SHAKESPEARE LECTURE

'I KNOW WHEN ONE IS DEAD, AND WHEN ONE LIVES'

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I AM very grateful to the British Academy for inviting me to deliver this lecture. For my title I am indebted, obviously, to Shakespeare himself, but it was a colleague of mine at the University of Durham, Dr Derek Todd, who provided the stimulus. In his book *I Am Not Prince Hamlet* Dr Todd writes as follows:

> 'I know when one is dead, and when one lives', says Lear as he carries in Cordelia: a statement which turns out to be strangely false, for he alternates several times between believing her alive and believing her dead.[1]

Dr Todd's remark made me curious to examine this scene afresh, and also to examine other scenes in which death and life are, or may be, treated with dramatic equivocation. The more often I read Shakespeare's plays the more firmly I believe that they are thoroughly dramatic. The truism is intentional. It seems to me impossible to stress too strongly that the life of a Shakespeare play lies in the effect it makes on a spectator (or on a reader who reads as if he were a spectator) as it proceeds, act by act, scene by scene, speech by speech, line by line. It makes its effect equally in its structural design, which becomes clearer and clearer as the action unfolds, and in its minute particulars of language and gesture which catch our attention and are, so to speak, the nerve-endings of the whole dramatic system. In the present century perhaps no critic has shown himself more aware of this Shakespearean dramatic life, in all its grandeur and in all its finesse, than Harley Granville Barker, to whose memory (coupled with Shakespeare's) I should like to pay tribute today. His first volume of *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (1927) is my exact contemporary; I was lucky enough to encounter his writings when I was a schoolboy, and I have reread them frequently since then, marvelling at so robust

[1] D. K. C. Todd, *I Am Not Prince Hamlet* (London, 1974), 135.

a common sense wedded to so sensitive an imagination. The last word on Shakespeare will never be said. Granville Barker, like the good exploratory critic he was, never wrote as though he thought he was saying it. But later critics who ignore his views, and the aspects of Shakespeare's plays to which they were directed, do so at their peril.

Granville Barker followed A. C. Bradley in believing that King Lear dies of joy, and I may as well say immediately that I share their opinion.[1] Opinion, of course, it is and must remain. Shakespeare did not expound through Kent and Edgar (or rather, allow them to try to expound) Lear's final emotional state. This is not to say that he left it a mystery: on the contrary, in his theatre it must have been settled one way or the other, by Burbage's intonation and gesture, and had there been a continuous theatrical tradition from Burbage onwards it would be no mystery now. However, the theatres were closed in 1642, and when they reopened after the Commonwealth Tate rewrote *King Lear* as a tragi-comedy. When Shakespeare's tragedy returned to the stage it was for the actors to build a new tradition upon the foundation of the script. Whether any actor had made Lear die of joy between the restoration of Shakespeare's text and the publication of Bradley's study I do not know. If not, I am rather surprised that a critic discovered what lay more obviously in an actor's way. The crucial words are: 'Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!' They seem to me to express excitement: the emotion, not of Laertes' exclamation 'Do you see this, O God?' but of Lear's 'Look, look, a mouse!' If it is agreed that Lear's tone here is not one of flat despondency, then it rests with those who maintain that he dies of grief to show what change in Cordelia has excited him, and to show why any change confirming her death should excite him, since he has just been exclaiming against the injustice of meaner creatures' having life while she has 'no breath at all'. Breath has been Lear's continual theme in his attempts to find life in her body: looking-glass, feather, voice (Shakespeare frequently tells us that words are made of breath), all point in the same direction. Colour he never mentions at all (though it is mentioned, whether present or absent, in connection with Juliet and Desdemona), and therefore the argument that Cordelia's lips

[1] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904, repr. 1957), 241; Harley Granville Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare, First Series* (London, 1927), 185.

have lost their colour seems a weak one.[1] The inference (drawn from Lear's long digression about his attempted rescue and Kent's attempt to make himself known) that Lear has abandoned all self-deception when he reaches his last speech is also considerably weakened by the fact that this last speech itself includes a digression, albeit a short one, the line in which Lear asks a bystander to 'undo this button'. That break in continuity is important, for it allows Lear to look away from Cordelia and then to look back and become excited by what he thinks he sees.[2]

The objection to Lear's dying of joy is not, I am sure, based on dramatic principles but upon principles quite different, those of tragic propriety. Many readers feel that, in a tragedy so deeply concerned with the theme of understanding, Lear must not be allowed to die in error but must die confronting his tragic situation. This argument, I think, would have weight only if the counter-argument was that Lear never did believe that Cordelia was dead. The poignancy of his final joy, in my opinion, rather heightens than lowers the tragic tone established by his opening words. As for the mass of illustration that is sometimes advanced in support of the thematic argument, I can only say, firstly, that to me a dram of the dramatic is worth a pound of the thematic when plays are in question, and, secondly, that if Lear dies with a poignant joy, his death bears a striking thematic relation to Gloucester's, whose

> flawed heart,
> Alack, too weak the conflict to support,
> 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
> Burst smilingly.

Moreover, if Lear's last speech is to contain no such fluctuation as Bradley detected, what is the dramatic point of all his earlier fluctuations? They would seem to lead up to nothing.

In discussing the last scene of *King Lear* I have dwelt till now on Lear's emotions as they are dramatically presented. I turn, next, to their object, the body of Cordelia. We are so familiar

[1] See J. K. Walton, 'Lear's Last Speech', *Shakespeare Survey*, 13 (1960), 11–19. The material in my next paragraph also relates to this article.

[2] I take it that the button is at Lear's throat, and that its tightness tells of emotional strain. Cordelia's dress would have been laced, not buttoned, in Shakespeare's time. I learn from Richard David, *Shakespeare in the Theatre* (Cambridge, 1978), 103–4, that the scene is often played as if the button were Cordelia's, as at Stratford-upon-Avon in 1976 (Trevor Nunn, Royal Shakespeare Company), where Mr David considered it 'a superbly right way' of playing the incident.

with the play that it is worth asking whether, if we had been at the first performance, we should have known for certain that she was dead, and if so, when. To take the general aspects of the matter first, Shakespeare's is the first tragic treatment of a story which previously had ended with the king's restoration and might have been expected to end so again; but, on the other hand, the loss of the battle, the capture of Lear and Cordelia, and Edmund's significantly secret instructions to the Captain, are pretty clear indications of disaster to come; these are, however, followed by the exposure of Edmund and Goneril, the defeat of the former by Edgar, and the suicide of the latter, having previously poisoned her sister—events which, at the eleventh hour, seem to tip the scales back towards hope; at the same time, despite the interest of these events, we are subtly kept conscious (mainly by means of observations from Edmund) of the danger to the prisoners, so that when the reprieve is at last sent we feel little but apprehension. The entry of Lear carrying Cordelia's inert body realizes our fears, and his opening lines proclaim her death in tragic tones.[1] This speaking picture of heroic bereavement is our immediate assurance that she is dead: were she now to revive, our humanity would be gratified but our exaltation would be diminished. Yet while Lear plies his futile attempts to find a spark of life in her, a glimmer of hope, almost as irrational as his, persists: like him, what we really want is a miracle—but, unlike him, we know this is what would be needed. This is what goes on in part of our minds, the part given over to sympathy. The other part, the part open to dramatic suggestion, observes that no one on stage—not even Kent—attempts to assist Lear in his repeated efforts.[2] There is, accordingly, no real suspense as to whether Cordelia might revive, though there is a kind of false suspense, related to pity. Lear's own death, by contrast, is confirmed—after Kent's moving lines—by Edgar's simple 'He is gone, indeed.'

Shakespearean deaths are, with few exceptions, as unequivocal as Lear's. Often—and by no means only in the earlier plays—they are given emphasis by a couplet, such as Arthur's

> O me! my uncle's spirit is in these stones:
> Heaven take my soul, and England keep my bones!

[1] That Lear should reappear, having almost succeeded in rescuing Cordelia, is a great dramatic surprise blunted by over-familiarity. On reflection we might consider that though Gloucester is allowed to die without a death scene Lear can hardly be allowed to do so, but in the theatre such considerations of convention would not enter our minds.

[2] See p. 113 n. 2, above.

or Richard's

> Mount, mount, my soul! thy seat is up on high;
> Whilst my gross flesh sinks downward, here to die.

or Brutus'

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

or Othello's

> I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee; no way but this;
> Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.

It would be interesting, though the present topic forbids it, to discuss why some of Shakespeare's characters die upon a couplet and others do not. Othello has not always been allowed his. When Edmund Kean reached the half-line 'And smote him, thus', he acted on the medical knowledge that 'death by a *heart* wound is *instantaneous*': an eye-witness reported of him:

> He literally dies standing; it is the dead body only of Othello that falls, heavily and at once; there is no *rebound* which speaks of vitality and of living muscles. It is the dull weight of clay seeking its kindred earth.[1]

This was doubtless fine theatre, but the suppression of the couplet seems a great pity, since Othello's last thought, touchingly recalling the beginning of the scene, should not be of himself but of Desdemona, and the dying kiss, physiologically impossible though it may be, is his reconciliation.

The great liberty which Shakespeare takes in this scene is, of course, in connection not with Othello's death but with Desdemona's:

> The revival of Desdemona from a state of suffocation, and her expiring without any fresh violence, we apprehend to be rather absurd; therefore, highly approve Othello's stabbing her with a dagger.[2]

This comment of a theatrical critic of 1770 shows both when and why this change in the stage business at 'I would not have thee linger in thy pain' was made. It became usual in the following century. But should realism be the arbiter of such matters? In Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* the heroine is strangled, suffers no fresh violence, is supposed quite dead, and yet recovers speech for a moment before she positively dies. It is probable that

[1] Leigh Hunt (pseud., 'An Actor'), *The Tatler*, 23 September 1831. Reprinted in *Dramatic Essays by Leigh Hunt*, ed. W. Archer and R. W. Lowe (London, 1894), 229.

[2] Quoted in H. H. Furness (ed.), *Othello* (A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, New York, 1886), 302, from Francis Gentleman in the *Dramatic Censor*.

Webster is here imitating Desdemona's unexpected late utterances, as in *The White Devil* he had imitated Lear's pathetic hopes of Cordelia's recovery when portraying Cornelia hoping as vainly for Marcello's. If so, Webster may serve as a contemporary witness against the stabbing of Desdemona. But, as usual, the strongest evidence as to stage business is to be drawn from Shakespeare's lines. When Othello tells Gratiano, later in the scene,

> There lies your niece,
> Whose breath, indeed, these hands have newly stopp'd,

his statement is conclusive that he used no other means than suffocation. The extreme improbability of Desdemona's recovery of speech, to utter her noble lie testifying to her loyalty to her husband and sparking off a fine exchange between Othello and Emilia, is clearly justified by something more than theatrical surprise. Theatrical surprise is, however, an important element in Shakespeare's intention. Why else should he allow Othello to emphasize, just before Emilia's entrance, that he has put Desdemona out of her pain and that she lies 'still as the grave'?

I have mentioned already Othello's 'And smote him, thus', a magnificent *coup de théâtre*. Incidentally, I believe it supplies further argument (if further argument were needed) against the notion that Othello uses a dagger to dispatch Desdemona, for if he did use one, what would he do with it afterwards? To sheathe it, ready for his own suicide, would ruin the surprise of that splendid climax. It should not only be Cassio, but the audience, who think he has no weapon, especially in view of the way Shakespeare has made him lose not one sword but two. The long explanations involving Ludovico, Cassio, and the rest, serve a useful purpose besides conveying information: they separate Othello's loss of his second sword from his suicide with the dagger, thus preventing our suspicion that Shakespeare has cheated by concealing this dagger's existence from us, and also, it would seem, from Othello, whose poignant line 'For in my sense, 'tis happiness to die' immediately follows his loss of the second sword in the unsuccessful attempt to kill Iago. During the explanatory dialogue just mentioned, one more fact comes out which relates to Shakespeare's interest (in this scene) in surprise and in the equivocal treatment of death: Cassio says,

> There is besides in Roderigo's letter,
> How he upbraids Iago, that he made him

Brave me upon the watch; whereon it came
That I was cast; and even but now he spake,
After long seeming dead, Iago hurt him,
Iago set him on.

This last detail comes as a surprise, and a gratuitous one, for the letters 'found in the pocket of the slain Roderigo' have already convicted Iago of setting him on to murder Cassio, and as for stabbing him, Iago made no secret of that at the time. The point does seem to be being made in this tragedy that murder is not only impossible to hide but also remarkably difficult to effect. Perhaps Iago's failure to dispatch Roderigo neatly makes Othello look less like a bungler, supposing we had thought him one. In any case, this reported revival of Roderigo raises a question of performance in the scene where Cassio wounds him (mortally, to judge from his exclamation 'O, I am slain!') and Iago finishes him off. Was Kean right, when he played Iago in 1814, to 'throw his eye perpetually towards the prostrate body', having already 'given and repeated the atrocious thrust, till it may be supposed no life remains', instead of, as was usual, stabbing Roderigo once and then walking away 'with perfect ease and satisfaction'?[1] Is the dramatic effect at the time the all-important thing, or will the memory of the scene so played persist to the detriment of the report of Roderigo's brief revival in the last act? This is, I think, an open question.

Having begun my examination of Shakespeare's equivocal death scenes with *King Lear* and *Othello*, and brought in Webster for purposes of analogy, I may seem to be suggesting that such treatment of death particularly belongs to the Jacobean Shakespeare. There is, I think, something to be said for that view, and I shall be returning to it later. But equivocal death scenes are not confined to his Jacobean plays. In one of his earliest, the *Third Part of Henry VI*, Clifford enters mortally wounded at the battle of Towton:

Here burns my candle out; ay, here it dies,
Which, while it lasted, gave King Henry light.
O Lancaster, I fear thy overthrow
More than my body's parting with my soul!

In a long speech he laments Henry's weakness and foresees his ruin, ending as follows:

The air hath got into my deadly wounds,
And much effuse of blood doth make me faint.

[1] Quoted in John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* [1966], (Harmondsworth, 1969), 81, from *The Examiner*, 5 June 1814.

Come, York and Richard, Warwick and the rest;
I stabb'd your fathers' bosoms, split my breast.

With that he faints, and upon their cue his victorious enemies enter. They speculate on Clifford's whereabouts, Warwick affirming confidently that 'whereso'er he is, he's surely dead'. As he speaks this, 'Clifford groans and then dies'; but his death, though attested for a reader by the Quarto's stage direction, is deliberately kept in doubt for an audience:

Rich. Whose soul is that which takes her heavy leave?
A deadly groan, like life and death's departing.
See who it is.
Edw. And now the battle's ended,
If friend or foe, let him be gently used.
Rich. Revoke that doom of mercy, for 'tis Clifford;
Who not contented that he lopp'd the branch
In hewing Rutland when his leaves put forth,
But set his murd'ring knife unto the root
From whence that tender spray did sweetly spring—
I mean our princely father, Duke of York.
War. From off the gates of York fetch down the head,
Your father's head, which Clifford placed there;
Instead whereof let this supply the room.
Measure for measure must be answered.
Edw. Bring forth that fatal screech-owl to our house,
That nothing sung but death to us and ours.
Now death shall stop his dismal threat'ning sound,
And his ill-boding tongue no more shall speak.
War. I think his understanding is bereft.
Speak, Clifford, dost thou know who speaks to thee?
Dark cloudy death o'ershades his beams of life,
And he nor sees nor hears us what we say.
Rich. O, would he did! and so, perhaps, he doth.
'Tis but his policy to counterfeit,
Because he would avoid such bitter taunts
Which in the time of death he gave our father.
Geo. If so thou think'st, vex him with eager words.
Rich. Clifford, ask mercy and obtain no grace.
Edw. Clifford, repent in bootless penitence.
War. Clifford, devise excuses for thy faults.
Geo. While we devise fell tortures for thy faults.
Rich. Thou didst love York, and I am son to York.
Edw. Thou pitied'st Rutland, I will pity thee.
Geo. Where's Captain Margaret, to fence you now?
War. They mock thee, Clifford; swear as thou wast wont.
Rich. What, not an oath? Nay, then the world goes hard

When Clifford cannot spare his friends an oath.
I know by that he's dead; and by my soul,
If this right hand would buy two hours' life,
That I in all despite might rail at him,
This hand should chop it off, and with the issuing blood
Stifle the villain whose unstanched thirst
York and young Rutland could not satisfy.
War. Ay, but he's dead. Off with the traitor's head,
And rear it in the place your father's stands.
And now to London with triumphant march,
There to be crowned England's royal King.

In this inventive scene Shakespeare gives the prevailing acrimony of the play a truly dramatic vehicle. In spite of Richard's opening question, 'Whose soul is that which takes her heavy leave?', and Warwick's line, 'Dark cloudy death o'ershades his beams of life', it is not until Richard's jocular proof (if Clifford cannot swear, he must be dead) that we are thoroughly sure he will be spared further atrocities.

This is an early history play. By the time he wrote his second group of English histories Shakespeare was working with much richer and more various material. The final events of the battle of Shrewsbury—in which the Prince first kills Hotspur and speaks his epitaph, then spies the supposedly dead Falstaff and speaks his, leaves the stage, and returns to find Falstaff alive again and in his best 'buckram-men' style claiming a reward for dispatching Percy after an epic combat—are masterly in conception and in execution, though they do set the producer one problem which I will mention presently. How far Falstaff's pretended death is equivocal it is not easy to decide. As the chief comedian, he is no doubt felt by every spectator to bear a charmed life, and, moreover, I cannot easily imagine a production in which any spectator would really suppose him to be killed in his fight with Douglas. The problem in producing the scene is to prevent Douglas from looking like Falstaff's accomplice. How can Falstaff 'fall down as if he were dead' in a manner convincing to his antagonist? Picked off by a stray bullet, perhaps? Here, for once, Shakespeare gives us no help with the stage action, though again some business must have been worked out at the Globe. It looks as if he was thinking of the end rather than the means. This rather large detail apart, the sequence is vividly clear and theatrically faultless. Hotspur's death, his final word unspoken, has a finality which is very moving, and which also contrives to throw into hilarious relief

Falstaff's apprehension, 'How if he should counterfeit too, and rise?' The apprehension, ridiculous but genuine, motivates Falstaff's stabbing of Hotspur's corpse, which makes the deed less intolerable, even though before the stab is delivered opportunism has superseded apprehension: 'Yea, and I'll swear I killed him.' If any lurking revulsion exists in the audience it is borne down by laughter when Falstaff, looking furtively to left and right, soliloquizes to a theatre full of witnesses, 'Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me.'

Pretended deaths on the stage, as distinct from deathlike swoons on the stage and pretended deaths delivered by report, are infrequent in Shakespeare. I shall be discussing Juliet's, which is as serious as Falstaff's is comic, in due course. In the meantime I turn to the *Second Part of Henry IV*, and to the scene in Act IV where the Prince, believing his father to have died, takes away the crown from his pillow. Shakespeare's audience, at least those members of it who had seen *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth*, would be expecting this celebrated incident, and Shakespeare takes the opportunity of writing an eloquent dialogue between father and son in the latter half of the scene. In the first half, as soon as the Prince is left sitting alone at the bedside, his speech comes straight to the point:

> Why doth the crown lie there upon his pillow,
> Being so troublesome a bedfellow?

His sombre reflections, which chime with his father's earlier soliloquy, lead into a simile summing up the idea (incidentally, a simile very well suited to its speaker), and the completion of his thought allows him, midway in the line, to turn his eye once more upon the sleeper:

> O majesty!
> When thou dost pinch thy bearer, thou dost sit
> Like a rich armour worn in heat of day,
> That scalds with safety. By his gates of breath
> There lies a downy feather which stirs not:
> Did he suspire, that light and weightless down
> Perforce must move. My gracious Lord! my father!
> This sleep is sound indeed; this is a sleep
> That from this golden rigol hath divorc'd
> So many English kings. Thy due from me
> Is tears and heavy sorrows of the blood,
> Which nature, love, and filial tenderness
> Shall, O dear father, pay thee plenteously;
> My due from thee is this imperial crown,

Which, as immediate from thy place and blood,
Derives itself to me. Lo, here it sits,
Which God shall guard; and put the world's whole strength
Into one giant arm, it shall not force
This lineal honour from me; this from thee
Will I to mine leave, as 'tis left to me.

This final couplet is, of course, the cue for his exit, the crown upon his head. As I have said, many of Shakespeare's original audience would know the story and would be expecting the King to awake and miss the crown. But those who did not, and who had therefore taken the Prince's circumstantial inference of death as conclusive, would surely now recognize that the situation was not what it had seemed. The stage, silent and empty except for the bed on which the King is lying, is crying out for the scene to continue. And, of course, this suspense should last for a few seconds—which, in performance, will seem like as many minutes—until the King's call for Warwick, Gloucester, and Clarence breaks the tension and sets the remainder of the scene in motion.

At this point perhaps I may be allowed a small digression on the subject of Shakespeare's feathers. The downy feather which the Prince observes by his father's gates of breath we are surely to take on trust: not only its immobility but its very existence. I think the same thing is true when Lear exclaims

This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows
That ever I have felt.

It has been suggested to me, from time to time, that Lear might find a plume fallen from a helmet on the battlefield, but such a stage property would be difficult to lay convincingly and conveniently in his reach. (Incidentally, I have seen it seriously proposed, in print, that Lear gets the looking-glass he asks for, the theory being that it was hanging at the girdle of Goneril, whom Kent earlier described as Vanity the puppet.[1]) I think that when Shakespeare imagined feathers—ornamental ones excepted—he imagined them tiny: Edgar associates them with gossamer and air in describing Gloucester's supposed fall from

[1] See John C. Meagher, 'Vanity, Lear's feather, and the pathology of editorial annotation', in Clifford Leech and J. M. R. Margeson (ed.), *Shakespeare 1971: Proceedings of the World Shakespeare Conference, Vancouver, August 1971* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 244–59. Meagher does not believe that Lear gets the feather but that he shows his madness by referring to the looking-glass as a feather.

Dover Cliff, and in his dialogue with the two Keepers who apprehend him Henry VI uses one to illustrate their readiness to swear loyalty to whoever happens to be in power:

> Look, as I blow this feather from my face,
> And as the air blows it to me again,
> Obeying to my wind when I do blow,
> And yielding to another when it blows,
> Commanded always by the greater gust,
> Such is the lightness of you common men.
> (*3 H. VI*, III, i)

I do not suppose that King Henry actually produced a feather with which to grace his analogy, but that he made the gesture of catching one from the air, and the audience's imagination did the rest. Having mentioned an ornamental plume only to reject it as a stage property in *King Lear*, I also beg leave to doubt that when Prince Henry says to dead Hotspur, 'But let my favours hide thy mangled face', he means the plumes from his helmet. I am sure he means the helmet's silk mantling.[1] This would serve admirably as facecloth to the corpse, whereas there is something risible about ornamental feathers in the wrong place. Besides, they will not stay still. No spectator must be allowed to think, of Hotspur, 'This feather stirs; he lives!' Even more damaging fancies would inevitably be suggested; as everybody knows, feathers *tickle*; to parody *The Ancient Mariner*,

> It had been strange, ev'n in a play,
> To hear a dead man sneeze!

Of these trifles enough, as Dr. Johnson says,[2] and on to the pretended death of Juliet. If Shakespeare leaves us to shift for ourselves when Falstaff 'falls down as if he were dead', here he is thoroughly explicit: the Friar, when he gives Juliet the potion, tells her in detail of the death-like trance it will induce, outlining at the same time the part which this trance is to play in his plan of reuniting her to Romeo. In the speech which Juliet makes before drinking the potion the seriousness of her undertak-

[1] See A. R. Humphreys (ed.), *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth* (The Arden Shakespeare, London, 1960) who records both suggestions in his note on the passage.

[2] Of the 'System of Enchantment, which supplied all the Marvellous found in the Romances of the Middle Ages' which he outlines in his note on Prospero's first scene in *The Tempest*, quoted in Walter Raleigh (ed.), *Johnson on Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1908), 65.

ing is brought out by her speculations; one of these runs as follows:

> What if it be a poison, which the friar
> Subtly hath minister'd to have me dead,
> Lest in this marriage he should be dishonour'd
> Because he married me before to Romeo?
> I fear it is; and yet, methinks, it should not,
> For he hath still been tried a holy man.

Juliet's fear is expressed only to be dismissed. This is our reassurance that the potion will act as the Friar foretold. At the same time it presents us with an exciting and disturbing dramatic idea to entertain; and like the extended passage about her dread of awakening too early in the tomb, it foreshadows in its tragic mood the actual tragic outcome, even though that will be produced by different means.

Imogen's apparent death in *Cymbeline*, when she is disguised as Fidele, is as unequivocal to the spectators as is Juliet's, though, in taking the drug which Pisanio had from the wicked Queen, Imogen herself has no idea of what it will do to her, imagining it merely to be cordial. Shakespeare has given us all the necessary information in the early scenes, including the fact that the Queen intended the drug to be mortal but that her physician Cornelius had made sure it was not. Such are the ironic involutions of this late play that they make Juliet's brief suspicion of the Friar's potion look very simple by comparison. But Imogen has not even the smallest, briefest suspicion: it is a feature of the play that her innocent directness keeps an unswerving course amid all the tortuous plotting.

By contrast with the plot of *Cymbeline*, that of *Pericles* is a very straight-forward affair of separations and reunions. The apparent death, in this case Thaisa's, is once again unequivocal: but this time it is presented as unequivocally genuine (as it must be if we are to acquiesce in Pericles' committing her body to the sea). There is nothing in Pericles' address to the storm, his dialogues with Lychorida and the sailors, or his apostrophe to Thaisa's body to throw doubt on her death. Hence, in the immediately following scene, we have all the pleasure of surprise when Cerimon (whose skill as a physician is dwelt on in the leisurely opening lines) is brought the chest containing her body, discovers signs of life remaining, and instantly takes steps to recover her. In the last scene of the play, husband and wife are brought together in Diana's temple at Ephesus, and Thaisa is so moved by her recognition of Pericles

that she swoons as she utters his name. He (having not yet recognized her) exclaims,

> What means the nun? She dies! Help, gentlemen!

However, Cerimon is at hand to reassure him that she has merely swooned with joy.

Hero's swoon of grief, in the 'church scene' of *Much Ado About Nothing*, is almost as brief as this of Thaisa's:

> *Beat.* Why, how now, cousin! Wherefore sink you down?
> *D. John.* Come, let us go. These things, come thus to light,
> Smother her spirits up.
> *Exeunt Don Pedro, Don John, and Claudio.*
> *Bene.* How doth the lady?
> *Beat.* Dead, I think. Help, uncle!
> Hero! Why, Hero! Uncle! Signior Benedick! Friar!
> *Leon.* O Fate! take not away thy heavy hand.
> Death is the fairest cover for her shame
> That may be wish'd for.
> *Beat.* How now, cousin Hero!
> *Friar.* Have comfort, lady.
> *Leon.* Dost thou look up?
> *Friar.* Yea, wherefore should she not?
> *Leon.* Wherefore! Why, doth not every earthly thing
> Cry shame upon her?

I quote the short passage in order to remind you how Hero's swoon is presented in action and dialogue. It is, of course, important to the rest of the plot, which is why Claudio is immediately withdrawn before he can witness her recovery; but Shakespeare, who usually does several things with one incident, also brings out Beatrice's concern and makes the audience share it, and then introduces the contrasting, surprising, but not incomprehensible reaction of Hero's father. To suit all these purposes it is necessary for the swoon to be, for the short time it lasts, convincingly deathlike. There would have been no point in keeping the audience in the dark about Hero's recovery, however; on the contrary, we need to know that her reported death is only pretence if we are not to misunderstand the developments involving Beatrice, Benedick the challenger, Claudio and Don Pedro, and the two old men without teeth: we must not be misled into thinking that these developments are much ado about something.

By the time Hero's swoon occurs the play is more than halfway through, and its tone has assured the audience that nobody is going to die. In *The Winter's Tale*—to return now to the group

of late comedies—the case is very different. Leontes' jealousy and its consequence in Hermione's imprisonment and trial are presented powerfully and weightily: the relieving touches, given mainly to Antigonus and Paulina, have not sufficed to give Hermione the immunity that the presence of Benedick and Beatrice, to say nothing of Dogberry, has given Hero. Therefore the trial scene is fully serious, working slowly up through Hermione's eloquent self-vindication to the superb multiple climax in which, within a dozen lines, the oracle vindicates her, Leontes rejects the oracle as 'mere falsehood', a servant bursts in with the news that the young prince Mamillius is dead, Leontes recognizes a divine judgement on his injustice, and Hermione falls in a swoon. Paulina exclaims

> This news is mortal to the queen; look down
> And see what death is doing;

and the contrite Leontes says

> Take her hence;
> Her heart is but o'ercharg'd; she will recover;
> I have too much believ'd mine own suspicion;
> Beseech you, tenderly apply to her
> Some remedies for life.

These are the accents, not of confidence, but of anxiety. It can be no surprise to him when Paulina re-enters with her long accusing speech culminating in the news that the queen is dead. Deception on Paulina's part is out of the question:

> I say she's dead; I'll swear't. If word nor oath
> Prevail not, go and see; if you can bring
> Tincture or lustre to her lip, her eye,
> Heat outwardly, or breath within, I'll serve you
> As I would do the gods.

In the last speech of the scene, Leontes bids her

> Prithee, bring me
> To the dead bodies of my queen and son;
> One grave shall be for both: upon them shall
> The causes of their death appear, unto
> Our shame perpetual.

Everything, in short, combines to convince us that Hermione's death is a fact. In the next scene we are with Antigonus and the infant Perdita in Bohemia, where we remain till the beginning of Act V. From then onwards everything combines to convince

us, by degrees, that Hermione is in fact alive. The long dialogue in Sicily before Florizel arrives with Perdita is wholly given to the question whether Leontes should or should not remarry, and ends with Paulina's decision that his marriage

> Shall be when your first queen's again in breath;
> Never till then.

Her rebuke to the Gentleman who praises Perdita's beauty, for forgetting Hermione's, serves as a kind of rebuke to the audience too for forgetting her during the Bohemia scenes. When Leontes compliments Perdita Paulina rebukes him also, allowing him to imply the resemblance between his lost wife and his unrecognized daughter in his reply. The final speeches of the three Gentlemen who narrate the discovery of Perdita's identity prepare the audience to see Hermione impersonating her own statue: there could not be a broader hint than the statement that Paulina 'hath privately twice or thrice a day, ever since the death of Hermione, visited that removed house'. Therefore, when the statue is unveiled, the audience is as aware of the true situation as it is when Hero enters masked for her second betrothal to Claudio, though the awareness has been reached by two very different processes, involving in the later play a very uncharacteristic change of front on Shakespeare's part, whereby what was true in the trial scene turned out to have been false later. He equivocates in the design of his plot, but in the scenes themselves he does not equivocate.[1]

The point of the statue scene in *The Winter's Tale* is not to surprise us but to move us. We do feel wonder, although not surprise; but the wonder is at the human emotions of Leontes and the rest, not at a seeming statue's becoming a living woman. To make the point clearly we may contrast an incident in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, also involving matters of life and death and the employment of human statues. In her imprisonment the Duchess is horrified by being given, in the dark, a dead man's hand to hold. She is then, with the words 'Look you, here's the piece from which 'twas ta'en', shown the dead body of her husband and those of their children. This sight makes her demand her own death in a couplet which concludes the scene.

[1] J. H. P. Pafford (ed.), *The Winter's Tale* (The Arden Shakespeare, London, 1963), note to v. iii. 20, is not alone in taking the contrary view: 'The audience do not know that Hermione is alive. For them as well as for everyone else [*sic*] on the stage except Paulina the statue can be nothing but a statue.' See also his discussion of the scene on p. lxii of his introduction.

The next scene opens with her brother Ferdinand exulting in his progress towards bringing her to a suicidal state of mind:

> Excellent: as I would wish; she's plagu'd in art.
> These presentations were but fram'd in wax,
> By the curious master in that quality,
> Vincentio Lauriola, and she takes them
> For true substantial bodies.

This explanation to his subordinate, Bosola, is also an unexpected revelation to the spectators. They, like the Duchess, have been deceived by the lifelike statues. That the statues were represented by the actors playing Antonio and the children there can be no doubt: if they looked less than real the Duchess would look a fool.[1] So we have actors impersonating statues impersonating their bodies. Surprise is the paramount factor here, Webster's theatrical ingenuity matching the devilish ingenuity of Ferdinand.

The deception of the audience in *The Winter's Tale* (if deception is the correct word for it) is quite different. Both Shakespeare and Webster make the spectators believe a thing and then show them that the facts were not what they supposed. The difference is that Webster does his best to obtrude surprise, while Shakespeare does his best to obliterate it: Webster gets his effect by juxtaposition, Shakespeare by separation.

It is not always clear to me when Webster intends to trick his audience. The famous scene in *The White Devil* in which Flamineo exhibits false death-agonies after being shot at with unloaded pistols is a case in point: perhaps one is supposed to guess the unreality of his wounds from the extravagant language in which he describes them; perhaps not; perhaps uncertainty on this matter is the point of the incident.

Shakespeare cannot easily be imagined writing such a scene. The scene in *King Lear* in which Gloucester is made by Edgar to believe that he is throwing himself to his death from Dover Cliff is, in its way, as extravagant a piece of theatre, but there is nothing equivocal about its treatment. The first ten lines, in which Edgar tells Gloucester that it is his blindness that makes him unaware of the hill which is being climbed and the sea which is audible, make the physical fact clear: they are not

[1] The Quarto's stage direction, 'Here is discovered, behind a traverse, the artificial figures of Antonio and his children, appearing as if they were dead', is obviously authorial, and describes the effect to be made, not the means by which it is to be made.

really at a cliff's edge. While Gloucester kneels to pray, Edgar's aside makes the moral fact equally clear:

> Why I do trifle thus with his despair
> Is done to cure it.

When Gloucester throws himself forward, Edgar's speech contains two interesting asides:

> And yet I know not how conceit may rob
> The treasury of life, when life itself
> Yields to the theft; had he been where he thought,
> By this had thought been past. Alive or dead?
> Ho, you sir! friend! Hear you, sir! speak!
> Thus might he pass indeed: yet he revives.
> What are you, sir?

This speech is like Juliet's momentary distrust of the Friar's potion in giving us a new idea to entertain. Its dramatic value is considerable. The possibility that Gloucester may be dead from auto-suggestion should be enough to stop any silly or nervous giggling in the audience; and the implication that he has momentarily lost consciousness makes his belief that he has fallen more believable. Not that Gloucester is easily credulous: in the opening dialogue he never acquiesced, against the evidence of his senses, in imagining that he *was* climbing a hill or *could* hear the sea, and he stoutly maintained his conviction that his guide was 'better spoken' than formerly; and similarly here he asks with some incredulity, 'But have I fall'n, or no?'

Even when his material is complicated, then, Shakespeare characteristically plays fair with his audience. This is a strong reason against complicating it in production when it is simple. Mercutio's very first words after being stabbed by Tybalt under the intervening Romeo's arm are

> I am hurt.
> A plague o' both your houses! I am sped.
> Is he gone, and hath nothing?

They are unequivocal. It is the fact that Mercutio knows he has got his death's wound that makes his ensuing jests so mordant. The fashion now is to make a big theatrical effect out of the delayed recognition, by Mercutio or his companions or both, that he is dying.[1] Shakespeare's text gives no warrant for this.

[1] See Brown, op. cit., 184 (Franco Zeffirelli, London, Old Vic, 1960); David, op. cit., 114 (Trevor Nunn and Barry Kyle, Stratford-upon-Avon, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1976).

Romeo's line,

> Courage, man; the hurt cannot be much,

does not follow from Mercutio's taking his wound lightly but from his taking it seriously: it is a pathetic attempt to hope in a hopeless situation, and as such it draws the uncompromising reply, 'No, 'tis not as deep as a well, nor as wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve.' I should much prefer to enjoy Shakespeare's scene without the high seasoning with which directors disguise its real ingredients. It is not as though the convention that the funny man bears a charmed life had to be overcome. By the time Tybalt draws his sword in reply to Mercutio's taunting challenge, the scene is more than eighty lines old, and the ominous atmosphere has been thoroughly developed. We are expecting Mercutio to be killed. His hope, naturally, is better, and he goes into the fight full of confidence. All the more reason to make his recognition of his fate instantaneous. This is the truly dramatic force of the scene, as is proved whenever a director has the humility and the judgement to play it according to the natural run of its structure and language.

That Shakespeare's own judgement is equal to his genius has been my theme during the past hour, in which I have done my best to analyse the particular dramatic effects made by a number of scenes in which matters of life and death are his subject. In conclusion I return to my opening truism, that it is as drama that his dramatic works should be considered, and I salute him, on the occasion of this annual anniversary celebration, in the words of Ben Jonson:

> The applause, delight, the wonder of our stage.