

HOW CATHOLIC WAS SHAKESPEARE?

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THE POSSIBILITY that Shakespeare was a Catholic is an intriguing ideal.¹ After all, his plays are filled with Catholic allusions. Take for example the reverent manner in which both Romeo and Juliet speak to Friar Lawrence, their confessor and "ghostly father,"² the importance of the sacrament of penance in the play, the respectful way in which it is treated by Shakespeare. "Riddling confession finds but riddling shrift,"³ says Friar Lawrence to Romeo. And Juliet tells her nurse that she is going to "Lawrence cell, to make confession and to be absolved."⁴ Faith in the power of the priest to forgive sins appears in these and many other lines of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Furthermore, the ghost of Hamlet's father seems to be a Catholic ghost. It tells Hamlet:

I am thy father's spirit
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.⁵

This is a clear reference to purgatory. Many other similar, more or less Catholic references could be cited from Shakespeare's works.

But conclusive proof of Shakespeare's Catholicity from such internal evidence is impossible. In the first place, many Catholic customs, expressions, and beliefs were retained in the Elizabethan Church of England. In the second place, Shakespeare's wide-ranging imagination found poetic and dramatic material where it could—in folk lore, in Christian faith and practice, in classical mythology, in whatever was familiar to his audience. One can say with certitude

¹ The argument in favor of the possibility has been plausibly presented in *Shakespeare and Catholicism* by H. Mutschmann and K. Wintersdorf, New York, Sheed and Ward, 1952. cf. a review of this book in *Dominicana*, December, 1953, p. 347.

² *Romeo and Juliet*, II,iii,45.

³ *Ibid.*, 1. 56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III,v,232.

⁵ *Hamlet*, I,v, 9-13.

that Shakespeare was familiar with the Catholic faith and not unsympathetic to it, but not that he was a Catholic.

Whence, then, came this familiarity? Probably from his family and from his school days in Stratsford. Documentary evidence exists to show that Shakespeare's father was probably a Catholic recusant and that Shakespeare's principal school teacher in Stratford later became a Jesuit. It is a fact that Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, came from a staunch Catholic family. Some of her cousins suffered death for the faith in 1583.⁶

But even such historical evidence does not prove the fact that Shakespeare, himself, was a Catholic. It shows only some probability. It accounts for the many Catholic allusions in his plays.

Nothing, therefore, can be concluded with certainty as to the fact of Shakespeare's Catholicity. Such a conclusion must await the discovery of documentary evidence. It is a purely historical question, which is not our concern here. What is our concern and what is far more important anyway is HOW CATHOLIC ARE SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS? Do they present a Catholic view of life? The question would still have to be asked and would still have to be answered in the same way, even if irrefutable documentary proof were discovered that Shakespeare was a Catholic. Furthermore, the question can be answered with certitude. There need be no doubt about it. A close inspection of Shakespeare's major tragedies reveals that these plays are more pagan than Catholic. They are typical of their age, the Renaissance, when the great modern blasphemy—the substitution of man for God—had its beginning, when man sought to exalt himself but ended by plunging himself into despair.

THE CATHOLIC VIEW OF LIFE

The Catholic view of life is simple. It is that we are wayfarers on a journey to our home in eternity. The trials and labors of this life are merely steps to our goal, means to our end of happiness in God. And the goal—our possession of God—is worth all the striving, for we are the sons of God.

And if sons, heirs also; heirs indeed of God, and joint heirs with Christ: yet so, if we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him. For I reckon that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come, that shall be revealed in us.⁷

Furthermore, our afflictions are the just punishment for our sins; the Church recognizes this fact in her prayers:

⁶ Mutschmann and Wentersdorf, *op.cit.*, Chapters 7-11.

⁷ *Romans* 8:17-18.

Graciously hear, we beseech thee, O Lord, the prayers of thy people: *that we, who are justly afflicted for our sins,* may be freed by thy mercy for the glory of thy name.⁸

The recognition that our ultimate happiness is supernatural and that our sufferings, united with Christ's, are means of attaining it epitomizes the Catholic view of life.

This view of life is to be found in all truly Catholic literature. It is evident in the medieval classics of English literature, written in a time when England was permeated by the Catholic faith. For example, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c.1370) the hero is a man of faith and hope who knows his ultimate end and uses the means of attaining it. Prayer, Mass, and the Sacraments are an important part of his life. The day before his perilous meeting with the green knight, he goes to confession:

Then he took his way to the chapel, and sought out a priest privily and prayed him to teach him better how his soul might be saved when he should go hence; and there he shrived him, and showed his misdeeds, both great and small, and besought mercy and craved absolution; and the priest assailed him, and set him as clean as if doomsday had been on the morrow. And afterwards Sir Gawain made him merry with the ladies, with carols, and all kinds of joy, as never he did but that one day, even to nightfall; and all men marveled at him, and said that never since he came thither had he been so merry.⁹

This is the merriment of a man who places his final happiness not in this life but in eternity, and who therefore has hope and joy even though he is probably going to suffer death the next day.

Moved by hope, the sinful Queen Guinevere in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (before 1470) ends her days in a convent doing penance for her sins. When Launcelot, her former lover, appears there, she expresses her hope in eternal life to him:

Therefore, Sir Launcelot, wit thou well I am set in such a plight to get my soul-heal; and yet I trust through God's grace that after my death to have sight of the blessed face of Christ, and at doomsday to sit on his right side, for as sinful as ever I was are saints in heaven.¹⁰

Hope also characterizes the death of Everyman as he descends into the grave with Good Deeds:

⁸ Collect for Septuagesima Sunday. Italics added.

⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, tr. by Jessie L. Weston.

¹⁰ *Le Morte d'Arthur*, book 31, chapter 9.

Into Thy hands, Lord, my soul I commend;
 Receive it, Lord, that it be not lost;
 As Thou me boughtest, so me defend,
 And save me from the fiends boast,
 That I may appear with that blessed host
 That shall be saved at the day of doom:
In manus tuas, of might most,
 For ever, *commendo spiritum meum.*¹¹

The characters in truly Catholic literature know the purpose of life and the connection of all that happens in life with that purpose. They see God's loving providence in all things, in every event. They look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. In the face of suffering and death, their ruling virtue is HOPE.

THE PAGAN VIEW OF LIFE

The pagan view of life, on the other hand, is the opposite of the hopeful Christian view. It is a view darkened by ignorance. The pagan, unlike the Christian, does not know the purpose of life or the reason for suffering. He does not see that suffering is a means to the end of our ultimate happiness. To him there is no loving providence of a merciful God guiding us to an eternal reward. Rather, life is governed by grim fate, and the curse of the gods falls on some men. In the face of suffering and tragic failure, the pagan must either stoically endure or despair.

A Greek play of the fifth century B.C.—the *Oedipus Tyrannus* of Sophocles—is a good illustration of the pagan view of life. It is the story of a man “born destined to misery,”¹² “to the Gods, above all men . . . a mark for hate.”¹³

Oedipus was the son of Laius and Jocasta, king and queen of Thebes. As a child he had been exposed to die because of a prophecy from Appollo that he would murder his father and marry his mother. However, the destiny decreed by the god for him was not to be thwarted, for the child was discovered by a shepherd and taken to Corinth, where he was adopted by the childless king and

¹¹ *Everyman* (translated from the Dutch after 1450) in *Representative Medieval and Tudor Plays translated and modernized, with an introduction*, by R. S. Loomis and H. W. Wells, N.Y., Sheed and Ward, 1942, p. 242.

¹² *The Dramas of Sophocles* rendered in English verse, dramatic and lyric, by Sir George Young, London, (Everyman ed.), 1906, p. 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

queen. Here he grew to manhood. Learning of his evil destiny through another oracle of Apollo, Oedipus sought to avoid it by fleeing from Corinth and his supposed father and mother. But this very action had been destined also, and by it he began to fulfill the divine prediction. For at a crossroads he met Laius, his father, who was on a journey. They quarrelled, and he killed Laius and all but one of his servants, who escaped and returned to Thebes. Oedipus eventually went on to Thebes himself to carry out the rest of his unhappy destiny. He delivered the inhabitants from the attacks of a sphinx by solving a riddle proposed by the animal, was proclaimed king, and married the widowed queen, Jocasta, his own mother. Jocasta bore him several children.

The action of the play opens some time later, when Thebes is being ravaged by a plague. Oedipus has sought the reason for this plague from the oracle of Appollo. The answer is brought back: revenge the murder of Laius, the former king, discover and expel his murderer from the city. Then there will be relief. The play is a masterpiece of irony. Its action consists in Oedipus' gradual discovery that he, himself, is the murderer, that Laius and Jocasta were his parents, that he is therefore guilty of patricide and incest. All his threats against the murderer, all the curses of the gods he invokes against him return upon himself. His rash insistence on unravelling the whole mystery despite repeated warnings is punished a hundred fold. His arrogance and angry threats against those who know the secret of his identity and try to shield him is avenged by the very telling of the facts which he demands to know about the circumstances of the murder and his own identity. When the horrible truth is finally revealed, Jocasta rushes from the stage and hangs herself. Oedipus, realizing that he was "born destined to misery,"¹⁴ that he has been "unwittingly guilty"¹⁵ of unspeakable sins, follows her and dashes out his eyes in despair. The description of the tragic end of Oedipus and Jocasta illustrates the hopelessness of pagan religion:

When she passed
So frantically inside the vestibule,
She went straight onward to the bed-chamber,
With both her hands tearing her hair; the doors
She dashed to as she entered, crying out
On Laius, long since dead, calling to mind
His fore-begotten offspring, by whose hands

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

He, she said, died, and left to his own seed
 Its mother's most unnatural bearing-bed. . . .
 And then . . . Oedipus brake in, crying aloud. . . .
 And as he raved thus, some Power shews him. . . .
 Then, shouting loud, he sprang upon the doors
 As following some guide, and burst the bars
 Out of their sockets, and alights within.
 There we beheld his wife hanging, entwined
 In a twined noose. He seeing her, with a groan
 Looses the halter; then, when on the ground
 Lay the poor wretch, dreadful it was to see
 What followed; snatching from her dress gold pins
 Wherewith she was adorned, he lifted them,
 And smote the nerves of his eyeballs, saying
 Something like this—that they should see no more
 Evils like those he had endured or wrought;
 Darkling, thereafter, let them gaze on forms
 He might not see, and fail to recognize
 The faces he desired! Chanting this burden,
 Not once, but many times, he raised his hand
 And stabbed his eyes; so that from both of them
 The blood ran down his face, not drop by drop,
 But all at once, in a dark shower of gore.¹⁶

Much can be concluded about the pagan view of life from the tragic story of Oedipus. The fundamental characteristic of it is that the end of man is natural, not supernatural. Man suffers but without purpose. If man achieves any happiness, it is a purely natural one in this life. If he loses this happiness, he loses all. Man is subject to superhuman powers—gods—who govern the universe, but they are more often hostile than benevolent to man. They are cruel, capricious, cold. They destine some men to evil, from which there is no redemption. They are without mercy. The pagan sense of sin represented in *Oedipus* is strange to the Christian mind. Oedipus is "unwittingly guilty"; he did not freely and formally commit patricide and incest, but rather sought to avoid these sins by fleeing from Corinth to Thebes. He is predestined to them by a decree of fate. Yet he feels guilt and the need to atone for his sins. But since there is no redemption or forgiveness in the pagan universe, Oedipus blinds himself in despair and self-hatred.

The play represents man as a plaything in the hands of the gods, as the victim of a malignant fate—a view of life which results in despair, not hope. Suffering is without significance or value. Our afflictions are not the shade of God's hand outstretched lovingly, but the meaningless malice of some cruel god.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-166.

SHAKESPEARE'S VIEW OF LIFE

A comparison of Shakespeare's tragic heroes with Oedipus will reveal an undeniable parallel. The view of life represented in the death scenes of Shakespeare's tragedies is clearly natural and pagan. To support this assertion we need only examine his major tragedies and ask one simple question: are their heroes hopeful men?

We need not examine Shakespeare's Roman plays. They are pagan by reason of plot and characters and consequently express a pagan view of life. We shall examine only *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. In each of these plays the protagonist makes a mistake in choosing the means to happiness, and by this mistake he sets in motion a chain of events that results in disaster for him. Instead of happiness, he finds only misery and death. Throughout this tragic struggle his attitude is not supernatural but natural. He sets himself a created end—a false natural happiness. In failing to achieve it, his reaction is natural—despair. His regret for the sins he has committed in trying to achieve it is also natural, not supernatural. He does not have contrition, but only remorse.

Macbeth

Macbeth, a villain-hero, thinks he will be happy if he is king. Pricked on by "vaulting ambition,"¹⁷ he considers murdering Duncan, the King of Scotland, in order to gain the crown, but hesitates for fear of the consequences not in the next life, but in this life.

. . . that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgement here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips.¹⁸

Macbeth fears natural justice, not divine justice. But encouraged by his wife, he murders Duncan, is crowned king, and in order to safeguard his crown, orders the murder of Banquo and others.

The representation of tragic waste and anguished conscience in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's greatest achievements. Is it not a Catholic treatment of the consequences of sin?

¹⁷ *Macbeth*, I, vii, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11. 4-11.

No, it is not, because the attitude taken towards sin by the principal characters and the author is not supernatural but purely human and natural. Shakespeare's treatment of sin in *Macbeth* is more like that to be found in *Oedipus* than in *Everyman*. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth do not regret their sins because they have offended God. They do not resolve to amend their lives, to give up the crown which they have gained by their sins. Like Oedipus, they regret their sins because of the natural consequences of them, because natural, "even-handed justice" has returned the "poison'd chalice to [their] own lips." Pride still rules them. They have demeaned themselves by their sins. They have lost more natural good than they have gained: peace of mind, the love and respect of their subjects. The remorseful and uncontrite heart of Macbeth is evident in the famous lines:

my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.¹⁹

When he hears of the death of Lady Macbeth before going out to fight his last battle, Macbeth's only sentiments are regret and despair. He has no hope because he has no belief, because he has chosen to "jump the life to come."

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.²⁰

Pride, remorse, and despair go together, as do humility, contrition, and hope. Judas in his despair is perfectly consistent. So is Peter in his hope.

Macbeth lacks contrition to the end. With never a regret for his sins of superstition in consulting the witches, of envy, of murder, he dies fighting defiantly rather than humble himself in surrender

To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.²¹

It is conceivable that a Catholic play deal with a bloody villain who dies in despair and defiance. But it is not conceivable that a

¹⁹ V, iii, 22-27.

²⁰ V, v, 24-28.

²¹ V, viii, 28-29.

Catholic play should ignore grace and repentance as does *Macbeth*. For in the resolution of the plot, no character makes a Christian comment on the tragic downfall of Macbeth. No one gives an interpretation in terms of sin, grace, redemption, judgment, heaven or hell.

Hamlet

Hamlet is equally natural in outlook. And it is more pagan in its story than *Macbeth*. The motivating force in the plot is Hamlet's obligation to revenge the murder of his father. Once he has done this by killing his usurping uncle, Claudius, he will enjoy rest and happiness, will occupy the throne himself. Throughout this pagan undertaking the hero is favorably presented, and the audience is made to sympathize with him. So from the outset, by its very plot, *Hamlet* is a pagan, unCatholic play. Certainly revenge could be a fit subject for a Catholic play, but it could not be presented as an act of virtue. It would have to be presented as an act of vice, as a flagrant sin against charity. At best Shakespeare's treatment of Hamlet's revenge is morally indifferent. He is not concerned with Hamlet's sin of hatred but with using his sufferings and death as a means of evoking pity and fear in the audience.

This same moral indifference has also characterised most of the criticism of *Hamlet*. Hamlet has been considered a noble, admirable character. Actually he is a vicious, sinful character. His capital sin is of course pride. His desire for revenge against the murderer of his father and seducer of his mother is just one facet of his self-love. Revenge will clear his family honor and therefore his own. He hates his enemy, the king, so intensely that he wishes him to lose his soul. Hamlet does not kill him while he is at prayer lest he go to heaven, but delays vengeance to a time

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed;
At gaming, swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in't;
Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
As hell, whereto it goes.²²

Hamlet murders Polonius in a fit of rage, thinking he is the king, and he is without regret upon discovering whom he has killed:

Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!
I took thee for thy better: take thy fortune.²³

²² *Hamlet*, III, iii, 89-95.

²³ III, iv, 32-33.

He achieves a terrible revenge on Rosencranz and Guildenstern by sending them to their death in England. He expresses skepticism in the famous suicide soliloquy. He is insulting to Ophelia, using lewd *double entendre* and gutter language to mock her.

Despite all these sins, Hamlet expresses no word of contrition in death. He is apparently unconcerned about the next world. His last words are not prayers but are directed to Horatio and are concerned with his family honor and his own reputation. In restraining Horatio from suicide he does not plead its sinfulness but his own need of a spokesman:

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,
To tell my story.²⁴

This is consistent with Hamlet's concern for honor above all:

Rightly to be great
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour's at the stake.²⁵

Hamlet's last words are about the succession to the throne. Then, he says, "the rest is silence."²⁶ He dies without a Christian sentiment, without either hope or despair, without an expression of faith in the hereafter or in God's mercy. A prouder, more naturalistic death could scarcely be imagined.

Hamlet's silence about the last things should be remembered and balanced against the many Catholic references throughout the play: his own assertion that the soul is immortal,²⁷ that there is a divine "canon 'gainst self-slaughter"²⁸; the ghost's references to purgatory²⁹; Marcellus' beautiful allusion to the Incarnation³⁰; the king's soliloquy on the nature of true contrition³¹; the Catholic burial of Ophelia.³² All of these passages indicate the survival of a Catholic tradition, or at least the memory of one. But Hamlet's "silence" is more eloquent. The play is pagan in substance, not Catholic. It is a product of the Renaissance.

²⁴ V, ii, 8-10.

²⁵ IV, iv, 53-56.

²⁶ V, ii, 368.

²⁷ I, iv, 68.

²⁸ I, ii, 132.

²⁹ I, v, 10-15.

³⁰ I, i, 158-160.

³¹ III, iii, 35-72.

³² V, i.

King Lear

King Lear is bare, unmitigated paganism. It is noteworthy that it is bare, unmitigated paganism, because it is often considered Shakespeare's greatest work. Why should a Catholic author have chosen pagan characters and a pagan setting for his deepest, most universal interpretation of life? But, the reader might ask, why do you consider *King Lear*, which is pagan in its setting and characters, when you have not considered Shakespeare's Roman plays, which are also pagan? The answer is that the Roman plays are historical. They follow Plutarch closely and do not necessarily reflect Shakespeare's own views on life. But *King Lear* is imaginative. Shakespeare took only the skeleton of his plot and the names of the principal characters from the old play which was his source. All the character development and philosophizing speeches are his own. *King Lear*, therefore, reflects Shakespeare's own views.

The setting of *King Lear* is in pre-Christian, pre-Roman Britain. The religion of the characters is pagan. From the first scene to the last they refer to "the gods." Lear swears by Jupiter and Apollo. Kent swears by Juno.³³ Lear prays that the "dear goddess" nature curse his daughter, Goneril, with sterility.³⁴ Here is the world of *Oedipus* again. As in *Oedipus* the outlook is purely natural, without Christian hope, because man knows only a natural end, seeks only a natural happiness.

Lear seeks rest and leisure in his old age. It is, he says

our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age;
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward death.³⁵

He makes the mistake of dividing and giving away his kingdom to his daughters, of misjudging their sincerity. He gives all to Goneril and Regan, who are selfish hypocrites, and vindictively disinherits the sincere and loyal Cordelia. Receiving a natural punishment for his sins in being abandoned and exposed to the storm by Goneril and Regan and in the death of Cordelia, he dies of a broken heart just as his kingdom is being restored to him.

Lear is a sinner, and he recognizes the fact, although it is true, as he says, that he is "a man more sinned against than sinning."³⁶ His principal sin is anger. Moved by pride and a thirst for flattery,

³³ II, iv. 21-22.

³⁴ I, iv. 296.

³⁵ I, i, 39-42.

³⁶ III, ii, 58-59.

he disinherits and disowns Cordelia. When Kent remonstrates with him against the injustice he is doing, he banishes him in another fit of rage. Lear has many faults, the most serious being rashness, imprudence. Blinded by his own vanity and the flattery of Goneril and Regan, he completely misjudges his three daughters and his most loyal subject, Kent. He is blind and willful, too proud to seek or take advice from others. So he rashly gives away his kingdom, trusting naively in human promises and honeyed words. His two wicked daughters understand their father well, correctly judge his costly error, characterize him clearly and accurately in a few words. Says Goneril, ". . . he always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgement he hath now cast her off appears too grossly." And Regan replies, "'Tis the infirmity of his age: yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself."³⁷

Lear pays a heavy natural penalty for his sins and mistakes, a retribution meted out to him by the gods, who

are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us.³⁸

Lear suffers the bitterest mental anguish and physical humiliation. Driven from home by the coldness of Goneril and Regan, by the insults of their servants, and by his own pride, he is suddenly reduced from his position of royal honor to that of a mad beggar. Exposed to the fury of the storm, with only his fool in attendance, he wanders insanely through barren country and is finally thankful to take refuge in a miserable hovel, saying

Where is this straw, my fellow?
The art of our necessities is strange,
That can make vile things precious. Come, your hovel.³⁹

Lear is gnawed by the worm of remorse. It is his regret for the evil he has brought on himself and others that stings him to madness. He suffers a "burning shame" that "detains him from Cordelia" when she comes to his rescue with the armies of France.⁴⁰ He is so keenly aware of his injustice to her that at first he will not consent to see her. His final agony of remorse comes after he has been returned to sanity and has seen Cordelia hanged, realizing that he has been the principal cause of her death. He carries her dead in his arms onto the stage and dies of sorrow.

³⁷ I, i, 4-7.

³⁸ V, iii, 170-171.

³⁹ III, iii, 69-71.

⁴⁰ IV, iii, 48-49.

The attitude throughout the play towards all this sin and suffering is consistently natural. There is no supernatural redemption from sin, therefore no supernatural contrition. Lear's remorse is the natural result of human pride; his sorrow is the natural result of human love. His cursing Regan and Goneril is natural. His desire for revenge on them is natural. The virtue which he acquires through suffering, his hard earned wisdom and prudence at the end of the play are natural. For Lear does grow and progress in virtue. The play is concerned with his education, acquired through mistakes and bitter suffering. Grace plays no part in it. There is no question here of using suffering for supernatural growth in charity, of offering up suffering in union with Christ to expiate for sin. Such an act is impossible without divine faith to give meaning and purpose to suffering, for without faith suffering has no object and there is no end for which to offer it. It interferes with our attaining natural happiness.

Suffering in *King Lear*, then, as in *Oedipus* is meaningless. The theme of the play is expressed by the blind Gloucester:

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods,
They kill us for their sport.⁴¹

These are the cruel gods of *Oedipus*, the relentless forces of nature that rule the universe. Evil must be endured stoically, not evaded through suicide:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all: come on.⁴²

Suffering must be borne because human dignity demands that it be borne, because escape through suicide is cowardice, whereas endurance is strength. Man must persevere to the end till the "gods," the forces of nature, release him from his prison of torture. That will be whenever he has achieved maturity, "ripeness," whatever degree of natural perfection fate or the "gods" have ordained for him. Lear attains ripeness when he learns that this world is a "great stage of fools," that he is "the natural fool of fortune,"⁴³ when he comes to admit that he is "a very foolish fond old man."⁴⁴

It is significant that Shakespeare chose a pagan setting for his deepest interpretation of life, a play in which the plot and characters

⁴¹ IV, i, 38-39.

⁴² V, ii, 9-10.

⁴³ IV, vi.

⁴⁴ IV, vii, 60.

have the widest application, in which he probes most deeply into human capacity for good and evil, shows the forces of good and evil in a naked death battle, searches most profoundly the problem of human suffering. It is significant that he conceived for this story a setting without the light of revelation and grace, that in it he made man his own principle, end, and measure. In such a setting the outlook is inevitably pessimistic and unChristian. There is no answer to the question why man suffers; he simply suffers. Happiness is not to be achieved in this life, and there is no other. Thus Shakespeare writes about pagans as though he were a pagan, himself, something no Catholic writer should do.

The last two plays which we shall examine are not like *Oedipus* in religion and setting, as is *King Lear*. They take place in a Christian world. Their characters are Christian or at least acquainted with Christianity. But they more closely resemble *Oedipus* than does *King Lear* in the despair and violence of their denouements.

Othello

Othello is a story of jealousy and revenge, of murder, remorse and despair ending in suicide. Othello is a Moor, a general of the Venetian army, who is married to a noble Venetian girl, Desdemona, many years younger than he. Duped by an envious officer, Iago, into believing her unfaithful to him with his lieutenant, Cassio, he murders her and then, when he learns that she is innocent, commits suicide.

There are many Christian references in the play. The most important are in the last scene. Othello tells his wife to prepare for death by soliciting for "any crime unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace," for, he says, "I would not kill thy soul."⁴⁵ Desdemona protests her innocence to the last, and after he has smothered her, Othello says, "She's like a liar gone to burning hell."⁴⁶

However, such evidence of faith in judgment, heaven, and hell does not mitigate the naturalism of this play. In murdering his wife, Othello follows the unwritten moral code of the Renaissance, that a husband was obligated to vindicate his manhood and honor against an adulterous wife. As a soldier Othello feels doubly bound to avenge his honor; if he did not, he would be laughed at as a weakling and coward. Without honor, his career would be ended. Honor—in other words pride—is therefore his reason for the murder of Desdemona and his assent to the attempted murder of Cassio by Iago: "Nought

⁴⁵ V, ii, 28, 32.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 1. 129.

I did in hate," he says, "but all in honour."⁴⁷ Honor is also the reason for his suicide. When Othello stabs himself and falls dead, Cassio says

This did I fear, but thought he had no weapon;
For he was great of heart.⁴⁸

Othello is too noble, too "great of heart" to suffer the disgrace of trial and execution, to bear them as a penance. He is not a humble man. Without an act of contrition, he wreaks vengeance on himself and dies by his own hand.

Othello is brought to his tragic end by his own simple impulsive nature. A professional soldier nearing middle age, inexperienced in the customs of Venetian society and the ways of women, not of the same race as his wife, he is very sensitive on any point that touches his honor and is therefore an easy prey to the duplicity of Iago. For him ". . . once to be in doubt is once to be resolved."⁴⁹ Iago makes him doubt Desdemona, and he rages, "I'll tear her all to pieces."⁵⁰ He gives way to overpowering anger. He thirsts for revenge, wishing

. . . that the slave had forty thousand lives!
One is too poor, too weak for my revenge.
Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago;
All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven.
'Tis gone.
Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate!⁵¹

Once he has chosen hatred and revenge rather than love and forgiveness, he will not change:

Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.⁵²

Blinded by rage and driven by hatred and jealousy, Othello carries out his resolution despite the pitiful and loving pleas of his wife.

⁴⁷ V, ii, 295.

⁴⁸ V, II, 360.

⁴⁹ III, iii, 179-180.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, I. 431.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, II. 542-549.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 453-460.

Once the deed is done and he learns of her innocence, he is overwhelmed by remorse and self-hatred:

Whip me, ye devils,
From the possession of this heavenly sight!
Blow me about in winds! roast me in sulphur!
Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!⁵³

Before he stabs himself in despair, Othello asks those who carry his story back to Venice to speak

Of one who loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum.⁵⁴

Othello's remorse is closely akin to the remorse which drives Oedipus to blind himself. It is no more Christian despite the Christian setting of the story, despite Othello's words about heaven and hell. It is not inspired by the love of God, but by the evil he has done to Desdemona and the ruin and disgrace he has brought on himself. Having thrown away every possibility of natural happiness, Othello seems to see no possibility of a supernatural happiness. He does not so much turn his back on the divine mercy as act as if it did not exist. Nor is the audience reminded of its existence by anything said at the end of the play. After the death of Othello, the comments of the onlookers are only that "he was great of heart" and that "the object poisons sight." These are the perfectly natural remarks and reactions of pagans. They are not made from a supernatural point of view and are not Catholic. For they do not allow for redemption, grace, mercy, and a supernatural end. *Othello*, therefore, is a story of pagan despair, not of Christian hope.

Romeo and Juliet

There is no more hope in *Romeo and Juliet* either, even though its characters are Catholics living in a Catholic society. There is no need to list the many Catholic elements throughout the play. They are obvious. He who runs may read them. But in spite of them, the story of the play is essentially a pagan one of youthful passion and untimely, ill-fated death. *Romeo and Juliet*, "a pair of star-

⁵³ V, ii, 277-280.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 344-351.

crossed lovers"⁵⁵ from two feuding families, are separated on their wedding day when Romeo is banished for murder committed in a duel. Seeking to be reunited to her husband, Juliet takes a sleeping potion which makes her appear dead. Romeo, thinking her dead, goes to her tomb and takes poison. Juliet soon awakens, sees the body of Romeo, and stabs herself.

The fundamental cause of this tragedy is that Romeo and Juliet set a false natural end as their goal in life—their possession of each other. They do not subordinate their love to the love of God. They think that their own natural, human love can alone give them happiness. When this is lost, they despair. Another cause of their downfall is the vehemence of their youthful passions, of their love for and joy in one another, of their sadness in separation. Their love is so intense, so unregulated by reason, that they make gods of one another. Juliet says to Romeo that "thy gracious self . . . is the god of my idolatry."⁵⁶ Speaking of her love for him, she says

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.⁵⁷

Romeo's emotion is similar. He calls Juliet's "beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear."⁵⁸ And swears

I am no pilot; yet, wert thou as far
As that vast shore wash'd with the farthest sea,
I would adventure for such merchandise.⁵⁹

These expressions are the natural hyperbole of love. Yet they prove to be literally true in the resolution of the plot. For Romeo and Juliet expect the happiness from each other which only union with God can give, and when they lose each other they despair of the possibility of any other happiness. Both express their intention to take their own life rather than endure separation. Concerning his banishment, Romeo says that "the damned use the word in hell,"⁶⁰ for "heaven is here where Juliet lives."⁶¹ He wishes to "sack the hateful mansion"⁶² of his body, but when he draws his sword is restrained by Friar Lawrence. After Juliet's parents announce to her that she is to marry Paris, she says to herself in soliloquy

⁵⁵ Prologue.

⁵⁶ II, ii, 113-114.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 133-135.

⁵⁸ I, v, 49.

⁵⁹ II, ii, 82-84.

⁶⁰ III, iii, 47.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁶² *Ibid.*, I. 108.

I'll to the friar to know his remedy ;
If all else fail, myself have power to die.⁶³

The lovers carry out their intention. When Romeo hears of Juliet's supposed death, Romeo says "then I defy you, stars"⁶⁴ Buying a quick poison he hastens to Juliet's tomb, stands beside her body, and resolves

here will I remain
With worms that are thy chamber-maids ; O here
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last!
Arms, take your last embrace! And, lips, O you
The doors of breath, seal with a righteous kiss
A dateless bargain to engrossing death!
Come, bitter conduct, come, unsavoury guide!
Thou desperate pilot, now at once run on
The dashing rocks thy sea-sick weary bark.⁶⁵

This fatalism and despair is reaffirmed by Juliet when she awakens and sees Romeo lying dead at her side:

. . . then I'll be brief. O happy dagger!
This is thy sheath (*stabs herself*) ; there rust, and let me die.⁶⁶

At the end of the play no one speaks of this tragedy of inordinate love and despair in supernatural terms. The Prince of Verona expresses regret that the feud which he tolerated has led to such a disastrous punishment for both families. Capulet and Montague express their sorrow and resolve to end their feud. But no one calls the self-murder of the two lovers sin or says that for such acts men lose their souls. The manner of their death should have been a greater source of sorrow than their death itself.

Romeo and Juliet, therefore, is a product of Renaissance humanism, despite its Catholic setting. The Catholic faith and Catholic customs are little more than ornamental stage settings. Substantially the story is pagan, and it reminds one more of a story out of Ovid than of a Christian story.

HOW CATHOLIC ARE SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS?

Whatever Shakespeare's religion may have been, it cannot be said that his plays are Catholic, for they do not present a Catholic

⁶³ III, v, 241-242.

⁶⁴ V, i, 24.

⁶⁵ V, iii, 108-119.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 11. 169-170.

view of life. The universe of Shakespeare is not the Christian universe. Grace, redemption from sin, eternal life do not enter into the motivation of his characters either at the beginning or end of his plays. His protagonists are not men of hope. They place a natural, finite good as their ultimate end instead of God, the true ultimate end. They do not subordinate this natural good to God, the supreme Good. Macbeth does not subordinate his ambition for power and glory to the glory of God. Hamlet will not leave the punishment of sin to God's justice but must have his own revenge. Lear, a pagan, does not know God, his ultimate end, and therefore cannot subordinate his will for rest and peace to God's will through resignation to humiliation and suffering. Othello does not subordinate his honor to God's honor and glory. Romeo and Juliet do not subordinate their love for each other to their love for God. There is nothing necessarily evil about any of these naturally desirable things: about being a king or even wanting to be one, about the just punishment of murder, about honor, about human love. These things are all good when regulated by right reason and the divine law. They become evil when they are not so regulated. The loss of them leads to despair when they are made the measure of good in life, the end by which other goods are regulated. For we know that all earthly goods are mere straw and are not worth the sufferings of this life. Shakespeare's protagonists despair because they misconceive and abuse earthly goods, but especially because they misconceive and abuse them to the last, never recognizing their mistake, never regretting it. And since no one else points it out or deplors their despair, the plays cannot be considered Catholic literature.

But to say that they are not Catholic is not to say that they are not great literature. They *are* great drama and poetry, and they express much truth about human nature, but not the whole truth because they ignore the supernatural. Shakespeare was a great artist, but not a Catholic artist, though he may have been a Catholic in religion. He was not a pagan artist, like Sophocles. He was a Renaissance, humanistic artist. His homo-centric universe still reflects the light of divine revelation because he wrote at a time when Christianity was known by all and was professed by most Englishmen. Even though artists at that time were finding their principal inspiration in the ancient classics rather than in the Bible, their works were inevitably colored by Christianity. So Shakespeare's plays were influenced by the Catholic Faith without being Catholic.