

Desdemona once dead, all will be well. Nay, when he fails to kill Cassio, all may still be well. He will avow that he told Othello of the adultery, and persist that he told the truth, and Cassio will deny it in vain. And then, in a moment, his plot is shattered by a blow from a quarter where he never dreamt of danger. He knows his wife, he thinks. She is not over-scrupulous, she will do anything to please him, and she has learnt obedience. But one thing in her he does not know — that she *loves* her mistress and would face a hundred deaths sooner than see her fair fame darkened. There is genuine astonishment in his outburst 'What! Are you mad?' as it dawns upon him that she means to speak the truth about the handkerchief. But he might well have applied to himself the words she flings at Othello,

O gull! O dot!
As ignorant as dirt!

The foulness of his own soul made him so ignorant that he built into the marvellous structure of his plot a piece of gross stupidity.

To the thinking mind the divorce of unusual intellect from goodness is a thing to startle; and Shakespeare clearly felt it so. The combination of unusual intellect with extreme evil is more than startling, it is frightful. It is rare, but it exists; and Shakespeare represented it in Iago. But the alliance of evil like Iago's with *supreme* intellect is an impossible fiction; and Shakespeare's fictions were truth.

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The characters of Cassio and Emilia hardly require analysis, and I will touch on them only from a single point of view. In their combination of excellences and defects they are good examples of that truth to nature which in dramatic art is the one unflinching source of moral instruction.

Cassio is a handsome, light-hearted, good-natured young fellow, who takes life gaily, and is evidently very attractive and popular. Othello, who calls him by his Christian name, is fond of him; Desdemona likes him much; Emilia at once

— Cassio & Emilia — By A. C. Bradley

interests herself on his behalf. He has warm, generous feelings, an enthusiastic admiration for the General, and a chivalrous adoration for his peerless wife. But he is too easy-going. He finds it hard to say No; and accordingly, although he is aware that he has a very weak head, and that the occasion is one on which he is bound to run no risk, he gets drunk — not disgustingly so, but ludicrously so.¹ And, besides, he amuses himself without any scruple by frequenting the company of a woman of more than doubtful reputation, who has fallen in love with his good looks. Moralising critics point out that he pays for the first offence by losing his post, and for the second by nearly losing his life. They are quite entitled to do so, though the careful reader will not forget Iago's part in these transactions. But they ought also to point out that Cassio's looseness does not in the least disturb our confidence in him in his relations with Desdemona and Othello. He is loose, and we are sorry for it; but we never doubt that there was 'a daily beauty in his life', or that his rapturous admiration of Desdemona was as wholly beautiful a thing as it appears, or that Othello was perfectly safe when in his courtship he employed Cassio to 'go between' Desdemona and himself. It is fortunately a fact in human nature that these aspects of Cassio's character are quite compatible. Shakespeare simply sets it down; and it is just because he is truthful in these smaller things that in greater things we trust him absolutely never to pervert the truth for the sake of some doctrine or purpose of his own.

There is something very lovable about Cassio, with his fresh eager feelings; his distress at his disgrace and still more at having lost Othello's trust; his hero-worship; and at the end his sorrow and pity, which are at first too acute for words. He is carried in, wounded, on a chair. He looks at Othello and cannot speak. His first words came later when, to Lodovico's question, 'Did you and he consent in Cassio's death?' Othello answers 'Ay.' Then he fathers out, 'Dear General, I

¹ Cassio's invective against drink may be compared with Hamlet's expressions of disgust at his uncle's drunkenness. Possibly the subject may for some reason have been prominent in Shakespeare's mind about this time.

never gave you cause.' One is sure he had never used that adjective before. The love in it makes it beautiful, but there is something else in it, unknown to Cassio, which goes to one's heart. It tells us that his hero is no longer unapproachably above him.

Few of Shakespeare's minor characters are more distinct than Emilia, and towards few do our feelings change so much within the course of a play. Till close to the end she frequently sets one's teeth on edge; and at the end one is ready to worship her. She nowhere shows any sign of having a bad heart; but she is common, sometimes vulgar, in minor matters far from scrupulous, blunt in perception and feeling, and quite destitute of imagination. She let Iago take the handkerchief though she knew how much its loss would distress Desdemona; and she said nothing about it though she saw that Othello was jealous. We rightly resent her unkindness in permitting the theft, but — it is an important point — we are apt to misconstrue her subsequent silence, because we know that Othello's jealousy was intimately connected with the loss of the handkerchief. Emilia, however, certainly failed to perceive this; for otherwise, when Othello's anger showed itself violently and she was really distressed for her mistress, she could not have failed to think of the handkerchief, and would, I believe, undoubtedly have told the truth about it. But, in fact, she never thought of it, although she guessed that Othello was being deceived by some scoundrel. Even after Desdemona's death, nay, even when she knew that Iago had brought it about, she still did not remember the handkerchief; and when Othello at last mentions, as a proof of his wife's guilt, that he had seen the handkerchief in Cassio's hand, the truth falls on Emilia like a thunder-bolt. 'O God!' she bursts out, 'O heavenly God!'¹ Her stupidity in this matter is gross, but it is stupidity and nothing worse.

But along with it goes a certain coarseness of nature. The contrast between Emilia and Desdemona in their conversation about the infidelity of wives (IV. iii.) is too famous to need a

¹ So the Quarto, and certainly rightly, though modern editors reprint the feeble alteration of the Folio, due to fear of the Censor, 'O heaven! O heavenly Powers!'

word, — unless it be a word of warning against critics who take her light talk too seriously. But the contrast in the preceding scene is hardly less remarkable. Othello, affecting to treat Emilia as the keeper of a brothel, sends her away, bidding her shut the door behind her; and then he proceeds to torture himself as well as Desdemona by accusations of adultery. But, as a critic has pointed out, Emilia listens at the door, for we find, as soon as Othello is gone and Iago has been summoned, that she knows what Othello has said to Desdemona. And what could better illustrate those defects of hers which make one wince, than her repeating again and again in Desdemona's presence the word Desdemona could not repeat; than her talking before Desdemona of Iago's suspicions regarding Othello and herself; than her speaking to Desdemona of husbands who strike their wives; than the expression of her honest indignation in the words,

Has she forsook so many noble matches,
Her father and her country and her friends,
To be called whore?

If one were capable of laughing or even of smiling when this point in the play is reached, the difference between Desdemona's anguish at the loss of Othello's love, and Emilia's recollection of the noble matches she might have secured, would be irresistibly ludicrous.

And yet how all this, and all her defects, vanish into nothingness when we see her face to face with that which she can understand and feel! From the moment of her appearance after the murder to the moment of her death she is transfixed; and yet she remains perfectly true to herself, and we would not have her one atom less herself. She is the only person who utters for us the violent common emotions which we feel, together with those more tragic emotions which she does not comprehend. She has done this once already, to our great comfort. When she suggests that some villain has poisoned Othello's mind, and Iago answers,

Fie, there is no such man; it is impossible;

If any such there be, Heaven pardon him;
Emilia's retort,

A halter pardon him, and Hell gnaw his bones,

says what we long to say, and helps us. And who has not felt in the last scene how her glorious carelessness of her own life, and her outbursts against Othello — even that most characteristic one,

She was too fond of her most filthy bargain —

lift the overwhelming weight of calamity that oppresses us, and bring us an extraordinary lightning of the heart? Terror and pity are here too much to bear; we long to be allowed to feel also indignation, if not rage; and Emilia lets us feel them and gives them words. She brings us too the relief of joy and admiration, — a joy that is not lessened by her death. Why should she live? If she lived for ever she never could soar a higher pitch, and nothing in her life became her like the losing it.¹

LECTURE VII KING LEAR

King Lear has again and again been described as Shakespeare's greatest work, the best of his plays, the tragedy in which he exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers; and if we were doomed to lose all his dramas except one, probably the majority of those who know and appreciate him best would pronounce for keeping *King Lear*.

¹ The feelings evoked by Emilia are one of the causes which mitigate the excess of tragic pain at the conclusion. Others are the downfall of Iago, and the fact, already alluded to, that both Desdemona and Othello show themselves at their noblest just before death.

Yet this tragedy is certainly the least popular of the famous four. The 'general reader' reads it less often than the others, and, though he acknowledges its greatness, he will sometimes speak of it with a certain distaste. It is also the least often presented on the stage, and the least successful there. And when we look back on its history we find a curious fact. Some twenty years after the Restoration, Nahum Tate altered *King Lear* for the stage, giving it a happy ending, and putting Edgar in the place of the King of France as Cordelia's lover. From that time Shakespeare's tragedy in its original form was never seen on the stage for a century and a half. Betterton acted Tate's version; Garrick acted it and Dr. Johnson approved it. Kemble acted it, Kean acted it. In 1823 Kean, 'stimulated by Hazlitt's remonstrances and Charles Lamb's essays,' restored the original tragic ending. At last, in 1838, Macready returned to Shakespeare's text throughout.

What is the meaning of these opposite sets of facts? Are the lovers of Shakespeare wholly in the right; and is the general reader and playgoer, were even Tate and Dr. Johnson, altogether in the wrong? I venture to doubt it. When I read *King Lear* two impressions are left on my mind, which seem to answer roughly to the two sets of facts. *King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me *not* his best play. And I find that I tend to consider it from two rather different points of view. When I regard it strictly as a drama, it appears to me, though in certain parts overwhelming, decidedly inferior as a whole to *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. When I am feeling that it is greater than any of these, and the fullest revelation of Shakespeare's power, I find I am not regarding it simply as a drama, but am grouping it in my mind with works like the *Promethæus Vincens* and the *Divine Comedy*, and even with the greatest symphonies of Beethoven and the statues in the Medici Chapel.

This two-fold character of the play is to some extent illustrated by the affinities and the probable chronological position of *King Lear*. It is allied with two tragedies, *Othello* and *Timon of Athens*; and these two tragedies are utterly unlike.¹

¹ I leave undiscussed the position of *King Lear* in relation to the 'comedies' of *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *All's Well*.