

# Shakespeare as the Pinnacle of English Literary Tradition

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**Abstract:** Before we go into the details of Shakespeare's writings a few lines about his life is necessary to know. He was born on or about the 23rd April, 1569, at Stratford – on – Avon, Warwickshire. He was the son of a prosperous tradesman of the town, who at a little later became its High Bailiff or Mayor. Though there is no actual record of the fact, it is practically certain that, like other Stratford boys of his class, he went to the local Grammar School an excellent institution of its kind, where he was taught Latin and arithmetic. Financial misfortunes presently over took his father, and when he was about fourteen, he was taken from school that he might help the family by earning money on his own account. Of the nature of his employment Hudson says "We know nothing".<sup>1</sup> In his 19th year he married Anne Hathaway a woman eight years his senior, the daughter of a well - to - do yeoman of the neighbouring village of Shottery. The marriage was hasty and ill - advised, and appears to have been unhappy. Three children were born to him. Susannah, and the twins, Judith and Hamnet. Tradition says that meanwhile he fell into bad company, and that a dear stealing escapade in the words of Charlecote Hall obliged him to fly from home. It is certain that a few years after his marriage roughly about 1587 – he left his native town to seek his fortunes in London. At this time the drama was gaining rapidly in popularity through the work of the University Wits. Shakespeare soon turned to the stage and became first an actor and then a playwright. An ill - natured reference to him in a pamphlet written by Greene on his death bed, shows that in 1592 he was well known as a successful author. He remained in London upwards of twenty years after this, working hard, producing on an average a couple of plays a year and growing steadily in fame and wealth. He became a shareholder in two of the leading theaters of the time, the Globe and the Black friars and purchased property in Stratford and London. But the years which brought prosperity also brought domestic sorrows. His only son died in 1596 his father in 1601, his younger brother Edmund, also an actor, in 1607 married Dr John Hall who was later celebrated as a physician, on February 10, 1616, Judith became the wife of Thomas Quiney, whose father had been one of the poet's closest friends. By this time Shakespeare's health was broken down completely, and he died on the 23rd April of that year.

**Keywords:** Witches, Atmosphere, Wild appearances of the Witches, thunder and lightning, fog and filthy air

## 1. Research Methods

The Research Methods needs no Introduction. Every line what Shakespeare wrote is itself blended with his own writings.

### Shakespeare's Biography

Shakespeare's biography proves conclusively that, like Chaucer, he was no dreamer, but a practical man of affairs. He reached London poor and friendless, he left it rich and respected, and his fortunes were the work of his own hand. Much light is thus thrown not only upon his personal character, but also upon his writings, in which great powers of creative imagination and combined with, and supported by, a wonderful feeling for reality, sound common sense, and a large and varied familiarity with the world.

### Shakespeare's Works

Shakespeare works can be divided in different periods:

- 1) **1588 – 93** Three parts of Henry VI and Titus Andronicus. To this period belong his first comedies, in which the influence of Lily is pronounced – Love's Labour's Lost, The two gentlemen of varona, The comedy of Erros, and A Midsummer Night's Dream, Richard III and a Single and youthful tragedy, Romeo and Juliet.
- 2) **1594 – 1600** Period of great comedies, and chronicle plays. The works of this period are – Richard II, King John, The Merchant of Venice, Henry IV Parts I and II Henry V, The Taming of the Shrew, The Merry wives of Windsor, Much ado about nothing, As you like It and Twelfth Night.
- 3) **1601 – 08** Period of the great tragedies, and of the somber of bitter comedies. In this period all

Shakespeare's powers his dramatic power, his intellectual power and his power of expression – are at their highest. This is the time of his supreme master pieces. The plays of this period are: Julius Caesar, Hamlet, All is well that ends well, Measure for Measure, Troilus and Cressida, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra, Corialamus, and Time of Athens.

- 4) **1608 – 1612** Period of the Later comedies or Dramatic Romances. Three plays entirely Shakespeare's belong to this period – Cymbeline, The Tempest, and the Winter's Tale, Pericles and Henry VIII.

### Characteristics of Shakespeare's Works

Token as a whole Shakespeare's plays constitute the greatest single body work which any writer has contributed to English Literature. Perhaps their most salient feature is their astonishing variety. Other men have surpassed him at this point and that but no one has every rivalled him in the range and versatility of his powers. He was (though not equally) at home in tragedy and comedy and his genius took in innumerable aspects of both; he was supreme not only as a dramatist, but also as a poet to whom the world of high imagination and delicate fancy were alike open; and while not himself a very profound and intelligent thinker, he possessed in a superlative degree the faculty of digesting thought into phraseology so memorable and so final that, as we all know he is the most often quoted of all our writers. He was almost entirely free from dogmatism of any kind, and his tolerance was as comprehensive as his outlook. The greatness of Shakespeare's work is apt to bind critics to his limitations and defects, but these must of course be recognized in an estimate of him, or otherwise we shall get him out of his proper focus. Broad as he was, he was

essentially a man of his time while his plays are remarkable for their general truth to what is permanent in human nature, still his interpretation of human nature is that of an age in many respects very different from our own. He wrote hurriedly and signs of hasty and ill production are after apparent.

Professor Bradley says "A Shakespearean tragedy as a rule has a special tone or atmosphere of its own, quite perceptible however difficult to describe. His famous tragedy 'Macbeth' is set in a dismal and dreary atmosphere based with overpowering supernatural awe and horror. It is therefore, the most poignant and the most appealing and the most awe-inspiring tragedy, in which Shakespeare takes the readers and spectators straight into black tragedy, through our readers and spectators set plural number as 'such things and such sights'. Those who hold the view that the second ghost is Duncan's get clue from Macbeth's words 'Thy bones are marrowless'. They explain that the bones of Banquo who had died only a few minutes later could not be 'marrowless'. The second ghost must be Duncan's ghost. Nevertheless, this theory does not seem to hold water. Shakespeare could not have been so negligent as to give no definite stage directions regarding the appearance of the ghosts. In the contemporary history of Macbeth also no reference has been made to the ghost of Duncan.

### Atmosphere in Macbeth

An Bradley in his book 'Shakespearean tragedy' PP 278 - 282 says, "A Shakespearean tragedy as a rule, has a special tone or atmosphere of its own, quite perceptible, however difficult to describe. The effect of this atmosphere is marked with unusual strength in Macbeth. We may approach the consideration of the characters and the action by distinguishing some of the ingredients of this general effect".<sup>3</sup>

The atmosphere of Macbeth, however is not that of unrelieved blackness. On the contrary, is compared with King Lear and its cold dim gloom, Macbeth leaves a decided impression of colour; it is really the impression of a black night broken by flashes of light and colour, sometimes vivid and even glaring. They are the lights of thunder storm in the 1st scene; of the daggers hanging before Macbeth's eyes and glittering done midnight air; of the torch borne by the servant when he and his Lord came upon Banquet's crossing the castle count of his room, of the torch again, which Fleance carried to light his father to death, and which was dashed out by one of the murderers, of the torches that flared in the hall on the face of the ghost and the blanched cheeks of Macbeth.

The witches, after their first wild appearance, have hardly quitted the stage when their staggers onto it a 'bloody man', gashed with wounds. His tale is of a hero whose 'brandished steel smoked with bloody execution, 'carried out a passage' to his enemy, and when unseamed him from the nave to the chaps'.

### The Witches in Macbeth

It need hardly be once more repeated that the Witches of Macbeth are not the broom stick witches of vulgar tradition. If they are grotesque, they are also sublime.

Shakespeare fearlessly followed us his weird sisters, "the Goddess of destiny" brewing infernal charms in their wicked cauldron. The Weird Sisters, say Gervinus "are simply the embodiment of inward temptation. The Witches are nameless and sexless. It is enough to know that such powers auxiliary to vice do exist outside ourselves, and that Shakespeare was scientifically accurate in his statement of the fact.

"There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio, Than are dreamt in your philosophy".

"The true reason for the first appearance of the Witches, Coleridge has said, "is to strike the key note of the character of the whole drama" <sup>6</sup> They appear in a desert place, with thunder and lightning, it is the barren place where evil has obtained the mastery of things. Observe the last words of the witches, in the opening scene of the play, are the first words which himself utters.

"Fair is foul and foul is fair

However through the fog and filthy air" <sup>7</sup>

So foul and fair a day

Shakespeare has said that he had not seen.

### Abstract / Observation

In the Witches of Macbeth let us observe another point. The vividness, magnitude, and violence of the imagery in some of the passages are characteristic of Macbeth almost throughout, and their influence contributes to form its atmosphere. Images like those of babe torn smiling from the breast and dashed to death, of powering the sweet milk of concord into hell, of the earth shaking in fever, of the frame of things disjointed, of sorrows striking heaven on the face, so that it resounds and yells out like syllables of colour, of the mind lying in restless ecstasy on a rock, of the mind full of scarp ions, of the tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing. All these help to keep the imagination moving on a 'wild and violent sea' while it is scarcely for a moment permitted to dwell on thoughts of peace and beauty. In its language, as in its action, the drama is full of tumult and storm. Whenever the Witches are present we see and hear a thunder storm, when they are absent we hear of ship - wrecking storms and direful thunders, of tempests that blow down trees and churches, castles, palaces, and pyramids, of the frightful hurricane of the night when Duncan's was murdered, of the blast on which petty rides like a new born babe, or on which Heaven's cherubim are horsed. There is thus something magnificently appropriate the cry blow wind come wrack ! with which Macbeth turning from the sight of the moving wood of Birnam bursts from his castle. He was borne to his throne on a whirlwind, and the fate he goes to meet comes on the wings of storm. Now all these agencies, darkness, the lights and colours that illuminate it, the storm that rushes through it, the violent and gigantic images conspire with the appearances of the witches and the Ghost to awaken horror, and in some degree also a supernatural dread.

### Bradley's criticism

There are two views in this connection. As to the former, Shakespeare took as material his purposes, the ideas about witches craft that he found existing in people around him

and his books like Reginald Scot's Discovery (1584). And he used these ideas without changing their substance at all. He selected and improved, avoiding the merely ridiculous, dismissing (unlike Middleton) the sexually loathsome or stimulating a rehandling and lightening whatever could touch the imagination with fear, horror, and mysterious attraction. The Witches that is to say, are not Goddesses, or fates or in any way whatever, supernatural beings. They are old women, poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite, occupied in killing their neighbours so vine or revenging themselves on sailors wives who have refused them chestnuts. If Banquo considers their beards a proof that they are not woman, that only shows his ignorance. There is not a syllable in Macbeth to imply that they are anything but woman. But, again in accordance with the popular ideas, they have received from evil spirits certain supernatural powers. They can raise, hail, tempests and hurtful weather, as lightening thunder etc. They can pass from place to place in the airs in visible. They can keep, devils and spirits in the likeness of todes and cats. He used nothing but the phrase weird sisters. His witches owe their powers to the spirits, they are the instruments of darkness, the spirit are their masters.<sup>4</sup> (iv.1.63) Fancy the fates having masters?

As to the latter view we can say that the influence of the Witches prophecies on Macbeth is very great, it is clearly shown to be an influence and nothing more. The prophecies of the witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal. They are dramatically on the same level as the story of the ghost in Hamlet, or the false hoods told by Iago to Othello.

## 2. Summary

There can be no summary better than what Edward Dowden in his book 'Shakespeare' (A critical study of the mind and art) <sup>5</sup> has said about Macbeth, the greatest tragedy written by the greatest man on earth. There is a line in the play of Macbeth, uttered as the evening shadows begin to gather on the day of Banquet's murder, which we may repeat to ourselves as a motto of the entire tragedy. "Good things of day begin to drop and drowse". It is the tragedy of the twilight and the setting in of thick darkness upon a human soul. We assist at the spectacle of a terrible sunset in foolish clouds of blood. To the last, however, one thin hands breadth of melancholy light remains, the sadness of the day with its strength. Macbeth is the prey of a profound world weariness. And while a huge ennui pursues crime, the criminal is not yet in utter blackness of night. When the play opens, the sun is already dropping below the verge. And as it sunset strange wind arise, and gather the clouds to westward, with mysterious pause and stir, so the play of Macbeth opens with the movement of the mysterious spiritual powers, which are auxiliary of that awful shadow which first creeps, and then strides across the moral horizon.

### References are given at the end

The list of references is well supported by documents that directly support the claims and discussions as provided in the different paragraphs of the article.

## References

- [1] Hudson says "We know nothing".
- [2] Brad leys criticism.
- [3] Brad leys definition of Shakespeare tragedy.
- [4] IV 1.63
- [5] Edward Dowden in his book "Shakespeare" (A critical study of the mind and art) P/244 - 256.
- [6] Coleridge's comment on the first appearance of the Witches.
- [7] Shakespeare comment which says that he had not seen such behaviour of the Witches. NB\_-In\_my\_next\_article I\_would\_like\_to\_lay\_emphasis\_on\_the\_dramists\_comedy which\_I\_hae\_onto\_dealt\_here\_