearean 'symbolism' lies in the fact that it springs out of the poetry as an extension of the written word."⁶⁵

Surely, it is possible to give a different account—to say that the maturing dramatist finds more and more organically unified expressions for his vision, experience, and sense of form, such that incident, imagery, and indeed all the various components of poetic drama are inter-related with peculiar closeness? There is then no need to give a peculiar importance to the

64. *An approach to Shakespeare*, p. 181.

65. *Ibid*, p. 290.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

“extension of the function of the poetic image in the dramatic scheme,” and to argue that “the plot has become simply an extension, an extra vehicle of the poetry,” or that “the ‘symbolism’ . . . springs out of the poetry as an extension of the written word”. It is logically impossible to know which came first, the plot or the poetry; the symbolism or the poetry; and in the plays as we have them these and other elements work together in close harmony. Besides, when words and images are not adequately related to other aspects of the experience, misinterpretations of incident, structure and meaning can occur, as we have had occasion to notice.

IV

It is thus important to pay attention to such an account of the structure of meaning of a Shakespeare play as this, by Professor L. C. Knights:

“ But it is only in relation to that larger all-embracing meaning—determined by the ‘plain sense’ of what is said, and by its overtones, by the dramatic situation and the progress of the action, by symbols and by the interplay of different attitudes embodied in the different persons of the drama—it is only in relation to this total meaning that the imagery, or any other component that may be momentarily isolated, takes on its full significance.”⁶⁶

This account of the whole structure of meaning is, however, qualified by Professor Knights’s view of the *essential* structure—“The essential structure of a Shakespeare play is poetic”.⁶⁷ Professor Knights clarifies his use of the terms “poetry” and “poetic” in this context. He points out that with Macbeth’s aside “this supernatural soliciting” (etc.) “Our recognition of the body—the very feel—of the experience, is a response to the poetry, to such things as the sickening see-saw rhythm (‘Cannot be ill; cannot be good. . .’) changing to the rhythm of the pounding heart, the overriding of grammar as thought is revealed in the very process of formation, and so on.” Also, “the words do not only point inward to the presumed state

66. L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes*, p. 19.

67. L. C. Knights, *Pelican History of English Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 229.
See also *Some Shakespearean Themes*, p. 120.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

of Macbeth's mind, but, as it were, outward to the play as a whole." For, "major themes of the play. . . are mirrored in the speech under consideration." And, "the interrelations we are forced to make take us outside the speeches of the protagonists to the poetry of the play as a whole."⁶⁸

It is beyond question that all these effects described by Professor Knights are to be found in the "dense verbal texture of the greater plays."⁶⁹ But it still does not follow that the essential structure is to be sought in the poetry. If it did, one would have to agree that "the major themes of the play. . . emerge as themes because they are what the poetry—reinforced by action and symbolism—again and again insists on."⁷⁰ But the themes do not "emerge" in quite this way. This becomes clear when one considers, for example, the development of the theme of "the unnaturalness of evil"—one of the themes noted by Professor Knights.⁷¹

In the first scene of the play both the unnaturalness and the evil reach us mainly through the non-verbal elements of *poésie de théâtre*. Thunder and lightning are natural phenomena, but they shake human beings into an abnormal and dehumanizing state of fear, especially when associated with a bare, undefined place. The associations thus called up are given direction by the appearance of the witches, who must necessarily be unnatural in appearance, and who must act and speak as evil creatures. We take our bearings here from setting and acting, for the words spoken do not in themselves connote evil. Even the references to Paddock and Graymalkin take their force from the characters of the speakers.

The associations thus called up recur when the witches reappear and are reinforced by their account of their activities. The first effect of their appearance on Macbeth and Banquo is an action, suggested by the sudden change from "How far is't called to Forres?" to "what are these. . .?"⁷² The "poetry" supports the effect by suggesting, through the tense rhythm, the quick questions, that Banquo is more than ordinarily startled. The moral effect of the witches' prophecies on Macbeth, too, is first registered as an action, which is described by Banquo in:

68. *Some Shakespearan Themes*, pp. 120—121.

69. *Pelican History*, (etc.), p. 230.

70. *Some Shakespearan Themes*, p. 121.

71. *Ibid.*

72. Act I, sc. iii. line 39.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

“ Good Sir, why do you start and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair ? ”⁷³

This reaction to good tidings is unnatural, and being unnatural, it arouses in us the first suspicion that the “fair” tidings have a “foul” significance for Macbeth.

Macbeth continues to be unnaturally disturbed, a fact dramatically underlined for us by the use of aside, suggesting that he wishes to hide his feelings from the others present. The unnaturalness is now verbalized for the first time in “against the use of nature,”⁷⁴ our sense that Macbeth’s thoughts are turning to unnatural evil being powerfully reinforced by the poetry of the aside “This supernatural solliciting”⁷⁵ (etc.) so sensitively elucidated by Professor Knights and others. The effect of secret disturbance in Macbeth increases, so much so that the other characters notice his “rapt” abstraction, and it reaches us as much from the action and situation as from the words spoken. Its questionable nature is emphasized when Macbeth invents a lying explanation for his pre-occupation.⁷⁶

The theme of the unnaturalness of evil is strongly sounded in the dramatic situation created in the next scene. There is first the dramatic irony of

“ He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.

Enter Macbeth, (etc.)

O worthiest cousin ! ” (etc.)

Macbeth’s reply, with its protestations of devotion takes its colour entirely from the situation. And it is primarily the facts of Duncan’s gratitude and bountifulness rather than the terms in which they are expressed which make us react with a quick sense of outrage to Macbeth’s hypocrisy, e.g. “The rest is labour which is not used for you,” and to the decisiveness which reveals that he has been completely untouched: “Stars, hide your fires” (etc.) The terms of the expression strengthen our response, e.g. through the associations called up by lines like:

73. *Ibid*, lines 51—52.

74. *Ibid*, line 137.

75. *Ibid*, lines 130—142.

76. *Ibid*, lines 149—150.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

"I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing."⁷⁷
"Signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine
On all deservers."⁷⁸
".....Stars hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and deep desires."⁷⁹

In the scenes that follow the theme of the unnaturalness of evil emerges from a complex of interrelated elements. The "plain sense" of "and shalt be/What thou art promised"⁸⁰ and "the fatal entrance of Duncan/Under my battlements,"⁸¹ indicates a promptness at seizing opportunity which is not natural when the opportunity is for evil. This works closely with the awful suggestiveness of Lady Macbeth's invocation to the "murdering ministers".⁸² The situational ironies of Duncan's praise for the castle within which evil and danger await him, and of the hypocritical show of welcome,⁸³ work along with the effect of the rich associations present in his speeches and in the speech of Banquo.⁸⁴ The fact that a sense of the wrongness of the proposed murder erupts in the murderer himself, leading to the decision "We will proceed no further," indicates that his own nature revolts against the evil.⁸⁵ This movement of the psyche is expressed in terms which embody and enrich it: e.g.

"...heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind."⁸⁶

When Macbeth "sees" the air-drawn dagger, the text is a simple record of the fact, of his actions, and of his mental reactions. When those elements are synthesized into a theatrical situation they create a picture of a man in a state of abnormal disturbance.⁸⁷ Immediately after the murder, Macbeth

77. Act. I, sc. iv, lines 28—29.

78. *Ibid*, lines 41—42.

79. *Ibid*, lines 50—51.

80. Act. I, sc. v, lines 13—14.

81. *Ibid*, lines 37—38.

82. *Ibid*, lines 39—52.

83. Act. I, sc. vi.

84. *Ibid*.

85. Act. I, sc. vii, lines 18—25.

86. *Ibid*, lines 22—25.

87. Act. II, sc. i, lines 33—49.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

appears in a state of shock, excitement, and horror. His state is manifested in the fact that he dwells as if mesmerized on the little incident where the two grooms "did wake each other,"⁸⁸ and in the fact that his mind occupies itself with the praise of sleep.⁸⁹ At the same time some of the phrases carry implications which extend our consciousness—e.g.

"But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?"⁹⁰

and

"'Macbeth does murder sleep'—the innocent sleep;

Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care. . ." (etc.)⁹¹

It would seem to be clear that the theme of the unnaturalness of evil "emerges" from a close-knit complex of effects. The organic interdependence of elements in a mature play of Shakespeare makes it inevitable that the themes would be clearly reflected in the poetry as much as in any other element of the experience. It is therefore possible to reach the themes, and indeed "the play's philosophy"⁹² through the poetry. It does not follow from this that the "themes. . . emerge as themes because they are what poetry—re-inforced by action and symbolism—again and again insists on." Rather, when the experience is viewed as a whole, the themes emerge as themes because action, poetry, symbolism, etc., working together, repeatedly insist on them.

Similarly, the *essential structure* is inevitably reflected in the "poetry," and at points it depends on the poetry. To mention a few examples, our response to "This supernatural solliciting", to Lady Macbeth's invocation to the spirits, or to Macbeth's great speeches in Act V, is primarily a response to the poetry, to "organic components of the living verse".⁹³ And these are certainly important parts of the essential structure. But there are also essential parts of the structure which do not depend for their effect primarily on the poetry. The first appearance of the witches; the telling dramatic ironies and contrasts of scenes iv and vi; Macbeth's vision of the air-drawn dagger before the murder and his disturbance after it; the appearance of

88. Act. II, sc. ii, lines 22—33.

89. *Ibid.*, lines 36—40.

90. *Ibid.*, line 31.

91. *Ibid.*, lines 35—40.

92. L. C. Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes*, p. 138.

93. *Pelican History* (etc.), p. 231.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

Banquo's ghost at the banquet and the consequent disruption of the feast ; the murder of Macduff's family;—these are clearly parts of the essential structure. Our response to them is primarily a response to the situations and actions which we re-construct from the text.

It is relevant to recognize at this point that we have always to start from the words. As Eric Bentley says, "A drama not verbalized is a drama not dramatized;"⁹⁴ or, as Professor Ludowyk puts it,

"Without the single units of the threads of the warp and weft, and their arrangement by the weaver, there could be no carpet, and without the words no play."⁹⁵

The text is the only record we have of the experience designed by the dramatist; and it is particularly true of an Elizabethan play that the text usually records the whole experience, inclusive of setting, situation, character and action. Thus Dr. B. L. Joseph observes with reference to characterization that an Elizabethan dramatist "set" a part in such a way that

"a trained actor who understood the principles of speaking and punctuation could run over a piece of dialogue in the way in which a musician runs over a score; the directions were plain and easily followed..."⁹⁶

and,

"Once a part was set it could have been played in exactly the same way by any number of actors; and the available evidence suggests very strongly that this was the usual practice."⁹⁷

In a similar way, the author's attitude to the actions and situations is often directly recorded in the text. The Elizabethan dramatist does not limit himself to implying his attitudes in the way in which a "realistic" dramatist is compelled to limit himself. An Elizabethan play

94. *The Playwright As Thinker*, (2nd Ed. 1955), pp. 46, 241.

95. E. F. C. Ludowyk, *Introducing Shakespeare* (1962), p. 76.

96. B. L. Joseph, *The Pelican History of English Literature*, Vol. 2, p. 157.

97. *Ibid.*

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

“is an imagined story which also records his (the dramatist’s) own individual reaction towards the persons and situations he was imagining; not merely the emotions which he imagined in their minds, but his own emotions as he imagined theirs.”⁹⁸

And this, as Dr. Joseph points out, is one of the functions performed by soliloquy, apostrophe, and other ‘unrealistic’ behaviour.”⁹⁹

It is, therefore, important to note that the text of a play of Shakespeare indicates the whole experience. Clearly, “the text” does not mean the same thing as “the poetry”. If we refer back to Professor Knight’s description of the way in which the poetry works it is evident that he is talking of those parts of the text where our response would be primarily to effects achieved by the language itself (whether we are conscious of this or not)—to qualities of the verse, to associations and inter-relationships suggested by the words and images. It has emerged from the discussion of examples from *Macbeth* elsewhere in this essay that our response is, at times, primarily to other aspects of the experience than the poetry, and that in general our experience is of a complex of elements working together in organic interdependence. It follows from this that the essential structure should be sought through the close analysis of the whole experience, of the whole drama. To seek the essential structure in the poetry is not more valid than to seek it in plot, character, or any other extractable element. The attempt to do so implies a distorted view of the dramatic form.

V

“From time to time major shifts of attention occur, and not the least significant and fruitful of these is the one that has been taking place in our own time. . . It is in an explicit recognition of the dense verbal texture of the greater plays that one of the main services of recent Shakespeare criticism lies.”¹⁰⁰ The gain has, indeed, been immense, and we have to be grateful for the important contributions to our knowledge of this aspect of Shakespeare’s work made by Professors Wilson Knight and L. C. Knights,

98. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

100. L. C. Knights, *Pelican History* (etc.), pp. 229, 230.

THE PLAY AND ITS POETRY

and by Mr. Traversi; grateful, too, for Mr. T. S. Eliot's sustained examination of poetry's "third voice," for the work of such different critics as Miss Caroline Spurgeon, Mr. Edward A. Armstrong, Dr. Leavis, Professors William Empson, and Professor Wolfgang Clemen; for such works as *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, and so on.¹⁰¹

But the modern critic's approach to the interpretation of a play of Shakespeare as a totality appears to be characterized by a somewhat perfunctory attention to some aspects of the experience, e.g. to situation, action, character, and theatrical technique. It is significant that these aspects of the experience are likely to present themselves more vividly in the theatre than in the study, and that the modern approach to the poetry and to spatial significances is one that can be pursued purely in the study with little sense of strain.

It may be necessary to guard against at least two misunderstandings which could arise from that last sentence. It is not by any means part of the purpose of this essay to suggest that the appreciation of the formal qualities of the verse is impossible in the theatre. The evidence is clear that Shakespeare makes extended use of the arts of language, and also that in his own time Shakespeare could have expected the greater part of his audience to be capable of active enjoyment of rhetoric properly so called.¹⁰² We have to try to develop a similar capacity ourselves.

Nor is there any intention here of suggesting that the modern critic sets himself against theatrical performance after the manner of many early-nineteenth-century bardolators,¹⁰³ or that he consciously devalues the

101. e.g. T. S. Eliot, *Poetry and Drama*, and *The Three Voices of Poetry*.
Caroline Spurgeon—*Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, (1935).
E. A. Armstrong—*Shakespeare's Imagination*, (1946).
F. R. Leavis—e.g. *Education and the University*, pp. 76—82, 'Tragedy and the "Medium",' in *The Common Pursuit*.
W. Empson—*Seven Types of Ambiguity*, (etc.).
Wolfgang H. Clemen—*Shakespeares Bilder*, (1936), translated as *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, (1951).
Sr. M. Joseph—*Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, (1947).
102. e.g. A. Harbage—*Shakespeare's Audience*, (1941), *The Pelican History*, Vol. 2, Pt. 2.
L. C. Knights—*Some Shakespearean Themes*, pp. 19—23.
103. e.g. "But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted."—Lamb, *Dramatic Essays*, ed. Matthews, p. 185.
"But we are exceedingly sceptical as to the power of any actor to represent such a mind as Lear's, just as we are in the case of Hamlet"—Leigh Hunt, *Dramatic Criticism*, ed. Houtchens (1950), p. 297.
"We do not like to see our author's plays acted."—Hazlitt, *Works*, ed. Waller and Glover (1903). Vol. I, p. 237.
"Poetry and the Stage do not agree well together." *Ibid*, VIII, p. 275.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

dramatic qualities of the plays. Rather, he is at some pains to assert an awareness of the importance of dramatic values, e.g.

“The commentator should be dramatically aware, even wary.”¹⁰⁴

“This approach does *not* betray or neglect the purely dramatic element in the plays.”¹⁰⁵

“...the verse...works in conjunction with the dramatic action and our sense of what the different persons of the drama stand for as each play develops.”¹⁰⁶

For all that, an imbalance has become perceptible in modern Shakespeare criticism, and it is directly related to the modern critic's approach to structure and meaning. They are sought primarily in the poetry, or in a “spatial” view. Since neither of these approaches is characteristic of the living experience of drama in the theatre, there may be some corrective value in suggesting that the criticism of drama should ideally be aimed at developing a fine precision of response in the theatre. To do so would be to work for a proper humility before the form chosen by the artist.

ASHLEY HALPÉ

104. *The Wheel of Fire*, p. vi.

105. Traversi—*An Approach to Shakespeare*, p. 5.

106. L. C. Knights—*Pelican History*, 2, p. 231.