

Reflections on Shakespeare, Keats and Others

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PUNASCHA

Preface

The present collection of papers and essays were occasioned by seminars, invited addresses and refresher course lectures; only a few were written at the request of editors of several journals. They cover a wide area: from Shakespeare to Hemmingway, with Wordsworth, Keats, Auden and many others in between. The target audience had always been students, both of undergraduate and postgraduate courses, as well as young teachers of English literature. My aim was to arouse interest in rather than to pontificate on the topics discussed.

Now, at the insistence of my friends and students this miscellany is being brought out for the general reader. Jay Bandyopadhyay, Siddhartha Dutta, Subhendu Sarkar, Sunish Kumar Deb and Tarun Basu helped me in so many ways that I cannot thank them enough. Thanks are also due to Sandip Nayak of Punascha who readily agreed to publish the collection of essays.

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1

REASON AND IMPULSE IN RENAISSANCE TRAGEDY

At a crucial juncture in Euripides' play, Medea tells herself (lines 1078-1080):

I understand
The horror of what I am going to do; but *anger*
The spring of all life's horror, masters my *resolve*.¹

The two key words in the passage, 'anger' (*thumos*) and 'resolve' (*bouleumata*), require some gloss. The first, *thumos* includes anger, pride, passion and 'all those emotions which have to do with self-esteem'; the other word, *bouleumata* denotes 'calculated, rational resolves.'² In other words, *thumos*, like Latin *animus*, means the soul, heart and so, mind, temper, will and spirit or courage; *bouleumata*, on the other hand, suggests a deliberate resolution, plan, design. Thus, once Medea resolves to avenge her humiliation by killing her own children (by Jason), she succumbs helplessly but consciously to *thumos*. This brings grief to her, but intent on revenge, she is unable to foresee what her rash action might entail.

From the very beginning of the play Medea is found 'unapproachable, wrapped up in her own thoughts. Throughout the play she is bound up with her own feelings. Plays about such people are common enough, but Euripides was apparently the first dramatist to use such an approach frequently. Before him it was more often what happened to people and what they did that was important in plays, not so much what they felt about events.'³

'These verses', it has been claimed, 'reveal the first emergence into consciousness of a new morality which in days to come was to reign supreme. A morality of psychological and individualistic colouring, it appears in the guise of a purely internal impulse, in the negative form of a moral inhibition or scruple.'⁴

Euripides' expression of 'double consciousness' has been quoted and imitated by a number of Greek and Latin authors, as Lucian, Plutarch, Clement, Galen, Arrian, Simplicius and Ovid.⁵ The cardinal importance of this passage then can hardly be overestimated. That Euripides could make a woman deliberate so coolly and make the all-female chorus venture

into philosophical comments for doing so (although they have to find a valid explanation for the attitude) also deserves some notice, especially by the feminists.

What we intend to do here, however, is to highlight a typical theme that occurs in subsequent tragedies as well: some Renaissance tragedies (though by no means all) represent retreat from reason as the cause of the tragic catastrophe. It is around this theme that such plays revolve. The irresolvable contradiction between *thumos* and *bouleumata* is, for instance, the focal point in *Othello*. The hero there abandons all reason and surrenders 'to *thumos*. The Baroque drama, too, it has been argued, brings out the split between *passion* and *reason*, the former almost invariably getting the upperhand,⁶ and causing the tragedy.

First, some clarification. By 'reason' we mean the innate human faculty which enables one to think of the consequences before one starts acting — to look before one leaps. Directly in opposition to it stands another inborn trait — impulse, instinct as well as emotion, etc. Reason, as Macbeth says, is 'the pauser'; impulse is the hastener which compels one to leap before looking. This antinomy inheres in Medea's speech though the expression is different. In some plays of Shakespeare we find the same polarity in such expressions as blood/judgement, valour/reason or valour/wisdom, will/reason, will/wit, etc.

This, however, is not all. It will be more interesting to see how the idea of the irresolvable contradiction between impulse and reason has been skilfully manipulated by Macbeth. Duncan has been murdered. Macbeth intends to pass the blame on the grooms. After the arrival of Malcolm and his train the horrid deed is discovered. Macbeth instantly kills the grooms to make any enquiry impossible. Macduff, visibly perturbed, asks, 'Wherefore did you so?' Our hero waxes eloquent:

Who can be wise, amaz'd, temp'rate and furious,
Loyal, and neutral, in a moment? No man.
The expedition of my violent love
Outrun the pauser reason.

(2.3.107-10)

This may be taken as an unconscious travesty of Medea's words. Medea, after some hesitation and considerable pain, decided on her course of action, fully conscious of the fact that she was following her impulse rather than reason. The 'pauser' had to be abandoned because of her wounded self-esteem. Macbeth, on the other hand, was coolly dissembling. He had killed the grooms in cold blood. It was *his* self-interest that had prompted him to do so and, at the same time, to feign that it was merely an act of impulse: the expedition of his violent love.

Hamlet, as Brecht has shown, finds himself in an irrational world where reason has no room to operate. Hence the tragedy.

Given the dark and bloody period in which I am writing — the criminal ruling classes, the widespread doubt in the powers of reason, continually being misused — I think that I can read the story thus: It is an age of warriors. Hamlet's father, king of Denmark, slew the king of Norway in a successful war of spoliation. While the latter's son Fortinbras is arming for a fresh war, the Danish king is likewise slain by his own brother. The slain kings' brothers, now themselves kings, avert war by arranging that the Norwegian troops shall cross Danish soil to launch a predatory war against Poland. But at this point the young Hamlet is summoned by his warrior father's ghost to avenge the crime committed against him. After at first being reluctant to answer one bloody deed by another, and even preparing to go into exile, he meets young Fortinbras at the coast as he is marching with his troops to Poland. Overcome by this warrior-like example, he turns back and in a piece of barbaric butchery slaughters his uncle, his mother and himself, leaving Denmark to the Norwegian. These events show the young man, already somewhat stout, making the most ineffective use of the new approach to Reason, which he has picked up at the University of Wittenberg. In the feudal business to which he returns it simply hampers him. Faced with irrational practices, his reason is utterly impractical. He falls a tragic victim to the discrepancy between such reasoning and such action.⁷

This, no doubt, is a radical interpretation of the play, which, in spite of some factual errors, provides a new look at the tragedy.

This interpretation of *Hamlet* is not so much off the mark as it may appear. Hamlet himself, like a true logician, considers reason to be the *differentia*: his reflection, 'a beast that wants *discourse of reason* would have mourn'd longer' (1.2.150-1) is a pointer to his understanding. The same idea is found-again in his speech:

What is a man,
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and *godlike reason*
To fust in us unus'd,

(4.4.33-38)

It was Hamlet again who told Horatio of 'some vicious mole of nature' that breaks down 'the pales and forts of reason'. (1.4.24,28)

Reason thus plays a focal role in some tragedies. Lear's retreat from

reason in the first scene of the play paves the way for his tragedy. Paradoxically enough, when he seems to have lost his reason altogether, he comes to know how irrational he had been. No wonder that the whole of Act 4 contains so much display of reason in madness.

The theme of retreat from reason can work both ways in a tragedy. When the call of duty goes against one's heart's desire (as in the case of Racine's *Berenice*,⁸ it is a ripe situation for tragedy — whichever be the winner. A few more examples might be adduced from Shakespeare's plays where the repressed voice of reason is at the root of the catastrophe.

In some tragedies of Shakespeare, we have said, the contraposition of reason and impulse appears in different garbs. Interestingly enough the latter is *invariably undervalued* and the former is considered superior under all circumstances. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, we find:

Cleopatra: Is Antony or we are in fault?

Enobarbus: Antony only, that would make his *will* Lord of his *reason*. (3.13.3-4)

It is a harsh reminder that *will* should not be allowed to overpower *reason*. Antony's affection 'nick'd his captainship.' In the same scene Antony laments:

O misery on't! — the wise gods seal our eyes,
In our own filth drop our clear judgements, make us
Adore our errors, laugh at's while we strut
To our confusion.

(3.13.112-5)

To blame the gods, Antony too knows, is an admission of his own fault; he himself has jettisoned his clear judgements because of his own infatuation. Enobarbus soliloquises:

and I see still
A diminution in our captain's brain
Restores his heart. When *valour* preys on *reason*,
It eats the sword it fights with.

(3.13.197-200)

Thus in a play dominated by passion, a note of criticism is inherent. The 'pauser' reason, conspicuous by its absence, makes Antony a caricature of his former self.

The contrast between *valour* and *wisdom* in Macbeth's soliloquy (in 3.1) is an excellent piece of self-criticism. Macbeth bemoans:

'Tis much he (Banquo) dares
And to that dauntless temper of his mind
He hath a wisdom that both guide his valour
To act in safety.

(3.1.50-3)

Macbeth grudges Banquo the quality he himself lacks. He too has that dauntless temper but is wanting in wisdom that should accompany it.

An elaborate exposition of the same theme is found in *Troilus and Cressida* (2.2). Hector's speeches contain counsels of sobriety, of judgement, to which nobody pays any heed. He asks Troilus:

. . . is your blood
So madly hot that *no discourse of reason*,
Nor fear of bad success in a bad cause,
Can qualify the same?

(2.2.115-8)

In the same way he admonishes Paris:

The reasons you allege do more conduce
To the hot passion of distempered blood
Than to make up a free determination
'Twixt right and wrong;

(2.2.168-71)

He connects it with the law of nature as well as that of state:

There is a law in each well-order'd nation
To curb those raging appetites that are
Most disobedient and refractory.

(2.2.180-2)

We may conclude with what M.C. Bradbrook said about Elizabethan plays in general. It bears out the same contention we hold, viz. the superior position given to reason.

However much the psychological aspect of his character might predispose a man to act, the ultimate remedy for his disorders was ethical: the use of reason, prayer and the exercise of the will in self-control. All theorists are at least agreed upon this....

Because reason was the supremest and governing faculty, dramatic characters may occasionally show themselves open to persuasion in a way that appears highly artificial. Truth must prevail: and if the mind is convinced, then the will and action will follow the lead of reason. In *The Honest Whore*, Part I, Hippolito undertakes to convert the courtesan Bellafront by force of reason and does so. In the second part, having lapsed into a sinful desire to possess her, he prepares to argue her out of her virtue again, and Bellafront agrees that if he can produce convincing reasons, she will yield. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* Vindice's attempt to seduce his sister for the duke is repulsed, to his great joy. But he finds to his horror that his fallacious arguments have succeeded with his mother. Hence such scenes as the trial scenes in *The Merchant of Venice*, Isabella's debate with Angelo, the King's attempt to show that Helena is as noble as