

SHAKESPEARE AND THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

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Aristotle founded his theory about tragedy upon *Oedipus Rex*. F. Fergusson takes it as a crucial instance of drama or an archetype and recognizes in it the fundamental idea of the theater. Since the time of Aristotle, it has been discussed from many different points of view, often imitated and rewritten by the following generations. The philosophical, theological, psychological or historical interpretations are all useful to understand the play but we can hardly realize the meaning of the play or its spirits if we don't pay attention to the tragic action which Sophocles directly presents. This tragic action has a form based on the unities. The action of Oedipus begins in his purpose to try to find out Laius' slayer. Oedipus meets with many unexpected troubles and is often prevented by improper proofs. Everyone suffers from the mysterious reality of life. From this suffering or trouble, they recognize the real condition of men and start for new life again. Oedipus succeeds in finding out the slayer but his success means his destruction. In a sense, he fails in his investigation. But his failure is his wonderful victory. Oedipus discovers that he does not deserve the place of the head of the community but at the same time he can know himself. He suffers from the forces which he cannot control. He is a puppet of fortune. As his action is supported by his strong will and consciousness, he

brings a renewal to the community through his passion and suffering. Fergusson, according to Kenneth Burk, defines that movement "tragic rhythm of action", which consists of Purpose, Passion and Perception.

It is this tragic rhythm of action which is the substance or spiritual content of the play, and the clue to its extraordinary comprehensive form.¹⁾

This tragic rhythm of Purpose, Passion and Perception may correspond to the ritual pattern, Agon, Pathos and Peripeteia (or Anagnorisis) which J. E. Harrison finds in the rite of Osiris.²⁾ Agon is a conflict between summer and winter, life and death, or the old year and the new year. Pathos is a death of every creature. Peripeteia is a sudden conversion; sorrow changes into joy and a resurrection is brought by the death. The rhythm of Corpus Christi Cycles may be equivalent to the "tragic rhythm". Fergusson says that it is the spiritual content of *Oedipus*, and it also makes the play the drama of ritual which has the whole civic element. It is clear that *Oedipus* satisfies every element as a scape-goat like Christ. The first scene of Thebes suffering from the plague presents the situation similar to the withered winter and suggests the coming conflict. We know that suffering is essential to the renewal of the community. Like this *Oedipus* has a characteristic of ritual. But if the audience had not perceived it, it would have been nothing.

This crowd have had as much appetite for thrills and diversions as the crowds who assemble in our day for football games and musical comedies, and Sophocles certainly holds the attention with an exciting show. At the same time his audience must have been alert for the fine points of poetry with the plays on the same bill. But the elements which distinguishes this theater, giving it its unique directness and

depth is the *ritual expectancy* which Sophocles assumed in his audience.³⁾

Sophocles or Aeschylus could expect the "ritual expectancy" in his audience and at the same time, as Aristotle says, the audience expected in the drama the action to reveal the mystery of life and to celebrate the renewal.

When the generally accepted doctrine of the metaphysical system is lost and people hover through the universe, a dramatist scarcely assumes the "ritual expectancy" in the audience any more. We are apt to separate the drama from our life and make it abstract. Authors of the medieval cycle drama could assume the "ritual expectancy" in their audience. Christ is a scape-goat, or a dismembered king for the salvation of man. Christ's crucifixion promises the possibility of new life to men who fell by the original sin of Adam. Shakespeare wrote a cycle of *Histories* which consists of the "tragic rhythm". With the fall of Richard II, the garden of England is destructed. "Fair sequence and succession" is despoiled. Richard II takes Hereford's rights away and takes from Time his charters and customary rights. On the contrary, Richard II is deposed while he is away from England by Bolingbroke. Unjustness of that deposition is often alluded in *King Henry IV*. Through 1 *Henry IV* and 2 *Henry IV*, our fear that the disorder will continue to the end of the world is gradually strengthened. Rebellion, civil war and quarrel will rush about furiously until they culminate in the evil of Richard III. The end of *Richard III* tells the Redemption of England. The Passion brings England a renewal.

Richm. All this divided York and Lancaster,
Divided in their dire division,

O, now, let Richmond and Elizabeth,
 The true succeeders of each royal house,
 By God's fair ordinance conjoin together!
 And let their heirs, God, of thy will be so,
 Enrich the time to come with smooth-faced peace,
 With smiling plenty and fair prosperous days!

England is brought to its unity by the hands of God. Tudor dynasty of Queen Elizabeth will be prosperous for a long time. God and King were equal in the doctrine of the generally accepted metaphysical system in those days. The spiritual frame work of the Elizabethan audience was still Christianity. They pledged allegiance to the King by whom their social and financial life was sustained. Shakespeare could assume the "ritual expectancy" in the psychology of the audience seeing the drama to build a great cycle of Histories to celebrate the prosperity of the community through the mercy of God.

When Nietzsche's Zarathustra descended from the mountain to preach the mankind, he met an old saint. The old man advised him to remain in the forest rather than to go to the town. Zarathustra did not obey him and continued to travel. He said to himself when he was alone, "Can it be possible! This old saint in the forest has not yet heard that God is dead!" (*Also Sprach Zarathustra, In Werke*, Vol. II, Munich, Hanser, 1955, p. 279) In 1883, Nietzsche completely disturbed the dream of the people who had easily satisfied themselves with the ready-made metaphysics without confronting their reality. In the nineteenth century, he prophesied a "waste land" through which the people today hover crying "God is dead".

The Nativity of Christ united the two different worlds, the divine and the earthly. The transcendental and formless God had

mysteriously been given the form with full accomplishment of flesh and blood. The New Testament proves the real existence of the unique agent between God and man. Christ resolves the two essential and mysterious problems of man, life and death. He courageously accepts them and endures them. He cannot escape from death as well as ordinary men. As the Son of God is also destined to death and cannot avoid his suffering from evils, people cannot put evil and death on Christ any longer. Christ dies saying, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (*Matthew. 27 : 46*) Christ gives up his privilege as the Son of God and lives as a human being to the last suffering. He agonizes and conflicts with the evils in this world till the last moment at Golgotha. As Christ is a human being, he must be desperate and cannot overcome his death. But people believe that he is saved eternally through his strong faith to God.

As the descendants of Cain are prosperous, the profane people stop the story of Christ with the last fearful cry on the Cross and bring him to their own side insisting on the desperate condition of men. Dostoevski develops his spirits of resistance in his imagination and Nietzsche doubts even God's love. Since *Zarathustra* was published in 1883, the number of the people to whom God is dead has gradually increased. Mankind learned the bitter lesson about the vulgar and cheap substitute that had taken up the large place of their mind as the center and the purpose of their existence for a long time, through the bitter experience of the two World Wars. There are still many people who listen to the message of Zarathustra even today. They confront the universe deprived of a generally accepted principle of integrity which was once the center and the purpose of living. The Theatre of the Absurd is one of the expres-

sions of this search.

It bravely faces up to the fact that for those to whom the world has lost its central explanation and meaning, it is no longer possible to accept art forms still based on the continuation of standards and concepts that have lost their validity; that is, the possibility of knowing the laws of conduct and ultimate values, as deducible from a firm foundation of revealed certainty about the purpose of man in the universe.⁴⁾

The authors of the modern theater cannot assume the "ritual expectancy" in their audience. The people who live in the jointless and purposeless world come to the theater which does not hold a mirror up to nature any longer. Why do they come to the theater? What do they require of the theater?

Martin Esslin points out that the fantastic and the nonsensical of Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter have a respectable and generally accepted tradition and says,

These elements in Shakespeare are merely parts of the whole, embedded in a rich amalgam of the poetic and literary, the popular and the vulgar, but they are present nevertheless in the earthy vulgarity of the low type of moron like Bernardine in *Measure for Measure* who refuses to attend his own execution because he has a hangover; in the naive stupidity of Launce in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; in the childishness of Launcelot Gobbo, or the melancholy madness of Feste, or the Fool in *King Lear*. There is also in Shakespeare the personification of the subconscious part of man in great archetypal characters like Falstaff or Caliban, and the exalted madness of Ophelia, Richard II, and Lear—real descendants into the realm of the irrational. Again, in a play like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is the savage parody of conventional poetic language in the artisans' play, and Bottom's transformation into an ass is used to reveal his true animal nature. But above all, there is in Shakespeare a strong sense of the futility and absurdity of the human condition. This is particularly ap-

parent in the tragicomic play like *Troilus and Cressida*, where both love and heroism are cruelly deflated, but it underlies most of Shakespeare's conception of life :

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They kill us for their sport.⁵⁾

I am not surprised at the fact that Shakespeare and the writers of the Theatre of the Absurd have the same technical devices to attract the popular audience. Shakespeare's theater is a popular theater, which is in the popular tradition. Music-hall, pantmime, revue, musical comedy, and commercial film require of an audience the same basic attitude of dramatic illusion as a medieval cycle drama or Shakespearean plays. Therefore, it is natural that we can find the same type of inverted logical reasoning, false syllogism, free association as those of Shakespeare in these popular entertainments or those of Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter.

I agree on Esslin's opinion that there is a "strong sense of the futility and absurdity of the human conditions" in Shakespeare as we find in a play like *Troilus and Cressida*. But as we see in *Hamlet* or *Histories*, his whole universe is not completely "out of joint" or purposeless but set on the medieval system in which human actions have their dignity and purpose however absurd and meaningless they might seem to be. Hamlet says, "Time is out of joint," but he bravely entrusts his fortune to God's hands after returning from England.

• • • there is a

Special providence in the fall of a sparrow.

(*Hamlet*. v. ii. 224-225)

When he gets the serenity of mind leaving everything to God, he is forced to revenge. This will suggest the absurdity of human

action in a sense. At any rate, Hamlet designates Fortinbras as the king and dies bringing the renewal to Denmark.

I cannot live to hear the news from England,
 But I do prophesy th'election lights
 On Fortinbras; he has my dying voice.
 So tell him, with the'occurrents, more and less,
 Which have solicited—the rest is silence.

(*Hamlet*, v. ii. 359-363)

Hamlet is a scape-goat to bring the renewal to Denmark. His suffering and agony are required to cure the sickness of Denmark. So the action in the world of *Hamlet* is very different from that of *Troilus and Cressida* in which human actions are meaningless and absurd. Actions in *Hamlet* constitute the "tragic rhythm". Both *Troilus and Cressida* and *Hamlet* won the great popularity in the Shakespeare's audience. The Elizabethan audience had the flexibility to accept these two plays which are different both in form and idea. They had the ability to keep in mind simultaneously two opposite aspects of a situation. From this fact we will know that the keen insight of M. Esslin catches the common spiritual characteristic founded in both Shakespeare and the writers of the Theatre of the Absurd, but it is not sufficient to understand the form and the idea of Shakespearean plays.

The Elizabethan world was still in the medieval heritage but was conscious of the new philosophy being associated with the new-tidings of the Renaissance. Living in the past heritage, they were forced to look into the future. They could not help condemning the miserable condition of men who cannot escape from death, but they tried to discover joy in living in this world and find some significance in human actions. With the coming of the new philosophy,

the universe began to lose its integrity as the center of living and the Elizabethans were vaguely conscious of it. The medieval people believed that man occupied a proper place in the universe. The microcosm corresponded to the macrocosm. On the contrary, those who were baptized by the Renaissance could not rely on the principle and felt uneasy about the position of men in the universe. They were indistinctly aware of the uncertainty and the vulgarity of the human actions. But the medieval tradition was still their spiritual basement. The audience of Shakespearean plays might have had the dual consciousness about the condition of life. Shakespeare frequently uses the dual techniques to present the various and complex human experiences. B. Smith says,

Contradictions and paradoxes are characteristic of the thought and the culture of the Renaissance, but it was given to Shakespeare more than to most writers of his time to use his insight into the duality of things as an effective instrument of his art.⁶¹

In *Troilus and Cressida*, the reality of love and war is explained by contradictions. For example. "sumptuous armour" (v.vi.) and "Putrefied core" (v.viii.) clearly present the theme of "fair without, and foul within".

Shakespeare is aware of the futility and absurdity of human condition but he renounces arguing about them. He shows them as they are, because he is neither a philosopher nor a theologian but an artist. He presents the absurdity on the stage through the images which the audience can easily understand. He does not flatter the old philosophy and the new philosophy at the same time. His dual awareness is his expression of his suffering "alter ego" living in a changing world. But his agony is not the problem that is current

only in his time but has universality.

God is dead to most people today and the drama appears to lose its ritual function to celebrate the prosperity of the community. A dramatist cannot depend on the "ritual expectancy" even if he has a strong faith in God. The mystery of the universe has been examined by natural science in detail. With the development of science, our life has been mechanized and our spiritual experience has been absorbed in the uniform way of life. People would have neither certainty of their proper place in the universe nor the consciousness as members of the community. Their identification with political or cultural ideals has gone. Without a purpose, they live in doubt and anxiety. A. Fletcher says that we shall expect more allegories to have ornaments in keeping with the anxiety and uncertainty of modern value judgment and points out that the "ambivalent kosmos" becomes the dominant type of an allegorical image in an author like Kafka⁷⁾. The same thing may be said in the case of the theater. We shall return to myth and religion.

In expressing the tragic sense of loss at the disappearance of ultimate certainties the Theatre of the Absurd, by a strange paradox, is also a symptom of what probably comes nearest to being a genuine religious quest in our age : and effort, however timid and tentative, to sing, to laugh, to weep—and to growl—if not in praise of god⁸⁾

The Theatre of the Absurd founds on the recognition of the absence of any generally accepted cosmic system of values and expresses the absurdity of human actions. But it has won the great popularity because it concerns with the fundamental problems of life and death and makes man confront his uncertain and mysterious position as Shakespeare's plays.

• • • the Theatre of the Absurd, however grotesque, frivolous, and irrelevant it may appear, represents a return to the original, religious function of the theater—the confrontation of man with the sphere of myth and religious reality. Like the ancient Greek and medieval mystery plays and baroque allegories, the Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe.⁹⁾

NOTES

- 1) Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre*, Anchor Books, New York, 1933, p. 31
- 2) J. E. Harrison, *Ancient Art and Ritual*, Williams & Norgate, London, 1919
- 3) Fergusson, *op. cit.*, p. 40
- 4) Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, The Anchor Books, New York, 1961, p. 290–291
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 234
- 6) M. B. Smith, *Dualities in Shakespeare*, University of Toronto Press, 1966, p. 3
- 7) A. Flecher, *Allegory, The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Cornell U. P., New York, 1964, p. 145
- 8) M. Esslin, *op. cit.*, p. 291
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 293