STRATFORD-UPON-AVON STUDIES

20

Shakespearian Tragedy

SHAKESPEARIAN TRAGEDY

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Preface

'THERE IS no such thing as Shakespearian Tragedy,' Kenneth Muir has said, 'there are only Shakespearian tragedies.' Certainly it is difficult to generalize about Shakespeare's tragedies without oversimplification or overstatement. One famous example of an attempt to formulate Shakespeare's conception of tragedy is A.C. Bradley's observation about the tragic heroes:

> In almost all we observe a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction; a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion or habit of mind. This, it would seem, is, for Shakespeare, the fundamental tragic trait.

This is carefully phrased to cover all cases, or 'almost all', but it is consequently highly ambiguous. In the case of *Hamlet*, for instance, we might say that his 'marked one-sidedness' is his melancholy, his 'predisposition' a deadly hatred of Claudius and his 'fatal tendency' precisely his inability 'to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion or habit of mind', but which of these is 'the fundamental tragic trait'? On the other hand, when Bradley admits qualifications to a general rule, the argument wavers nervously: 'And so it is, though not in the same degree, with *Antony and Cleopatra* and even with *Othello*; and, in fact, in a certain measure, it is so with nearly all the tragedies.' The endeavour to define the common properties of Shakespeare's tragedies has continued since Bradley, often in reductive and schematic approaches to the plays, distorting their individual qualities for the sake of uniformity.

Despite its title, therefore, this volume does not presuppose that the plays share the same tragic vision or that they conform to one mode that is uniquely Shakespearian. Indeed the main interpretative emphasis of this collection of essays is upon the variety of modes through which the tragedies communicate their meanings, the formal conventions and structural devices which were part of the stock-in-trade of the Elizabethan dramatist. The essays explore the versatility and inventiveness with which Shakespeare used these expressive resources in different plays, showing that

such an interest in the art of the playwright is not merely technical but directly related to a critical understanding of the plays. Michael Allen's essay stands first, since his subject is the function and effect of the opening scenes and the numerous ways in which Shakespeare chooses to begin. W.T. Jewkes focuses on the significance of narrative and dramatic analogues in *Hamlet*, while Ann Thompson treats another form of parallelism in the working of the double-plot, with particular reference to *King Lear*. Emblematic and iconographical imagery in spectacle and speech is discussed by Rosalind King, with examples from *Timon of Athens, Hamlet* and *Othello*. A.R. Braunmuller and D.J. Palmer are both concerned with aspects of characterization, Braunmuller investigating methods of motivation and the expression of emotion in the early tragedies in relation to the work of Shakespeare's predecessors and contemporaries, and Palmer examining the development of modes of self-awareness in the heroes of *Richard III, Julius Caesar, Othello* and *Macbeth*. Finally, Jacqueline Pearson argues for the coherence of the Roman tragedies as a group, including *Titus Andronicus*, from the point of view of their structural similarities. The volume as a whole offers some fresh perspectives on the tragedies and on their interrelatedness.

DAVID PALMER
MALCOLM BRADBURY

I

Toys, Prologues and the Great Amiss: Shakespeare's Tragic Openings

M.J.B. ALLEN

THE GREEK cosmologists first brought the experience of human beginnings, centred as they must necessarily be around the experience of birth, to bear on the metaphysics of time and existence: When did the world begin? When did time begin? Did they begin together? What existed before them? How can there be a before before time itself? These and other cognate questions were keyed in turn to the notion of a 'cause'. Indeed the Greek word *archē* means 'beginning' but also 'cause' and 'principle'. Inevitably the Greeks were led to the notion of the very first or prime cause as the only possible explanation for the ultimate beginning, though some were attracted to the vision of a great prime nothingness, the void or 'Night' of the Orphics.

Aristotle, however, was the first systematic theoretician of causes, and his most distinguished, though controversial, contribution was the notion of an end cause, the object and goal towards which each thing would tend as its perfection, its perfecting or final cause. This notion is inappropriate to many analytical situations, but it is still integral to our conceptions of biological growth and adaptation, to our theories of maturation and even internal intellectual development, and therefore to the many phenomena to which the notion can be figuratively applied, as to the growth of human societies, of art forms, of a scientific theory, and so forth. Medieval scholastics were fond of arguing from what they considered to be the undeniable evidence of the end cause operating in our quotidian experience of ourselves and the world to the existence of the ultimate end cause, the goal of universal desire and action, animate and inanimate alike, namely God. In other words the existence of an end that is also a cause, an *archē*, a beginning, constituted one of the best arguments, the teleological argument, for God's existence. For Aristotle's end cause remains a paradox: it is the end which is there from the beginning; it is the cause of the beginning, is the ultimate, the prime beginning; and yet it remains the cause of all that

follows from and on the beginning and eventually of the end itself. God as the end cause of all things is necessarily the beginning of all things and thus the universal cause, the beginning of beginnings, the end of ends, the end of all beginnings.

All this seems straightforward enough in the abstract. But what happens when we apply it to actual human affairs and to their beginnings? Ethicians have tended to assume that man is consciously goal directed, that his day-to-day choices, particularly in matters involving duty, right and wrong, responsibility and sensitivity to others, always have ends in view. Dramatists and novelists know otherwise; for they are attuned to the instability, if not the absolute undeterminability, of man's understanding of his own ends and particularly when caught up in a sequence of precipitous actions. A gulf exists between what is immediately understood and what is ultimately understood; between the beginning that is experienced as the beginning and the beginning that is understood in light of the end. But in certain imaginative contexts, and most notably in tragic drama, we are privileged as spectators to understand something of the end at the very beginning, even if it remains at the rudimentary level of knowing what happens. And there are certain tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex* whose beginnings are so encoded that we can return from repeated experiences of their ends—and not just of their plot dénouements, but of the words, images, sounds, and juxtapositions, of the extra-narrative events accompanying them—and read off adumbrations, premonitions, fore-echoings of these ends in the beginnings. We can even at times share in the Leibnizian fantasy of seeing the whole of the end monadically contained in the beginning. In such cases we are accorded a godlike vision and the dominant effects are achieved through dramatic ironies: we watch a protagonist with no knowledge of his end, or even more tantalizingly with a partial premonitory knowledge of his end, anticipating the future unconsciously or subconsciously by way of a chance word, or metaphor or symbolic action. Sometimes we admire the acuity of his near-misses in future perception, of his half-knowledge; more often we pity his failure of awareness, his imperceptivity to warnings and signs, his self-inflicted inner blindness. Such plays are at one end of the tragic spectrum; we might refer to them as plays whose ends are fully anticipated in their beginnings. Of such a kind, arguably the masterpiece of the kind, is *Macbeth*, where Shakespeare attains an extraordinary intensity and complexity almost from the first word, the kind of intensity and complexity we associate with symbolist poetry and which seems to demand the same kind of critical explication as such poetry.

To the accompaniment of thunder and lightning, the three witches materialize to pose their first question:

First Witch: When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
Second Witch: When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.
Third Witch: That will be ere the set of sun.

(I.i.1–5)[1]

The reiterated *when* inaugurates a play dominated by a concern with the circumscription of future time, with 'mortal's chiefest enemy', Hecate's 'security', and with the riddles that deny such security. Macbeth's fixation on the future manifests itself not only in his compulsive piling of deed upon deed in an attempt to secure the throne by desperate prevention, but in his obsession with the grammar of riddles, with the conditionals, concessives, and future subjunctives that explore his fears, hopes, projections, volitions, speculations and choices; with such complex modes as the Second Witch's 'When the hurly-burly's done,/When the battle's lost and won.'[2] Since time is the universal solvent for Macbeth, he too will want to know *when*, not merely as a temporal event but as a necessary condition. Significantly, it is only after the *whens* of their entrance that the witches can pose their next question:

First Witch: Where the place?
Second Witch: Upon the heath.
Third Witch: There to meet with Macbeth. (I.i.6–8)

The question meets in fact with a profoundly ambiguous answer, since the heath is not a real 'place'—particularly if we have Rannoch Moor in mind with its ill-defined desolation, its awesome imprecision—and the question of place is clearly subordinate to the witches' need to determine the exact moment of the next meeting in time.

Just as the Second Witch's 'When the battle's lost and won'—lost by Cawdor and won by Macbeth, lost by Cawdor and won by Macduff—has firmly implanted the *when* pattern in our minds, so the witches' final lines, 'Fair is foul and foul is fair,/Hover through the fog and filthy air', regenerate the question of *when* in terms of metaphysical values. We are compelled to ask *when* is fair foul and foul fair; when are they so equated. Ironically, of course, they will already be equated: when Macbeth crosses the heath on his

[1] All references in this essay will be to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1974), textual ed. G. Blakemore Evans.

[2] 'Done' is one of those, often quite simple, words which quickly become resonant in the play and soon possess a symbolic life of their own. 'Done', 'undone', 'Duncan', and 'Dunsinane' are all part of Macbeth's 'doing' and 'undoing'.

way to Forres and observes, 'So foul and a fair a day I have not seen'; when Banquo comments on Macbeth's 'rapture' at the witches' triple apostrophe, 'Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear/Things that do sound so fair?'; and when we eventually see Lady Macbeth as the living embodiment of foulness in the fair, of the murderess in the hostess. In thus alerting us to the equivocal relationship of fairness and foulness and to the fact that each has become the other, the witches alert us from the beginning to the world of antinomian paradoxes and oxymora, a world created by an obsession with *when* as if it were independent of all other questions and presupposes what we might call a palimpsestical time that preserves the past even as it adumbrates the future, is linear and cyclical, circumscribed and free, that can be lost and won in an instant by the same bloody man.

As Macbeth rides towards the witches, the Sergeant describes the battle day at Fife to the court party. A strange figure, he is considerably more complex than his predecessors in Aeschylean and Sophoclean tragedy, the anonymous messengers. Malcolm introduces him as a warrior who had personally defended him; in this respect he prefigures other Scots captains who will flee to England to enlist in Malcolm's cause. When he arrives he is bleeding profusely. As such he is the first bloody man in a play dominated by bloody men: the regicide, his victim, Banquo, the murderers, Macduff. As a man whose blood has been fairly spilt, whose blood is fair, he recounts the deeds of another putatively fair man of blood against men of foul blood. The prefatory epic simile of the 'two spent swimmers that do cling together/And choke their art' anticipates the self-destruction the Macbeths will call down upon each other, choking themselves to moral death in their attempt to become one in deed; and it also anticipates of course the image of the sanguine ocean that is central to the later stages of the play.

The Sergeant isolates two combats: the one with Macdonwald, the other with Sweno. First he narrates the hand-to-hand encounter between the merciless highlander and brave Macbeth: the one 'Worthy to be a rebel, for to that/The multiplying villainies of nature/Do swarm upon him,' a man upon whom Fortune like a whore had smiled; the other deserving his noble epithet of 'brave' and utterly disdainful of Fortune. In the event Macbeth becomes the more merciless, and the initial contrast between 'merciless' and 'brave' becomes no more valid than the superficial contrasts between 'lost' and 'won' and 'fair' and 'foul'. Fortune may smile on Macdonwald's damned quarrel but the battlefield is her brothel: he ends the day unseam'd from the nave to th' chops, his head stuck upon the battlements. In its entirety the account anticipates Macbeth's transformation from 'a valiant

cousin' into 'a gentleman' who had betrayed the absolute trust of the king and is worthy now only to be a decapitated rebel.[3]

After the rout of the kerns and gallowglasses, Macbeth and Banquo both engage Sweno, the Norweyan lord. The Sergeant's description becomes more passionately complex as it draws our attention to the 'doubling' and 'redoubling' which trammels Macbeth:

> As cannons overcharg'd with double cracks, so they
> Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.
> Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
> Or memorize another Golgotha,
> I cannot tell—
> But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.
>
> (I.ii.37–42)

The disturbingly ambivalent reference to the Crucifixion aligns Macbeth, though still in his prelapsarian bravery, with Christ's persecutors. The bleeding Sergeant becomes by association Golgotha's victim, whose gashes cry for help as the gashes of the saintly King of the Scots and of his grooms are to cry out that very night. The situation is given a further twist by Banquo's role. As another eagle after the sparrows, another lion after the hares—and the disproportions are significant given the ultimate triumph of naked babes and unarmed innocence—he is paired with Macbeth. The future alone will enable us to distinguish the true eagle from the kite, the lion from the jackal. The Sergeant's image cluster seems to associate Banquo with the Roman soldiers at Calvary, but ultimately we must associate him with their victim-victor, the 'warrior' of *The Dream of the Rood* who ascended the Cross; for Banquo's 20 trenched gashes will bleed far more hauntingly than the Sergeant's bandageable wounds and his sacrifice be much closer in spirit to Golgotha's. Throughout this description we are made aware of the role played by the sacrificial victim in a scene ostensibly committed to honouring the sacrificer and of the Sergeant's gift of blood as the first witness to Macbeth's success at Fife. But the Sergeant survives and his role will be assumed and then transmogrified by Macduff, who will end the play by recounting another battle deed and need no surgeon afterwards.

[3] Just as Macbeth eventually becomes Macdonwald, so Macduff eventually becomes the pristine Macbeth. As the armed head of the first apparition, he escapes from the second great slaughter at Fife where he loses the body of his family in order to become Valour's second minion and the conqueror of her first minion. On one side is the helmeted head of the King's champion, on the other the severed head of the traitor. Resolution comes, that is, when the proper head has been joined to the armed body, when the deceptively similar pieces in the bloody jigsaw have been distinguished and assigned correctly.

The Sergeant exits forever and the Thane of Rosse enters to complete the triptych. Macbeth is now Bellona's bridegroom, the husband-to-be of the savage war goddess, the Lady Macbeth of Scene V. His opponent is either Sweno, or more ironically and plausibly since Rosse refers specifically to a 'rebellious' arm, the rebel Thane of Cawdor whose very name onomatopoeically suggests the raven croaking the fatal entrance of Duncan under Macbeth's portals. The two combatants confront each other with 'self-comparisons', aping their mutual moves like reflections, 'Point against point, rebellious arm 'gainst arm.' 'Rebellious' here does double duty, since it is no longer clear which arm is loyal and which traitorous. Each warrior is not fighting another so much as an extension of himself; each circles his own doppelganger, lunging and parrying with one and the same sword. Cawdor and Macbeth are for the moment matched so exactly that Macbeth emerges as the victor from a bout of murderous shadow boxing. This suggestion is given immediate point by the transference of title, the new and old Cawdors uniting in both victory and defeat:

Duncan: No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive
Our bosom interest. Go, pronounce his present death,
And with his former title greet Macbeth.
Rosse: I'll see it done.
Duncan: What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.
(I.ii.63–67)

Of this triptych of descriptions at the beginning,[1] two by the Sergeant and one by Rosse, Rosse's is the most obviously ironic, since the language itself of self-comparisons invites instant circumspection and analysis, but the Sergeant's are the more remarkable in that they proceed from the lips of a wounded man who is a victim on the winning side. They chart the three stages of Macbeth's future career where combat with a manifest enemy is succeeded by the mêlée and carnage of the fight with the Norwegians, which is in turn succeeded by the hand-to-hand encounter with a warrior who is a psychological self-projection. Thus the battle's progress prefigures Macbeth's defection from legitimate war against the king's foes to the wanton slaughter of Scotland's sparrows and hares to the self-slaughter on the high hill of Dunsinane. In narrating the events of one day of battle it also adumbrates the history of an individual after that battle. The modalities were after all established by the witches from the onset:

[1] It is interesting that the finale also constitutes a triptych of battle episodes: the fight with young Siward, the fight with Macduff before he reveals the nature of his birth, and the fight to the death.

When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

There were always to be two battles and no true victory until the second. In hindsight the first battle was far from noble, since, though the king's foreign enemies were crushed, his greatest enemy was victorious. After the seemingly heroic sketches of Scene II, the first words of Scene III tell us what really happened:

First Witch: Where hast thou been, sister?
Second Witch: Killing swine.

We have been listening to the deeds not of Hector but of Ajax.

In many ways *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's cosmogony, for he is concerned there with the birth of that most intricate and unfathomable of all worlds, the world of human decision. No other play he wrote is so obsessed with the how and the why a course of action begins. Hence the continuing fascination of the theatre-goer with the relative values we should assign to the motivatory force of the witches, of Lady Macbeth, of a long premeditated ambition in Macbeth, of a sudden craze for power that comes upon him when time and place convene, of the impact of Malcolm's investiture with the princedom of Cumberland. Ultimately, however, these are tangential issues; for what is really at issue is the mystery of the birth of criminality itself. Macbeth is transformed before our eyes from a noble thane into a butcher with a fiend-like queen. We watch the process with a special fascination since Shakespeare has managed to present us with the illusion of truly organic change, of inward psychological degeneration, of a continuous life-like process that moves before our eyes and is never perceived as a series of stills. We seem to be witnessing the beginning in the beginning instead of having to uncover vital clues from the past, as is the case with *Hamlet* and with *Oedipus*. The play begins when Macbeth's choices begin; and it is surely the dramatist's triumph that he can focus our attention so sharply on Macbeth's freedom, on his deliberation and choices, even as he endows each scene with formidable ironies generated by our knowledge of what will eventually happen and how. With *Oedipus* a similar network of ironies had pointed to a sense of inexorable fate, of man's predestined helplessness to alter the unfathomable decrees of the gods. That we do not have this sense of predetermination and yet perceive the ubiquitous ironies is *Macbeth*'s special achievement. For no other Shakespearian play contains so much of its end in its beginning, is so circular and self-contained, and yet affirms so eloquently the validity of human reason and the freedom of the will. No other play as a result is quite so fiercely

moralistic, so magisterial, about the human condition: even as we know what will happen, we vehemently believe in Macbeth's power to reshape his future course and to reject his destiny as a regicide.[5]

Conceivably we might argue that the beginning of *Macbeth* is so dense, so fraught with fore-echoes and premonitions, so chock-full of ironies and palterings, that it constitutes a premature climax. After repeated experiences of the play, we bring too much to bear perhaps on the beginning; reading each line, each word, each sound too scrupulously, too curiously. In doing so we create something that is so intense, self-contained and symbolically complete that it becomes a dramatic poem in its own right. The ironies become so immediately prepotent that the experience of the beginning is effectively end-stopped. Knowing what we do from past readings of the play, we are dazzled to the point of blindness by the beginning's anticipations; we no longer see it just as a beginning but as a beginning dominated by its end, as simultaneously a beginning and an end. It becomes impossible to return to the pristine experience of accompanying Macbeth in not seeing the ironies, or at least most of them, until it is too late. And certainly it is true, as the sequence of actions and events later unfolds and the various premonitions of the beginning are validated, that the verbal texture becomes less concentrated, less connotative, less hallucinatory: what was infolded becomes unfolded, what was a knot becomes the long unwinding thread of destiny, what was a mysterious and awesome cipher becomes gradually interpreted and loses much of its primitive power, the power we always associate with the idea of the most contained in the least, of the tree in the seed, of the explosion in the gunpowder grain. But to be overwhelmed by the anticipatory force of the beginning is only a momentary, or at least a passing experience, the result sometimes of too much critical activity, too much precision in our mental footnoting, too nephritic a sensitivity to transient images that are intended to haunt us only much later. For no one perceives the beginning as imploding, as collapsing under its own too great a weight. The impact rather is explosive: we are hurtled forwards by the play's concern with future time and future choice, with what will be done and might be done; we are not permitted the time to consider too precisely, to hallucinate too freely, to hear too many echoes. Even so Shakespeare achieved a delicate balance. Of all his beginnings it is I believe the most profound, the most metaphysically exploratory, symbolically the richest precisely because it comes so close to being a climax, to fully articulating its end. And it is not surprising that the weight of the play which it begins is shifted so much further forwards than is the case with any of the other tragedies.

[5] The play raises many of the same issues in this respect as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.

Shakespeare's other tragic openings, though to a lesser extent, are still encoded. However, our sense of his conscious exercise of control, his imaginative deliberation, not only over the narrative but over the metaphysical elements varies considerably.[6] Sometimes we detect or at least suspect a failure on his part to conceive of his opening material in any particularly interesting or dramatically effective way; sometimes we see him concentrating on rhetorical and modal concerns rather than psychological or metaphysical ones; sometimes we are well aware that he is manipulating our reactions by withholding important information from us; and sometimes he seems to be entering upon the beginning with us, setting forth into a shadowy world where little is understood and where the basic determinations of genre and underlying structure have yet to be made by the material itself working in its own way and in its own time. In most of the beginnings, nevertheless, we are tantalized, though to varying degrees, by certain premonitory effects, by the felt presence of the end.

This is, unfortunately, not the case with *Titus Andronicus*. The tribunes and senators enter aloft and the contending brothers, Saturninus and Bassianus, enter from opposite sides below; Marcus Andronicus holds up a crown as the brothers press their irreconcilable claims. The effects are simple and predominantly visual. We are expending time in vain if we search for nuances, subtleties, ironies, for any kind of subtext. Straightforwardly the beginning tells us what we need to know, and we are engaged at the simplest rhetorical and narrative levels; it is workmanlike, but unremarkable; it serves adequately as a point of entrance into the play but no more.

If this can be ascribed to Shakespeare's immaturity as a tragedian, immaturity cannot account for the unravelling beginning of *Timon of Athens*, a play written, it is almost universally agreed, at the very height of his powers. The initial impression of *Timon*'s opening is its controlled artificiality. The hyperboles, the ornate literary conceits, the posturing and affected business, all these perfectly reflect the atmosphere of flattery and fulsomeness that surrounds 'A most incomparable man, breath'd, as it were,/To an untirable and continuate goodness' and possessed of the greatest magic of all, the magic of 'bounty'. The Poet's eulogistic description of the Painter's sketch of Timon as one that 'tutors nature' obviously points to the yawning disparity between such a painted man and the real man, between that which sets out to be livelier than life and life itself. His words are proleptic; for not only the true but the false too will be seen to have tended upon Timon's 'good and gracious

[6] Robert F. Willson, Jr, in his *Shakespeare's Opening Scenes* (Salzburg, 1977), p. 5, argues, to the contrary, that 'Shakespeare seldom omits something from the opening scenes simply to surprise or outwit his audience. We are consistently kept fully informed about necessary details, generally because Shakespeare strives for maximum ironic effect.'

nature'. Some betrayal is at hand, some turn of fortune's felloe, some precipitate reversal that will set 'the foot above the head'. But the Poet's and the Painter's immediate invocation of the figure of Fortune is so literal, so extended and so explicit that the opening mystery is effectively dispelled. As they rapidly construct the play's allegorical framework, the initial atmosphere of spidery sycophancy and deceit, of fogging hyperboles and busy attendance is blown away to reveal a simple abstract conflict between Bounty and the turn of Fortune's wheel, an abstract conflict from which the play will never really manage to free itself.

Hindsight is easy of course and it is otiose perhaps to maintain that the failure of *Timon* as a play was predictable from the failure of its beginning to develop on its own terms. It is not a question certainly of being given too much of the story at the beginning, but rather of the failure subsequently of other metaphors, other ideas, other strategies to loosen the stranglehold exercised by the image of Fortune. It seems that Shakespeare was defeated in a way by the magnitude and intractability of one idea; and the complexity of the opening's verbal surface manages to resist the onset of this idea for only a brief while. The end in this instance ruined the beginning in the beginning.

Another potentially ruinous abstraction, the idea of Fate conceived of in the most rigid Hardeian terms, was in the forefront of his mind when he set about the composition of *Romeo and Juliet*. But he hit upon the strategy of the 'double' beginning that not only fully subjugated the abstraction to his dramatic ends but enabled him to explore a dialectical vision not so much of tragedy itself as of the relationship between comedy and tragedy. *Romeo and Juliet* thus became his first unqualified success as a tragedy and its beginning prophetic of the infinitely more complex double beginnings of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

The idea of Fate dominates the prologue but Shakespeare has subjected it to the special rigours and dynamics of the sonnet form. Evocative superficially of love, of Italy, of the *dolce amarezza* of Petrarch—and the differences between the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean rhyme schemes and the structure they subtend is immaterial at this point—the form is ultimately concerned with the whole notion of a *volta*, of the turn that antithetically folds two ideas the one upon the other, of the wit that must serve unhappy passion, idealized and crossed. The doom-laden story he carved out from the quarries of Bandello's story and Brooke's poem, of the fearful passage in fair Verona, of the death-marked passage of adolescent love, of the warring households and their fatal loins, this story star-blasted by its abstraction is subjected not only to the musical formality of the sonnet form, but to its argumentativeness, to its search for the counterturn, to its intrinsic dialecticity, which Shakespeare was to key in this instance to a

dualistic metaphysics. The mention of the two hours' traffic of the stage[7] points forwards to this dualism from the onset, to the hour of joy and the hour of sorrow, of Verona and of all without Verona's walls, of the moonlit orchard and the noon-scorched piazza, of the amorous turn and the duelling counterturn, of Mercutio the poet of Queen Mab and of Mercutio the grave man. Significantly the sonnet that begins the second act lacks most of these dialectical dimensions and seems to be almost wholly unattuned to the dualistic vision they subserve.

From the sonnet prologue we immediately pass to Sampson and Gregory with their swords and bucklers and their loud-mouthed, circumspect cowardice and their strings of quarrelsome puns:

Samp.: Gregory, on my word, we'll not carry coals.
Greg.: No, for then we should be colliers.
Samp.: I mean, and we be in choler, we'll draw.
Greg.: Ay, while you live, draw your neck out of collar.

It is significant that the scene begins with such puns, for lying at the heart of the love story is something closer to paronomasia than to some great cosmic paradox. For all its serious possibilities and its later transformation into the *Liebestod*, the Elizabethan pun on 'dying'—Cleopatra with her celerity in dying—remains the source essentially of comic delight, of play, of the courting wit. It is significant too that the play's concern with violence—the violence of love and the violence of hate—begins in a comic key, with the biting of thumbs and the fingered fig; for the play will only modulate away from that key gradually and it seems to me reluctantly. The deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt are as witty as they are tragic. At least they begin in the Nurse's world, in her bawdiness and innuendoes, in her gossipy energy, in her vulgarity and street-bred shamelessness; only falteringly do they pass over into the sonnet world of Romeo and of Juliet with its passionate fateful music and its aristocratic closure.

Clearly the two openings depend and comment upon each other: the two households both alike in dignity are served by men that will not carry coals. But the openings' dependence is hardly organic: they establish a formal pattern of bold contrasts where we are struck by the chiaroscuro rather than by the subtlety of the design. Even so, it was a memorable achievement, for not only was it theatrically effective, it enabled Shakespeare to retain something of his comic vision in the very process of perfecting a tragedy. When we juxtapose the sonnet's lyricism, formal harmonies, midnight tonalities and intrinsic wittiness with the fortuitous logical-illogical punning and the

[7] In *The Tempest*, of course, the traffic is said to last four hours, the time twixt two glasses past the mid season and six (I.ii.239–240).