Shakespeare as Comic Poet.

If we comprehend now why the national historical play constitutes in Shakespeare a class apart, it still remains to be explained why he does not recognize the drama \([Schauspiel]\) in general as a separate species, as distinguished from tragedy and comedy. The reasons for this fact will be evident to us when we shall have become acquainted with Shakespeare as a tragic and as a comic poet.

When discussion turns upon the favourites of the comic Muse in modern times, everyone at once thinks of Molière; Shakespeare’s name will not so directly occur even to connoisseurs and worshippers. What is the cause of this? May it perhaps be that they are right who assert that Shakespeare does not equal the French poet in comic power? But how can such an opinion be maintained in face of obvious facts? Allow me to recall those facts to your minds.

If we review the different qualities
which constitute a comic poet, and ask whether Shakespeare possessed them, we shall find that he commanded them to as great or even to a greater degree than Molière. Has there ever been one who has so profoundly fathomed the human heart, with its passions, its frailties, its vices? a more subtile observer of every species of peculiarity, whether it spring from the inmost fibres of the heart, or appear merely on the surface? Where has there been in modern times a poet who conceived the ludicrous with such keenness and represented it with so sure a touch? In what dramatist do we find a greater wealth of genuinely comic figures—figures whose mere appearance suffices to put us into the most jovial humour, whose speech and action irresistibly provoke us to laughter? And, as for wit and humour, who can deny that Shakespeare's wit, though it may contain far more that is antiquated than Molière's, who presupposed a more fas-
tidious taste and a severer reasoning tendency—who can deny that Shakespeare's wealth is so great that, even after abstracting all lighter and cheaper matter, enough remains to make him dispute Molière's precedence? while Shakespeare's humour in its depths as well as its cheerful glow far surpasses that of the Frenchman. In the art, too, with which he prepares the way for significant situations of highly comic effect he is second to no dramatist. Just recall the scene in "Love's Labour's Lost" where the members of the academy of Navarre, who have all forsworn the love of woman and have all perjured themselves, are in turn unmasked each by another, till finally each one, to his mortification, but, at the same time, to his comfort, becomes conscious that he can cast no reproach at the others nor they at him. The scene is so capitally introduced, and so effectively carried out with such simple means, that it can complacently bear comparison with
any similar scene in Molière—for instance, with the one which leads to the catastrophe in the "Misanthrope." In one point only does the English poet seem decidedly inferior to the French: in the firm handling of the dramatic action, in the unity of structure of the comic drama. If we consider, however, that Shakespeare displays in a most eminent degree in his tragedies precisely those qualities which we sometimes miss in his comedies, it appears to us most improbable that this is a proof of inability. Such an assumption becomes untenable, yes, absurd, when we reflect that Shakespeare's earliest comedies are far more regularly and firmly constructed, are, indeed, in many respects more effective as comedies, than those of his ripest period.

The highly complicated action in "The Comedy of Errors" is managed with such perfect knowledge of the technique of the stage, and with so sure a hand, that the suspense is increased with every scene
and is only removed in the catastrophe. No French drama of intrigue is more effectively constructed than is this, the first effort of Shakespeare's pen. Perfectly true to art, also, is the development of the first four acts of "Love's Labour's Lost," while in the last a certain diminution of suspense is, of course, noticeable. In "The Taming of the Shrew," where he enters into the style of an older author, and confines himself essentially to the reconstruction of the main action, this main action stands out in such powerful relief, and is evolved with such true logical sequence, and with so irresistible an effect, from the characters of the participants, that this play still forms a powerful attraction of the dramatic repertory, though in some respects it was already antiquated in Shakespeare's time. Among the comedies of Shakespeare's maturest period, "The Merry Wives of Windsor" exhibits the most regular structure; but those very comedies which
are richest in substance and in poetic beauty lack the strict unity of a comedy of Molière. In Molière's best works we have either a strongly marked character with some prominent peculiarity or passion, who forms the centre of the action, or this place is taken by some dominant custom, that is to say, some dominant abuse, of the time, to which a number of the personages of the drama pay homage. That character or custom controls the whole action, and nearly all the dramatic effects may in the last instance be traced back to it. In Shakespeare's most important comedies we see two or even three actions artfully interwoven, yet in such a manner that, upon a purely superficial view, the dramatic structure appears in many ways somewhat loose, and is held together chiefly by the poetic idea. But, above all, that which here constitutes the centre of interest is, as a rule, no comic action at all, whether it spring from the faults of a character or the tend-
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cencies of a time; the principal action, indeed, has generally an earnest, touching, or, it may be, romantic colouring; while the really comic characters and situations figure principally in the subordinate action.

Our reflections, finally, lead us to the following conclusions: If Shakespeare as a comic poet has not found that universal and unqualified acknowledgment which has been accorded to Molière, it is not on account of any deficiency in his powers as a comic writer, but rather because of his too great inner wealth, which leads him to bring into play too great an abundance of motives and situations, which causes him to scatter his wit in too prodigal a fashion and without discrimination; because of a certain joyous light-heartedness and primitive freshness which finds pleasure in the simplest jest, and does not painfully weigh the effect of a witticism; because of the important influence which, pre-eminently in
his comedies, he allows his fancy to exert, while Molière works far more with his understanding; but, above all, because Shakespeare's designs were far less exclusively comic than the Frenchman's. This is connected with a difference between their conceptions of comedy, a point which requires a somewhat closer examination.

Molière's conception of the comic is more nearly allied to our own view of it, as well as to that of the ancients, than is Shakespeare's. The latter, indeed, is also related to the ancient conception, not directly, however, but only through its mediæval development.

The subject-matter of the comic drama is the ludicrous, and this is defined by Aristotle, in his "Poetics," as a kind of defect, as something ugly or bad, which is not, however, associated with anything painful, and which does not prove pernicious. The philosopher, to illustrate this by an example, cites most
happily the comic mask itself, which represented something ugly and distorted, without expressing pain.

But should we submit the best and most celebrated of Molière’s comedies to this test, we should find to our astonishment that it is by no means applicable to them. Let us take an unrivalled masterpiece like “L’École des Femmes”: Arnolph, the old egoist, who has reared a young girl in utter isolation to absolute inexperience and ignorance with the intention of marrying her, and who must now learn to his dismay that Love has found a way even to his prisoner, and that he proves a consummate teacher even to this being so totally undeveloped; Arnolph, who is kept constantly informed of the progress of this love, and yet is not in a position to check it, whose fine-spun plans end in his own ruin—Arnolph is certainly a capitaliy comic, a decidedly ridiculous figure. But does that which is faulty, ugly, in
him not prove painful? Arnolph undergoes positive torture, and, much as he may deserve it, the sympathetic reader feels with him. And the misanthrope, that noble, but too frank and heedless, character, who, while believing he hates and despises the world, becomes entangled in the snares of a coquette, from which he finally releases himself at the expense of a deep heart-wound, and then buries himself in solitude—is not painful the fate of this man, of which Goethe says it produces an absolutely tragic effect? And the miser: the fiendish passion which possesses Harpagon, which has killed all that is divine in him, and destroyed every filial emotion in his children—who would regard this passion as not pernicious? And finally Tartuffe, the hypocrite, who undermines the happiness of a whole family, a family that has heaped benefits upon him—is the nature, the conduct, of this man not pernicious?
We see, then, how it is the greatest masterpieces of the comic Muse that transgress the limits of the comic, and if, nevertheless, all these works succeed in creating a comic effect, it is owing to the art of the poet, who knows how to manage it so that the spectator does not become too vividly conscious of the painful and hurtful side of the ridiculous material presented to him. It seems clear to us that the question whether a certain failing or a certain evil appears ludicrous, depends not only upon the kind and degree of the evil and the extent of its influence, but very essentially upon the standpoint of those who happen to be the spectators at the time.

Upon this rests the development which took place in the conception of the comic in the Middle Ages, and which, in spite of its apparent naïveté, conceals a great deal of depth. What can there be more childish and uncultured than the idea that a tragedy is a play in which the
people become unhappy and die? a comedy, one that has a happy termination? And yet but little need be added to bridge the way to the profoundest conception. The tragic conflict is of such a nature that it must have a bad ending; the comic, of a kind that can end happily and consequently should. By reflecting upon this definition we might easily arrive at a complete theory of both classes of plays. Likewise, if we examine the naïve definition in Dante’s letter to Can Grande, or in the “Catholicón” of Giovanni Balbi of Genoa. According to them comedy is distinguished from tragedy in that a tragedy is great and calm at the beginning, but at the end grows horrible and ghastly; while a comedy allows the beginning of the action to be painful in order to lead it to a happy conclusion.

This view has been scoffed at a hundred times, yet only by superficial critics. Let us try to look into the matter a little
more thoroughly. Is not the tragic fate the more tragic the greater the height of bliss from which the hero is hurled? and—to go deeper—is not the effect of the tragedy greatest in those cases where the error which finally causes the hero's ruin appears at first perfectly harmless, particularly if the fatal error he commits be linked with his inmost nature, his noblest qualities? And comedy—is it not then most effective when the evil which it brings before us is most agitating, and is, nevertheless, happily overcome in an easy, natural way? It is this that is really characteristic of the mediæval conception of the comic. The harmlessness, the immunity from pain, of the ugly and the bad which are presented on the scene are based upon the fact that the evil is conquered in the course of the action. The development leads the participants in the action as well as the audience up to a higher plane, to a height whence they behold the vicious
and the ugly far beneath them and penetrate their hollowness, whence the evil veritably appears like an abandoned standpoint, and in so far like something ridiculous. This conception, in its profoundest sense, is embodied in the grandest comedy of all time—in Dante's Divine Comedy. As Dante urges his painful upward way through hell and purgatory to paradise, and here through all the heavenly spheres to a vision of the uncreated, he learns to regard divine justice, which at first appears to him as the vengeance of the Almighty, upon a higher plane, as a manifestation of the All-wise intent upon the bettering of mankind, until finally he recognizes infinite love as its real essence—the love which moves sun and stars.

This, of course, is not a comedy in the ancient sense, and just as little in ours. A play animated by such an idea would much rather realize our ideal of the drama [Schauspiel]. But this apprehen-
sion of comedy is closely related to that of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare sees that in the world good and evil, the sublime and ridiculous, joy and sorrow, stand close together, jostle each other, nay, are entwined with each other. The most innocent thing may prove noxious, and that which is pernicious be changed to good. Upon laughter follows weeping; upon weeping, laughter; the very occurrence, indeed, which draws tears from one may provoke another to mirth; according to the standpoint of the observer will an action or a situation appear pathetic or laughable; and even one and the same person may weep tears of laughter or smile amid tears.

Acting upon this comprehensive perception of the world around him, Shakespeare creates the world of his dramas. This is why he likes to interweave comic figures and motives into his tragic action, and why, conversely, he generally gives a
serious background to his comic actions, or allows a graver note to be heard through the noisy outbursts of uncontrolled merriment. This is why his characters, like those of real life, do not appear simple, but complex, a compound of good and evil, of strength and weakness. None of the types, so easily interpreted, of the ancient or even of the classic French stage are to be found among Shakespeare's great tragic figures; but his comic characters, also, are, as a rule, richer, endowed with more individual traits, than those that owe their origin to the genius of Molière.

If in all this we have a high degree of realism, we find in closest union with this realism the ideality which characterizes Shakespeare's art. And to the poet's ideal conception of the world there is added a decidedly optimistic quality—a quality which, appearing now in a weaker, now in a stronger, form, and for a while disappearing altogether, still, in the end,
proves itself indestructible. Shakespeare believes in the beautiful and the good, he believes that they are realized in the souls of men; he believes in the value of this world and of this life. He has preserved his faith, even though not without hard struggles, even though not unshaken, in the eventual triumph of the good in the development of the destinies of the world. This optimism is not absent from Shakespeare's historical dramas, or even his tragedies, but it appears above all in his comedies. They are, as it were, moments of relaxation in which he indulges his inward tendency to optimism and trustful faith. He deals largely with such human conflicts, such human errors, as are capable of the most disastrous, the most fatal consequences, but which, through a happy chain of events, are led to a favourable issue. One cannot always see in this fortunate turn of affairs a logical sequence of the actions of the characters concerned; the heroes in
Shakespeare’s comedies are often rendered happy beyond their deserts, let us say, without their own efforts—and where does this not occur upon the stage, where does it not occur in the world? This, then, were chance; but can the poet content himself with bare chance? Where the poet cannot see, he can at least dimly feel. Let us observe what terms he makes with chance in one of his earliest comedies, “The Comedy of Errors.”

Shakespeare took the underlying motive of this play from the “Menaschmi” of Plautus.

The dramatic interest of the Roman comedy is centred, as is well known, in the consequences ensuing from the perfect resemblance in face and form and the identity of name of the heroes, twin brothers, who, by a strange destiny, are parted from each other at a tender age; one seeks the other half the world over, and, arrived at last at the place where his brother lives, without the remotest
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Suspicion of it, he is mistaken for his brother by the latter's fellow-citizens and closest relations, even by his own slave. From this result apparent contradictions of the most delightful kind, strange complications, from which the brother residing in the place where the action occurs suffers most particularly, until through the personal meeting of the twins the confusion is suddenly cleared up. The improbable in the premises of the story could not be discarded without destroying the story itself.

And Shakespeare made no attempt to do so. On the contrary, since he accepts a world in which chance rules as the necessary groundwork of his play, he endeavours, with his own peculiar consistency, to extend the realm of chance; he gives it opportunity to assert itself not only in one but in many instances. To the one pair of twins he opposes another, in whom the fate of the first is repeated; to the two masters, so closely
similar as to be mistaken for each other, two servants equally similar. Each Antipholus,—he has thus rechristened the Menæchmi,—has a Dromio for a follower. The story, mad as it was, becomes still madder; the complication grows comic to the highest degree. But the spectator becomes familiar meanwhile with the workings of chance, conceives, unconsciously, a certain respect for this mysterious power which displays such methods. The idea of putting the two pairs of twins in opposition was evoked in Shakespeare’s mind, as was pointed out a few years ago, by another comedy of Plautus, the “Amphitruo,” from which he borrowed, notably, a very effective scene.

This is not yet all. The repulsive moral relations disclosed to us by Plautus’ Menæchmi were modified by Shakespeare with a delicate touch, in part entirely transformed, while, at the same time, he introduced a new element, a love episode, still somewhat shyly
treated, but with a charming lyric colouring. But even this did not satisfy the poet. Before his soul floated a vision of the world more richly and profoundly conceived than that produced by this blending of two fables of Plautus. By weaving into the action the figures and fortunes of the parents of the two brothers Antipholus, old Ægeon and Æmilia, he gained for his play, so full of strange adventures, a setting which is romantic, fairylike, yet charged with deep meaning. It gives us at the opening of the play a glimpse of a fateful past and a threatening future, while, at the same time, it explains the plot of the comedy directly connected with it; but to the close of the drama, mingling itself with the main plot, it imparts a higher spiritual meaning. While the lighter and graver misconceptions, the entanglements, the grievances, of the different personages resolve themselves into the most delightful harmony; while the grief of longing
is stilled, hopes long abandoned realized, and blessings showered upon one to whom but a moment before the grave seemed the only desirable goal—a feeling takes possession of us which makes us apprehend beyond the mysterious play of what we termed chance the ruling of a higher power.

To this apprehension Shakespeare has given different expression at different times. For this purpose here in the first production of his comic muse it pleases him to make use of the childishly naïve form of the fairy-tale. But at the close of his career he recurs to this form, to employ it in a far more daring manner. In "Pericles," in "The Winter's Tale," in "Cymbeline," which has only by accident been classed among Shakespeare's tragedies, the gods clearly, and partly visibly, interfere in the action. In "The Tempest," however, we find Prospero, who, by the power of the human soul, has become the ruler of the spirit world, and
who most truly embodies Shakespeare's wisdom, his magic power, his charity. Something of the character of a fairy-tale is present, though in an entirely different form, even in the most brilliant comedies of his middle period. They reproduce, in their way, dreams of a golden age.

While most other poets regard comedy as the form of drama which should most of all be a faithful mirror of the actual life around them, even as to its background and details, Shakespeare places his scenes among ideally conceived surroundings,—under beautiful, radiant skies, in fresh, green woods, on the shores of the sea,—among surroundings which powerfully stir the imagination and offer free scope to the fantastic play of chance, opportunity for surprising encounters, momentous experiences, sudden changes of fortune. The dramatic action is, as a rule, a complicated one; not rarely chance is permitted to assume a greater rôle than in tragedy. The world presented to our
eyes follows the same laws as the one in which we live. But it is a world of sunshine, seen in happy days on its brightest side—a world which allows us to feel the workings of a benign Providence more clearly than in the reality about us. The beings that live and move in this world are creatures of flesh and blood, with the same inclinations, passions, weaknesses, peculiarities, as the men around us. But passion does not rise to a tragic height; the sinful, the vicious, do not succeed in attaining their end; good deeds are rewarded with a more than customarily lavish hand; punishment is meted out with more charity, often in great part remitted. In many instances sin is expiated by repentance. Everything is so planned that good shall conquer evil, that the plot may culminate happily. Sometimes—whether because of the unmanageable-ness of the material, or because the poet’s fancy first penetrates too deep, then swiftly speeds on in its winged flight—it
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happens that the consummation does not seem to us sufficiently warranted, that, indeed, in dramas of his earliest and his latest period he to some degree violates our sense of poetic justice.

We feel this especially in a work not usually put in the class of pure comedy, but which, nevertheless, Shakespeare conceived as one—in "The Merchant of Venice." Here this feeling is closely connected with the tragic intensity which is given to one of the characters; I mean Shylock.

The character of Shylock is one of Shakespeare's most perfect creations, even though he devotes comparatively little space to its elucidation. The conception of this figure is as grand as the perfection of art with which it appears upon the scene. The very first words he speaks are characteristic, and still more the manner in which he speaks them; and at each one of his utterances we seem to see the man before us, and we
ourselves supply the gestures, the play of expression, which accompany his speech. As in his Richard III., Shakespeare has here furnished the actor with a worthy and most grateful task.

The two characters resemble each other in that one great passion dominates each with demoniac power. In Shylock it is the love of possession, the love of gold. His surrender to this passion has by degrees turned his heart to stone. Not always had he been so lacking in love; the tender memory of his dead wife, of the time of their betrothal, which once rises up before him, recalls a gleam of that radiant epoch: "It was my turquoise; I had it of Leah when I was a bachelor; I would not have given it for a wilderness of monkeys." Whatever tenderness, reverence, he still feels is essentially for things of the past; it is of a historic, traditional character. Outward and purely traditional are his relations to his daughter; he understood her so little, con-
cerned himself so little about her inner life, so little endeavoured to influence her morally—she suffers so much from his hard, unfeeling nature, can so little respect him, that the paternal house seems a veritable hell to her, that, yielding to her love for Lorenzo, she flees from her father as from a jailer, and no stirrings of filial piety cause her to waver in her action.

Her flight is a terrible blow to Shylock; his paternal authority, the honour of his house, are deeply wounded; but what pains him most is the loss of his jewels and of his ducats.

A heartless father, a merciless usurer, Shylock, nevertheless, in his way, clings to religion. He contents himself with the strict observance of the letter of the law, arms himself in conscious self-righteousness, and beholds in his growing wealth the blessing of God:

"And thrift is blessing if men steal it not."

If his heart be dead to love, so much
the more is hatred familiar to him. He hates all Christians, but above all Antonio, whose high-minded, humane sentiments are directly opposed to his own nature, and who injures his trade:

"I hate him for he is a Christian,  
But more for that in low simplicity  
He lends out money gratis, and brings down  
The rate of usance here with us in Venice.  
If I can catch him once upon the hip,  
I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him."

How has Shakespeare been able to make this man appeal to us, to arouse our sympathies in his fate? Before all, because he makes Shylock's nature comprehensible to us, because he lets us see his inmost being, prompts us to put ourselves in his place. Shylock is a Jew; he belongs to the chosen race, which bears marks of the curse of a bondage of many centuries, which has been persecuted, robbed, tortured, and is still insulted and, upon occasion, trodden underfoot. The historical light in which the poet places
his figure elevates it and renders it at the same time humanly comprehensible. "He hates our sacred nation," Shylock says of Antonio, and although this motive is but one of many, and not the strongest, yet all the other motives that determine his action, taken in connection with this one, seem to assume a certain justification. When Shylock says: "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that"—when Shylock speaks thus, he comes close to us humanly, we feel for him and with him.
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It is above all on account of this feeling that the celebrated trial scene in the fourth act strikes us as harshly discordant. If Shylock is prevented from carrying out his bloody intentions in regard to Antonio, even if he is remorselessly punished, mortally wounded in what he holds most dear, it is nothing more than poetic justice. It is only against his being forced to become a convert that our feelings justly rebel. The contemporaries of the poet doubtless attached no such importance to this point. But it is not merely poetic justice that our feelings demand. Shylock has come too close to us, we have learned to know too intimately the grounds of his hatred, of the intensity of his resentment, his figure has become too humanly significant, and the misfortune which overtakes him appeals too deeply to our sympathies, to permit us to be reconciled to the idea that his fate, which moves us so tragically, should be con-
ceived otherwise than as a tragedy. We are powerfully moved when this man who stands upon his right, who stakes all to gain it, who hour by hour is strengthened in the belief that his right will be granted him—when this man suddenly feels the ground give way beneath his feet, when, in the name and with the forms of law, he is cheated of his right. And we cannot dismiss the thought that this decision, brought about by a lucky accident, by the sophistical interpretation of a document, is not commensurate to Shylock's grand passion. We crave to feel the necessity of the fate which befalls him, the inevitableness of his ruin. Not only the higher moral motives of his judges, but also the legal motives of the sentence as such, we wish to feel to be justified and necessary.

There is a discordance here which cannot be explained away. It was impossible for Shakespeare to avoid it. The most essential feature of the tale—the suit about the pound of flesh—the real
purpose, the gist of the whole, he could not and would not discard. It embraces, indeed, a symbolically profound thought: *Sumnum jus, summa injuria*; it is admirably adapted to satisfy upon Shylock, in the most pronounced form, the demands of poetic justice. Considered in the abstract, this feature satisfies our understanding, creates the pleasing impression which the spirited solution of a difficult problem is wont to produce. And in comedy we must often resort to abstrac-
tion in order to find unalloyed enjoyment. When we see the success of the plans in which the poet has specially aroused our interest, the favourable change of fortune of the persons who chiefly enlist our sympathies, we often dare not too vividly realize the moral relations and the human individuality of those who, in the happy consummation, are deeply wounded and hurt. Few comedies would be enjoyable without abstraction of this kind. But Shakespeare renders
this abstraction so difficult for us because he himself was incapable of it, because all his characters are drawn with equal sympathy and with equal objectiveness; there is, consequently, often something unsatisfying in the dénouement of his comedies. The offence generally consists in this: that for the sake of a happy solution the evil which appears too prominent in some of his personages is not wholly eradicated, the guilt not adequately atoned. In "The Merchant of Venice" we have an instance of the opposite: a comic solution and a tragic character; a tragic fate developed in a manner befitting comedy.

This capacity for abstraction, coupled with unlimited powers of observation, would have made Shakespeare's life intolerable had not the gods bestowed upon him as their choicest gift his fund of humour. It is humour which renders the inconsistencies of the world and of human nature endurable, as we make
them subjects of æsthetic apprehension—an apprehension which awakens within us a feeling of the ludicrous which is mingled with sadness. While wit consists in combining ideas that are discordant to each other in an unexpected manner, humour illumines for our inner vision the inconsistencies existing in things themselves, in our own being and action. To render humour effective a reference to one's own self is as important as it is in tragedy. It is only when we put ourselves in the position of the suffering hero, when we behold in his fate but a particular instance of a common destiny, that our soul is stirred with tragic sympathy. And it is only when we recognize in a humourous character the underlying traits of human nature and of our own that it will produce an effect in accordance with the poet's purpose.

Humour as a poetic faculty presupposes, before all else, a spiritual emancipation from self. Shakespeare must have be-
come objective to himself, have at once wept and laughed at the contradictions in his own nature, before he could have written "Love’s Labour’s Lost," the earliest of his works in which humour breaks out triumphantly. And from that time forward we see this child of the gods ever more vigorously stirring his wings, and the creatures of the poet ever more gaily fluttering about. Shakespearean comedy is inspired with humour; it permeates the language, animates the characters, shapes the situations, and to the hero of his tragedy it blows a breath of relief in the midst of the intensest strain and suspense.

If one would realize by an example the depth and daring of Shakespearean humour, let him think of that scene in "Henry IV." which, as Goethe has remarked, may well draw from us a lofty smile—the scene where Henry Percy, Hotspur, the noble hero, full of achievement, and Falstaff, that magnificent rogue and good-for-nothing, are lying on
the ground side by side; the one killed by Prince Henry's hand, the other, from cowardice, feigning death, to rise again when all have disappeared; or recall the love scenes in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" between Titania, the queen of the fairies, and the weaver Bottom, who, through a spell, but quite symbolically, bears an ass's head—that scene in which Shakespeare shows us the point where the divine and the human, the ideal and the coarsest reality, meet, where the spirit is dragged down by the dust.

"Bis der Gott, des Irdischen entkleidet,
Flammend sich vom Menschen scheidet."

Or, finally, see how the lightning flashes of humour accompany the thunder of Shakespeare's wrath in Isabella's words in "Measure for Measure"—those words which warn earthly greatness of its bounds, and which, at the same time, tell us why, in the loftiest view, though all things human seem so small, nothing appears ridiculous.
FIFTH LECTURE

SHAKESPEARE AS TRAGIC WRITER
SHAKESPEARE AS TRAGIC WRITER.

We have sought in these lectures to approach our subject from various sides, and endeavoured to reach in these various paths a standpoint which might afford us the most complete view possible of the part of the subject under examination. To-day we have the difficult task of attempting to gain an insight into the most important, the most significant, but also the most unapproachable, side of our subject. Shakespeare, considered as a tragic writer, shall occupy our attention in our last lecture.

If Shakespeare as a comic poet must submit to being compared with Molière and to be measured by his standard, as a tragic writer he towers so far above any standard which may be adduced from modern poets that comparison becomes
impossible. From the lonely summit where he sits enthroned he beholds all other heights of tragic art far beneath at his feet, and he soars before the disciples of this art, in our time, as an unattainable model, as some being of a higher sphere.

What he is capable of as a poet, as a dramatist, Shakespeare reveals nowhere in so overpowering a manner as in his great tragedies; and as to what constitutes tragic action no poet of ancient times can instruct us better, no modern poet as well.

With the peculiar nature of this action, and the means by which it is produced, theory since Aristotle has repeatedly occupied itself; and it has, at various times, owing partly to a mistaken or a one-sided interpretation of the ancient philosopher, partly to a confounding of morals and æsthetics, advanced the most absurd views.

You will not expect a criticism of these
views at this point, nor, indeed, to hear from me any elaborate theoretic disquisition. Permit me, nevertheless, to make a few leading remarks of a general character before turning to my real subject, Shakespeare.

The conflict which, as we have seen in a former lecture, constitutes the essence of every real drama is in tragedy of such a nature that the hero succumbs, and our sympathies are enlisted in his sufferings and his ruin. We are profoundly moved by compassion and, at the same time, by fear, produced by beholding in the unfortunate hero an image of ourselves, by seeing in his fate the common fate of man and our own, by being reminded of the limits which confine humanity. Tragic fear will always be naturally awakened where tragic compassion is aroused; and the presence or absence of such fear may serve as a gauge to determine whether our compassion has really reached a tragic height, or whether we feel merely a greater or lesser
degree of sympathy, a pleasing agitation, but not of that nature which stirs the soul to its inmost depth. Everything, then, depends upon exciting tragic compassion. How is this aroused? The greatness of the suffering which we witness is not in itself sufficient. A great misfortune, terrible suffering, may inspire horror, revulsion, disgust; if it concern a person whom we love, it will, under any circumstances, cause us pain. But in order to excite our compassion, it is essential that we should perceive a connection between the hero's sorrows and his actions, and that we should so comprehend his actions as related to his character and his position that we may imagine ourselves in his place.

The deed or deeds of the hero of tragedy which are the cause of his sufferings constitute his tragic error, or, as they are pleased to term it in more modern times, his tragic fault. The expression would in itself not be objectionable if one always
realized what sort of fault is here meant, namely, simply the origin of suffering. But if one means by a tragic fault a morally reprehensible action, for which the perpetrator justly suffers, and for which he must atone by his sorrows, he displaces the proper standpoint to such a degree that it is impossible for him to realize, in the great tragic writers, the simple workings of facts upon each other. Even Sophocles' Antigone, that ideal of lofty maidenhood, of purest sisterly affection, of willing sacrifice to duty, is the author of her tragic fate. But without that unfortunate confusion of ideas would it have entered the mind of any philologist or aesthetic critic to suggest, by way of correction, to Antigone that she erred in acting against the authority of the state? as if she could have done aught but fulfil the higher law at the expense of the lower; or to maintain that she erred at least in expressing herself in such unmeasured terms to the
representative of the state, in disregarding the reverence due him? as if, according to the Hellenic conception, it did not well become one whose kindred are insulted to be roused to a noble rage, and as if this error, even if according to Greek ethics it were one, involved a fault in any way proportionate to Antigone’s fate. Such is the peculiar character of that false conception of the tragic fault, exposing it at once to a _reductio ad absurdum_, that it sometimes forces us to attribute to a microscopic cause an effect as great as that from an infinitely great cause.

The weight of the tragic fault does not necessarily depend upon the magnitude of the moral transgression connected with it. Whether the acts from which the tragic misfortunes spring are in themselves good or bad in a moral sense is not the essential point, though the work of the tragic poet will doubtless assume very different forms in the two cases.
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The essential thing primarily is that these acts should evoke a violent conflict between the hero and a power whose significance we must acknowledge, and that we should feel that this conflict is inevitable. That it is the power of the state with which Antigone enters into conflict impresses upon her fate the stamp of necessity, and consequently of tragedy, in a heightened degree, but her tragic error does not by any means constitute on that account a moral fault.

But if we picture to ourselves a hero who is drawn into a conflict not only with the outward, official representatives of the moral order of the universe, but who is driven to deeds of violence by an overpowering desire, then the task of the poet appears, on the one hand, easier, on the other, so much the more difficult. The motive of the tragic suffering is simplified, since our feelings, anticipating the dramatic unfolding, here imperiously demand this suffering; but, again, it is
harder for the poet to excite compassion,
as the sight of what one feels is a just
punishment will not in itself admit the
awakening of compassion. The mistake
of those who convert the tragic error into
a tragic fault is here most clearly shown;
for the greater the moral delinquency of
the hero the more difficult is it to pro-
duce tragic effects. It is here pre-
eminently, too, that the art of the poet
is put to the test in his conception of the
motive of the tragic error, of the irre-
parable deed; it is in just such cases that
Shakespeare reveals his incomparable
tragic power. Far from painting his
offending hero in the blackest possible
colours, from representing him as repel-
lent to the highest degree, he endeavours,
on the contrary, to bring him humanly
near to us, to make his deed compre-
hensible; endeavours, if I may say so,
to transform his crime, as far as it be
possible, into innocence, or, as Schiller
expresses it:
“Er wälzt die gröss’re Hälffe seiner Schuld
Den unglückseligen Gestirnen zu.”*

But the means which Shakespeare employs to this end are of such masterly simplicity, are so thoroughly different from the painful artifices to which feeble-hearted tragedians of later times are wont to resort, that they have deceived many commentators as to his purpose; commentators only, however, never the unbiassed reader, and far less still the spectator, who feels the effects intended to be produced by the poet, without troubling himself much about the manner in which they were aroused.

But here I expect to be met by the objection from the well-meaning that to make a wicked hero, a criminal of tragedy, an object of our sympathy has its doubtful side. I acknowledge this consideration to be perfectly well grounded. I am, still further, of the

*“He casts the greater half of his great guilt
Upon the unfav’ring and malignant stars.”
conviction, founded upon experience and reflection, that an easily inflamed fancy, a highly developed tendency to imitation, has, under the influence of a tragic representation, not rarely carried away the spectator to the commission of a real tragic deed. Yet if we should banish a certain kind of tragedy, or, indeed, tragedy in general, from our land on account of its possibly evil results, should we not, as a logical consequence, eventually arrive at having to banish every species of art—nay, finally, even science? Art in itself pursues no practically useful aims, nor any moral ones: its sole end is to heighten and strengthen our sense of life [Lebensgefühl]. But he who considers the moral effect of art,—I mean real art,—impartially will probably arrive at the conviction that in the main, and on the whole, the beneficial effects outweigh the injurious ones, if not, perhaps, in number, yet in inner significance. And as regards Shakespeare in particular, and
those of his tragedies in which he enlists our sympathies for a guilty hero, is there a loftier human standpoint than one that comprehends all and forgives all? is it not more divine deeply to pity Othello or Macbeth for his deeds than to condemn him?

It is essential that we should not confound heterogeneous domains of life and various points of view. The tragic stage is not a court of justice, the poet not an advocate, and the spectator not a judge. But it is a significant fact that at the very time when a morbid humanitarianism invades the courts of justice, playing a game with the notion of responsibility and irresponsibility, which, carried to its natural consequences, would convert the sword of justice into a mere child’s bugbear, the tragic critic so often feels it his vocation to formulate judgments of moral condemnation.

But it is my firm conviction that a thorough study of Shakespeare’s trage-
dies would as greatly promote real humanity as it would antagonize that false humanity which would exempt the criminal from retribution at the expense and to the danger of society.

If Shakespeare is the greatest of tragic writers, it is pre-eminently because of his spiritual depth and his thorough reality. He needed no traditional aesthetic theory in order to penetrate the tragic idea. The function of the drama is, according to him, no other than to hold the mirror up to nature. And human nature, the life of man, offered him a wealth of tragic elements, of tragic destinies, which he observed, felt, and probed with that universal sympathy for which he was fitted by his own inmost experiences. Dramatic creation had become his vocation, but he did not make a profession of it; and as all art was held sacred by him, so, pre-eminently, was tragedy. He did not obtrude himself upon his tragic material, but rather it obtruded itself upon him.
His maiden effort alone, the bloody tragedy "Titus Andronicus," evidently owed its existence to no inner necessity, but to the desire of the rising dramatist to rival the brilliant example of Marlowe and of his imitators. The author of "Titus Andronicus" was not yet ripe for his material, nor, indeed, for tragedy at all; nevertheless, he had already an intuitive sense of how tragic passion is developed and finds expression, and if in dramatic composition and dramatic language he proves himself a docile disciple of Marlowe, in the art of creating tragic effects he shows himself from the first far superior to his predecessor.

Then Shakespeare turned, as we have seen before, to the domain of comedy, and not long before the close of that series of lovely, bright creations, in which love in its manifold variations is his theme, he produced, at a happy moment, "Romeo and Juliet," that tragedy of his youth which stands out in astonishing loftiness,
yet not without connection, not incomprehensibly, amid the comedies which surround it. And we see in "Romeo and Juliet" that, if it is given to genius to find the right matter at the right moment, he does not owe it to mere luck, but also to his own patience inasmuch as he knows how to wait for the right moment. Shakespeare did not undertake to dramatize the fable of "Romeo and Juliet" as soon as he became acquainted with it. We see that the matter had already vividly interested him when he wrote the "Two Gentlemen of Verona"; we find evidence of it in the character and in the name of the Julia of the comedy, in the analogy between Valentine's banishment from Milan and Romeo's from Verona; it is shown, above all, in the additional insignificant circumstance that the banished Valentine in Shakespeare, like Romeo in the original tale, sojourned in Mantua.

Not until many years after the comple-
tion of "Romeo and Juliet" was it that Shakespeare's reflections upon the nature of man and his destiny attained such depth and gravity that they compelled him, as it were, for a number of years, to tragic production. Like all great poets, but in a higher degree than most, he possessed that inborn fine sense of the fitness of things, of harmony, of justice. He needed not to seek laboriously for tragic effects, and he ran no risk of choosing the wrong means. It did not occur to him to excite in his hearers emotions which had not thrilled the depths of his own soul; it was impossible for him to disguise himself, to exaggerate. That effect of pity and of fear which at once harrows and relieves us, and which constitutes the essence of tragedy, he had himself often enough felt; he needed but to look into his own heart to see what means were required to produce it. But even this represents the matter too objectively. When matter like that of
“Hamlet,” of “Othello,” of “Lear,” took possession of him, conquered for a time a supreme place in his inner world, a certain necessity constrained an adjustment, an assimilation, of this matter to the laws which governed that inner world. The transformation of the adventures, the character, the destiny, of the hero was accomplished with restless energy, yet in great part unconsciously, in consonance with those laws; and in the dramatic conception there arose in indissolubly close connection the tragic idea and the plan of the tragic action.

For Shakespeare it was a matter of course that tragic suffering cannot be a thing of accident, that it must be brought about by the sufferer’s own deeds; for to him it was a matter of profound significance, not a mere cruel sport of chance. It was a matter of course that the tragic catastrophe presupposed the insolubleness of the preceding conflict. Tragic necessity was an axiom in the code of his
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poetic logic—one upon which he may, perhaps, never have reflected, but which formed, nevertheless, the groundwork of all his reflections: necessary connection between the sufferings of the hero and the conflict into which his deeds throw him with the powers and the laws of the world about him; necessary connection between the actions of the hero and his inmost nature as it is shaped and developed by the circumstances of his contact with the outer world.

In his tragedies Shakespeare unconsciously followed the same fundamental laws which governed the great tragedians of classical antiquity. But these fundamental laws allow a wide latitude to the individuality of the poet, and the form, which is determined by the conditions of time and place. Many varieties, therefore, may be conceived in the domain of tragedy. Shakespearean tragedy bears, primarily, the family traits of his dramas, of the English drama in general of the
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time; it has its broad, realistic basis, its abundance of reflection of real life.

A work of art can offer us but a segment of the world, of reality; but if all great poets have known how to round this fragment, and invest it with an ideal significance which shapes it into a perfect whole, into a sort of a microcosm, an image of the great world, we see Shakespeare, besides this, ceaselessly endeavouring to extend as far as possible the boundaries of his microcosm.

By means of a thousand little artifices which serve this purpose our fancy is transported to actions and scenes beyond those actually presented before us, to actions of the past, to scenes beyond the boards. I shall only remind you here of Capulet's feast in "Romeo and Juliet," of the brief scene between Capulet's servants which precedes the appearance of the guests, where the excitement and disorder prevailing on the stage give us a sense of the reality of the feast which is held behind
the scene; and, further, the short colloquy between Capulet and his nephew, the natural, everyday tone of which makes the present moment seem but a link in a long chain of years of their life; of the nurse’s narrative of Juliet’s childhood—and how many similar instances might be mentioned! Most distinctly of this nature is the art wherewith Shakespeare always so shapes the utterances of new personages on the scene, be it in monologue or dialogue, that we are transported in the most natural manner into the midst of the thing that occupies them. In the monologues the intention of the poet has sometimes been misunderstood; as, for instance, in Hamlet’s famous “To be, or not to be,” where even eminent players often disregard the fact that the opening words of the monologue do not form the beginning of Hamlet’s soliloquy, but are the result of reflections directly preceding them whose substance, though suppressed, is necessarily in-
ferred from what is uttered. The effect produced by all these and similar artifices is that no doubt can spring up in our minds as to the reality of what we see and hear. If it is a question of the narration of an occurrence which we have either not ourselves seen, or the truth of which it is hard for us to believe in spite of having seen it, the poet never fails to give us a conviction of its reality by making the narrators introduce all sorts of insignificant details that they remember; often, too, by making the narrators deviate from each other in such minor details. Let us hear how Hamlet questions those who have informed him of the apparition of the ghost, questions them about the particulars:

Hamlet. Arm'd, say you?
Marcellus. Arm'd, my lord.
Bernardo. From top to toe?
Marcellus. My lord, from head to foot.
Bernardo. 
Hamlet. Then saw you not his face?
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Horatio. O, yes, my lord: he wore his beaver up.

Hamlet. What, look'd he frowningly?

Horatio. A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

Hamlet. Pale or red?

Horatio. Nay, very pale.

Hamlet. And fix'd his eyes upon you?

Horatio. Most constantly.

Hamlet. I would I had been there.

Horatio. It would have much amazed you.

Hamlet. Very like, very like. Stay'd it long?

Horatio. While one with moderate haste might tell a hundred.

Marcellus. Longer, longer.

Bernardo. Not when I saw't.

Hamlet. His beard was grizzled,—no?

Horatio. It was, as I have seen it in his life,

A sable silver'd.

Hamlet. I will watch to-night;

Perchance 'twill walk again.

Of still greater significance to the underlying character of Shakespearean tragedy than the instances cited was the custom of the stage of the time to extend the dramatic action itself beyond the limits customary with the ancients, and with other imitators of them. The latter, as a
rule, really represent only the crisis of the action; that which has preceded belongs among the presumptions which the spectator learns by means of narrative or reference; the English actually represented everything that bore any essential relation to the plot.

Matchless in this connection is the art with which Shakespeare contracts widespread matter, condenses the dramatic action; the way in which by the simplest means,—by alternately introducing parallel motives and parallel scenes, by foreshadowing to us at the appropriate time what is to come,—he produces the illusion that we have really beheld in all the plenitude of life even those parts of the action which he has depicted merely with a few strokes. A few short scenes, outwardly separated by others, but in reality most closely connected, suffice to create an illusion of abundant and continuous action. And, withal, we completely lose our sense of the measure of time. In the study of
the reckoning of time in Shakespeare's works, to which recent English research seems particularly inclined to devote itself, it becomes evident that in many of his dramas, perhaps in a majority of them, a double reckoning of time prevails. This appears with especial clearness in "King Lear." If we follow the scenes in which the king appears, from the point where Goneril first shows her disregard toward him to the night when he wanders shelterless upon the heath, and calculate the time that has elapsed between these two periods, we shall find that it comprises but a limited number of hours—at most a few days. During this same time, however, Cordelia in France has received information of the base treatment her father has experienced, has found opportunity to communicate with Kent by letter, nay, more, French troops have already landed on the British coast. But what does it matter? What spectator that follows the fortunes of Lear with ever-in-
creasing sympathy will think of verifying the poet's reckoning of the time necessary for the development of those fortunes? Shakespeare well knew that time is reckoned only by thoughts and experiences.

The wealth of substance offered us in "Lear" comports well with the idea that much might be happening in other places at the same time.

No poet ever better understood than Shakespeare how to utilize for the highest purposes of his art the constitution of the stage which was at his disposal, and the dramatic tradition to which he attached himself. The ideality of space which characterized the English stage of that time, and of which the ideality of time is a necessary corollary, the ability of the prevailing drama to include a long chain of events throughout its entire course, permitted Shakespeare in tragedy to follow his inner bent, which impelled him to the psychological side of his subject. It permitted him to represent, as he loved to
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do, the evolution of a passion from its first beginnings to its climax; and not seldom reaching still farther back, to show us the soil in which it was to take root. It permitted him to show us a character unfolding before our eyes under the reciprocal influence of deed and experience, of action and environment. It enabled him thus in his tragedies to lay the chief weight upon the connection between the character and the acts of the tragic hero, or, what is the same thing, to devote the best part of his powers and endeavours to the dramatic unfolding of his characters.

If we study Shakespeare’s tragedies as far as “King Lear” in their chronological order, we see how the poet grows ever more clearly conscious of his real vocation, of his real strength; how, ever more decidedly, he makes the tragic conflict centre in the soul of his hero.

With “Romeo and Juliet” we have already occupied ourselves in a former
lecture. In the extremely simple conflict of this tragedy the antagonistic powers of the outside world and those that determine the action of the main characters play an equal part, and the tragic theme did not in itself demand a special display of character study, much as Shakespeare accomplished even here in the way of psychological subtlety.

In "Julius Cæsar" our interest centres in the ideal figure of Brutus, the embodiment of manly loftiness of thought, of manly honour, full of the sense of duty, full of moderation and self-control, full of self-denial—Brutus, who lacks nothing but practical insight into the men and things of this world.

And the tragedy of his fate lies in this: that precisely in consequence of his high sentiments he falls under the influence of men cleverer, more keen-sighted, but morally far inferior; that precisely in consequence of his feeling of duty, he is plunged into the most agonizing conflict
of duties, and, apparently through self-denial, comes to a fatal decision; that from his sense of virtue he aims at an unattainable end, and in the pursuance of this end uses means repellent to his nature and which cover him with reproach, while, at the same time, they fail of their purpose. It is a painful spectacle to see this noble stoic share the vulgar error of all conspirators. How thrilling do the words "Et tu, Brute!" sound coming from Cæsar’s lips! Brutus become the murderer of his benefactor! And most depressing is the ever clearer consciousness that the crime was committed in vain. Brutus’ life becomes a chain of disappointments. In place of Cæsar his country has now civil war and a new triumvirate, the source of new civil wars and of new tyranny. Ever more hopeless grows the struggle of the idealist with harsh reality. To his grief over the consequences of his deed, the failure of his plans, the downfall of the
republic, are added sorrows of another kind: he loses his Portia. But the stoic stifles his grief, masters his feelings, continues to do to the end what he deems his duty. And finally, when all is over, he rejoices in the thought that he has never in the whole course of his life met any who have proved unfaithful to him, and he falls upon his sword exclaiming:

"Caesar, now be still:
I kill'd not thee with half so good a will."

But though Brutus is the chief character in the tragedy, it bears its title "Julius Caesar" not in vain. Mightier than all the personages of the drama does the idea prove that was projected into the world by Caesar and represented by him. In vain do Brutus and his friends combat against it; they are annihilated in the struggle. And the less adequate its embodiment, the more distinctly does the full significance of the idea as such stand out. Or, to be more explicit, it is
embodied not so much in Cæsar's person as in his position, his power, in the judgment, the mood, the character, of the people. Hence the significance in this tragedy of the gatherings of the populace, scenes which are at once eminently characteristic and intensely dramatic. If Shakespeare be guilty of serious errors as to the outward usages, nay, in individual instances as to the views, the manners, of the Romans, that which is really typical of the time and situation he reproduces with historic fidelity.

In Hamlet also Shakespeare gives us an idealist, one who is placed amid surroundings incongruous with his nature, who sees himself confronted with a problem to which he is not equal and which proves his ruin. Here, too, it is a question of regicide. Brutus murders Cæsar, who has been like a father to him. Hamlet has the death of his father to avenge. Both feel themselves called upon to set right the time which is out of joint. But
Brutus thinks it possible to solve his insoluble problem. Hamlet feels that he is unequal to the task forced upon him and which he must recognize as a duty. Brutus errs in his assumption, as he does in his choice of means. Hamlet's vision is theoretically far clearer, but as he cannot gather himself up to make a decision, he does not even reach the point of framing a plan. Both are endowed with profoundly moral natures, spirits delicately attuned. Brutus has the self-control and the energy which Hamlet lacks; Hamlet, the deeper insight into the relations of things and into his own conscience which Brutus does not possess.

In "Julius Cæsar" we have, besides the general human interest, the powerful historical interest attaching to the time. In "Hamlet" the problem is treated in its most universal significance, and presented with a depth which will remain unfathomed for all time. What experiences of Shakespeare's past and present formed the basis
of the mood which gave birth to Hamlet, what elements impelled him to descend deeper than he had ever done before into the abysses of his own soul, will perhaps forever remain a mystery.

And a mystery, to a certain extent, will the character of Hamlet also, and the real intention of the poet, remain. Though Goethe, in his "Wilhelm Meister," has given us the key to the solution, it seems as if we had not since then penetrated much farther into the heart of the sanctuary. It is, of course, not my intention to hastily swell the list of the already innumerable Hamlet commentaries whose strength lies wholly in criticism, their weakness in positive construction. This much, however, I shall permit myself to express as my firm conviction: that Goethe's statement of the main problem, much as it may leave in the dark, yet rightly defines the limits within which the gist of it lies. When Goethe, referring to Hamlet and his task, says that the impos-
possible is demanded of him,—not the impossible in itself, but that which is impossible to him,—he traces, as precisely as may be, the delicate line which investigation should follow, and from which it is apt to deviate. As regards later interpretations, like that of Werder, who finds the essential feature of the tragic conflict in the objective difficulties which confront Hamlet, and believes the point to be that Claudius, the murderer and usurper, is to be punished, while, at the same time, the world is given sufficient legal proof, proof beyond all justifiable question, of his guilt—as regards this and similar interpretations, I shall simply remark that Shakespeare evidently had no such thought in his mind, for he obstinately disdains to use the occasions which offer themselves to express such an intention. At no point does he show us Hamlet occupied with a real examination of his task, with a discussion of its actual nature and extent, of the means at his command
Shakespeare as Tragic Writer: to accomplish it, of the difficulties inherent in the undertaking. Now I firmly maintain under all circumstances the principle that it is not the proper method to drag to the light, nay, more, to submit to a microscopic analysis and to take as a starting point of investigation, things that Shakespeare intentionally or unintentionally leaves in the dark. That which he considers of moment Shakespeare expresses clearly enough; what he leaves unexpressed cannot have been deemed essential by him, and should, therefore, not be so regarded by us.

The essence of the Hamlet problem must, then, lie in the character of the hero as it was shaped by the portentous events which precede the dramatic action, and as it is further developed before our eyes by the problem which confronts him. But this character, although transparent, is so profound that no one has ever yet fathomed its depths.

Hamlet remains a mystery, but it is
irresistibly attractive in that we feel that it is not an artificially created mystery, but one founded upon the nature of things. We recognize the inherent reality of this character, even though we despair of ever exhaustively interpreting it. And, above all, we feel the universal validity, the typicalness, of Hamlet. As he thought and felt, or in some like manner, have we all at some time thought and felt and acted, or rather failed to act. An inward conflict of the most universal significance is here depicted with unsurpassed veracity and with a realistic abundance of detail. It is this which gives "Hamlet" a pre-eminent charm among Shakespeare's great tragedies. "Othello," "Macbeth," "Lear," are not less profound, not less grandly conceived, not less dramatic; nay, they are, in these respects, in part superior to "Hamlet." But a psychological delineation carried out in such detail, such a wealth of traits taken from nature's self, of traits which compel us to
descend into the depths of our own hearts, we find in "Hamlet" alone. The highest realism, nay, naturalism, here attains highest poetic effect; but it is the realism of a Shakespeare applied to the most ideal of subjects, to that Hamlet whom he endowed with a greater abundance of the treasures hidden in the depths of his own soul than fell to the lot of any hero before or after him.

"Othello" is one of the tragedies in which the hero plays a more passive rôle during the first half of the drama, until the climax is reached; nor could it be otherwise in a tragedy of jealousy. But all the more decidedly is it his own action—the abduction of Desdemona—which prepares the ground where his jealousy may take root; all the more decidedly his own action which causes the tragic catastrophe; and that which compels him to this last deed is the over-mastering power of a ruling passion, and that the most terrible of passions, which
rends his soul with a maddening tyranny. And let us not overlook the fact that the central point of the dramatic conflict lies here absolutely in the character of the hero. Outward influence is limited to Iago’s plot, conceived, to be sure, with demoniac cunning: a little more knowledge of human nature, a little more keen-sightedness, a little sang-froid, and Othello would have torn asunder the net which was tightening about him. Let us observe, too, that Shakespeare often, and most in his most powerful tragedies, shows us the tragic passion which springs of necessity from the hero’s nature to be in direct opposition to that nature. Othello’s jealousy, his unfounded suspicion, cannot be explained simply on the ground of a certain spiritual narrowness; but essentially on the ground of his being of an open, high-minded, confiding nature. Not knowing what it is to dissimulate, he does not believe in Iago’s dissimulation. And it is just because the
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passion aroused within him is contrary to his nature that it exerts so fearful and destructive an influence upon him.

We observe the same thing in "Macbeth." In this play Shakespeare propounded to himself one of the most difficult problems that any tragic poet has ever had to deal with. Until then his tragic heroes had been such that they could all say of themselves, as Lear does later:

"I am a man more sinn'd against than sinning."

To Macbeth, the regicide, the usurper, the bloody tyrant, this cannot be applied. How could Shakespeare dare to make a figure like Macbeth the hero of a tragedy? How has he succeeded in arousing for this hero the sympathies, enlisting for him the deep feelings, of the beholder? Admirable is the lofty way in which he disdains all outward help, all petty artifices, and leads the problem back to its simplest, most difficult, pro-
foundest form, and solves it in all its profundity. He suppresses every feature furnished by his source which could palliate or excuse Macbeth's deed, that fatal deed, the murder of Duncan, from which all the others flow. And this he does not merely tacitly by his manner of presenting the personages of the action and their relation to each other. No; in distinct words does he tell us that Duncan was the gentlest, the most just, of princes, who has heaped honours upon Macbeth, and, in token of his favour, visits him in his castle and there sleeps confidingly under his roof; he tells us expressly that everything seems to deter Macbeth from his deed, that nothing impels him to it but his ambition alone. And he tells us this by the mouth of Macbeth himself. It is Macbeth who is his own accuser; he presents the tragic problem to us in all its fearful clearness; and this it is that at once gives us the solution. For in the fact that Macbeth accuses himself before
he does the deed, that he does nothing to palliate the crime in his own eyes, that he is filled with agony and dread as he clutches his dagger and makes his way to Duncan’s chamber, we see that he is not a cold-blooded murderer, but the victim of an overpowering passion which takes complete possession of his vivid imagination, summons up before him dismal pictures more fearful than reality, holds him under a spell from which he seeks to free himself by his deed. And this passion, ambition, springing from the justifiable self-esteem of this heroic nature, yes, this truly royal nature—had Macbeth been born in the purple—fanned by the prophecy of the witches, nourished by the influence of his wife, develops itself to a degree and exhibits itself in a way directly opposed to his heroic nature and destructive of its very essence.

Grand and moving is the simplicity with which Shakespeare has endowed his hero as it manifests itself in the words
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which Macbeth speaks after Banquo's apparition:

"Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th' olden time,
Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal;
Ay, and since too, murders have been perform'd
Too terrible for th' ear: the time has been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools: this is more strange
Than such a murder is."

In "King Lear" Shakespeare presents to us a strange mixture of strength and weakness, of heroism and childlike helplessness, of manly passion and childish wilfulness, in the figure of that royal old man who, too late, is compelled to go through the hard school of life, too late sees his illusions destroyed by rude reality, and is thus driven into madness. Nothing can be more tragic than the fate of this king, who, so accustomed to unbounded obedience that opposition puts him beside himself, nevertheless renounces
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his power, divides his realm among his children,—and such children!—and thinks, withal, that he can maintain his consequence undiminished to his death; nothing more tragic than this man to whom love is such an infinite necessity and who yet has never known genuine love; who only learns to know it when, enraged by his wounded self-love, he has cast a being indispensable to him, his Cordelia, from him, and experiences in his other children what filial ingratitude, unnatural selfishness, mean; who first begins to recognize the world in its true shape, in all its baseness, at a moment when darkness is beginning to gather over his own spirit. And thus Lear, with whose soul Nature with her varying moods seems in league, wanders forth through the night—a physical, spiritual, moral night, illumined only by fearful lightning flashes—until he finds the light once more in the arms of his Cordelia. But only for a short space does this newly regained happiness endure;
the light is again extinguished, a horrible fatality snatches his daughter from him, and, in the infinite despair of an unavailing grief, Lear himself yields up his breath. And as a parallel to Lear Shakespeare gives us Gloucester, who has sinned in blind passion, and for whom the just gods have created of the fruit of his sin an instrument to scourge him with; who allows himself to be ensnared by the devilish cunning of his bastard son, Edmund, and thrusts his legitimate son, the noble Edgar, from him; who, like Lear, recognizes his injustice only when it is too late; who, in consequence of Edmund’s treachery, is robbed of his sight, and now feels his spirit, too, sinking into darkness, and, despairing of divine justice, wants to put an end to his life, but, under the wise and gentle guidance of his repudiated son, learns the duty of sufferance, of humble submission to a higher power, and regains his faith in the gods and in humanity.