

## Kierkegaard and Shakespeare

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## Kierkegaard And Shakespeare

DURING THE last year of his life Kierkegaard was asked by his niece, Henrietta Lund, if he too had been deeply affected by *Hamlet*. "Yes, indeed," Kierkegaard replied, "but for me it is an entirely different thing. That you cannot understand now—. Someday, perhaps, you will understand it."<sup>1</sup> In exploring the full implications of this conversation, we shall find that Kierkegaard was influenced by Shakespeare in three important aspects—his personal life, his psychology, and his aesthetics. In his personal life, he not only identified himself with several of Shakespeare's characters, but even with Shakespeare himself; in his psychology, he found convincing examples in Shakespeare's plays for certain categories of existence, and in his aesthetics, he was greatly influenced by Shakespeare in arriving at his unique conception of tragedy.

In recent discussions of Kierkegaard and Shakespeare, critics have been concerned, perhaps too exclusively, with citing parallels between Hamlet's character and situation and Kierkegaard's.<sup>2</sup> They have remarked upon Kierkegaard's impossible Ophelia-like relationship with Regina Olsen, which was sullied by Kierkegaard's discovery in 1835 of his parents' premarital illicitness.<sup>3</sup> They have noted Kierke-

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Walter Lowrie, *A Short Life of Kierkegaard* (Anchor Books, 1961), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> See Walter Bochlich, "Noch einmal Kierkegaard und Hamlet," *Der Monat*, LXVI (1954), 628-634; Salvador de Madariaga, "Noch einmal Kierkegaard und Hamlet," *ibid.*, pp. 625-628; Horst Oppel, "Shakespeare und Kierkegaard. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Hamlet-Deutung," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, LXXXVI (1940), 112-136; Denis de Rougemont, "Kierkegaard and Hamlet: Two Danish Princes," *Anchor Review*, I (1955), 107-127.

<sup>3</sup> See Lowrie, pp. 54-63, and Peter P. Rohde, *Soren Kierkegaard: Introduction to His Life and Philosophy* (New York, 1963), pp. 43-49. Kierkegaard refers to this secret of his father's guilt when in *Stages on Life's Way* he describes Solomon's discovery of David's sensuality.

gaard's melancholy and feigned madness; his protracted anxiety and indecision; his profound questioning and doubt. Indeed, if Hamlet had been religious, suggests Denis de Rougemont, his story would have been "purely and simply the biography of Kierkegaard."

What has been neglected in these speculations, however, is the fact that Kierkegaard himself read the story of Hamlet as a mirror of his own experience. On January 17, 1837, shortly after his traumatic sexual initiation in a Copenhagen brothel, Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journals* that *Hamlet* illustrated, for him, the "all-consuming power of original sin," and added that Hamlet's despair was aggravated by the fact it took place "in the midst of the most favorable circumstances."<sup>4</sup> Kierkegaard too was afflicted by the taint of parental guilt, by "original sin," but unlike Hamlet, Kierkegaard had added personal corruption to hereditary guilt by his sexual transgression. But in what sense could Hamlet's despair have been "aggravated" by the "favorable circumstances" of his personal innocence? As we shall see later in considering Kierkegaard's view of tragedy, the "ambiguous innocence" of one who must bear a guilt that is not his own is more painful than simple culpableness because impersonal guilt has no refuge in ethical or rational justification. From Kierkegaard's ironic perspective, his own despair, in contrast to Hamlet's, was alleviated because, as a result of his recent sin in the brothel, he could blame himself in an entirely ethical context.

Kierkegaard found no such alleviation in his relations with his guilty father. During that same month of January, when he was wrestling with the two specters of hereditary and personal guilt, and felt most painfully alienated from his father, he was so moved by Shakespeare's theme of father betrayal and filial reconciliation in *King Lear* that he copied in his private papers these lines from Act V, Scene 3:

So we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At golden butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Tell of court news; and we'll talk with them too,  
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out;  
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out  
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones,  
Who ebb and flow by the moon.

Walter Lowrie calls this passage "an exact counterpart to Søren's reconciliation with his father," and suggests that these lines immediately following were "too poignantly appropriate" to inscribe:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Journals*, trans. Alexander Dru (London, 1959), p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Lowrie, p. 97.

No, no, no, no! Come, let us away to prison:  
 We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;  
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
 And ask of thee forgiveness.

In his "Diary of A Seducer" Kierkegaard again finds *Lear* relevant to his own experience, this time in his relations with Regina Olsen. In "Diary" he appears in a variety of roles depending on the turn of the story. When the narrator tests Cordelia's love, he is obviously Kierkegaard, who like Lear, requires the impossible of his beloved. In another place he appears as Cordelia, "that remarkable girl who did not wear her heart on her lips, whose lips were silent while her heart beat warmly."<sup>6</sup> Thus, if Kierkegaard is Lear brutally rejecting Cordelia's love, he is also Cordelia refusing to speak what is in his heart. In these and other such disguises Kierkegaard performed the tragedy of the Regina Olson affair. In *Fear and Trembling* he portrays himself as both Abraham and Isaac. As Abraham he must sacrifice Regina Olsen to an obligation transcending the merely ethical, or "universal"; as Isaac, he is himself sacrificed by a fanatical, "crazy" father. Elsewhere he dramatizes himself and Regina Olsen in the tales of Tobias and Sarah, Agnes and the merman, Agamemnon and Iphigenia. In *Either/Or* he appears as Antigone, who in his own version of the story cannot marry Häimon because she somehow learns the secret of her father's guilt, just as Kierkegaard had learned of his mother's premarital relations with his father when she was his housekeeper.

In all of these various roles he saw himself as the supreme ironist and ultimate hero writing the allegory of his own unfolding existence. Like Hamlet and Cordelia, he must "hold his tongue," remaining silent or unintelligible while afflicted with agonizing "collisions." With this ironic view of himself as artist, he came to look upon Shakespeare as a kindred spirit with some deep, ineffable "secret" he could not utter except by artistic sublimation. This concept of Shakespeare is implicit in *Fear and Trembling*:

Thanks and thanks again to him who proffers to the man whom the sorrows of life have assaulted and left naked—proffers to him the figleaf of the word with which he can cover his wretchedness... Thanks be to thee, great Shakespeare, who art able to express everything, absolutely everything, precisely as it is—and yet why didst thou never pronounce this pang? *Didst thou perhaps reserve it to thyself—like the loved one whose name one cannot endure that the world should mention?* For the poet purchases the power of words, the power of uttering all the dread secrets of others, at the price of a little secret he is unable

<sup>6</sup> *Either/Or: A Fragment of A Life*, trans. David F. and Lillian M. Swenson, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1944), I, 278.

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to utter . . . and a poet is not an apostle, he casts out devils only by the power of the devil.<sup>7</sup>

In other tributes to Shakespeare's genius, Kierkegaard invariably suggests that it was motivated by some profound "secret," or by "collisions," "devils," or "spirits" Shakespeare dared not release except in objective dramatic form. In *Sickness unto Death*, for example, Kierkegaard discovers a Shakespeare of powerful "collisions" hidden under laminations of aesthetic objectivity:

O, my friend, what hast thou attempted to do in life? Tax thy brain, tear off every covering and lay bare the viscera of feeling in thy breast, surmount every barrier which separates thee from him whom thou readest, and then read Shakespeare—and thou shalt shrink from the collisions.<sup>8</sup>

Even here Kierkegaard identifies himself with a "secret" Shakespeare, for this tribute concludes what Walter Lowrie calls an "intensely personal" paragraph in which Kierkegaard, in the disguise of Anti-Climacus, hints at the possibility of a "new relationship" with Regina Olsen after her marriage to Schlegel.<sup>9</sup> The same passion that had prompted Kierkegaard to break his relationship with Regina Olsen now urged him, for her sake, to renew it, and this "collision" is the "little secret" that Anti-Climacus, like Shakespeare, is "unable to utter."

Although Kierkegaard never states just what "secret" Shakespeare concealed from less perceptive readers, he hints in one place that it may have been the one Kierkegaard knew about himself—the secret of his own madness. In his M.A. dissertation, *The Concept of Irony* (1841), Kierkegaard praises Shakespeare for being the "great master of irony" who was able to divert "spirits which obstinately seek to storm forth" into channels of objective artistic expression.

Shakespeare has often been praised as the great master of irony [observes Kierkegaard], and there can scarcely be any doubt that this is correct. Shakespeare, however, in no wise allows the substantial content to evaporate in an even more volatile sublimation, and insofar as his lyricism sometimes culminates in madness there is in this madness nevertheless an extraordinary degree of objectivity.<sup>10</sup>

Kierkegaard defines irony as a psychological process wherein the ironist, presupposing that his listener understands him, and yet, paradoxically, not really wishing to be "universally understood," negates

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<sup>7</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Anchor Books, 1941), p. 72. Italics mine.

<sup>8</sup> *Sickness unto Death*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Anchor Books, 1941), p. 258.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275, note 27.

<sup>10</sup> *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (New York, 1965), p. 336.

his subjective impulses (the "phenomenon") and emancipates himself through the objective work of art (the "essence") until phenomenon and essence become one harmonious activity. In this context Kierkegaard praises Shakespeare for *Gleichgültigkeit*, for an "indifference" or objectivity somewhat comparable to Keats' "negative capability":

Accordingly, when Shakespeare relates himself ironically to his work, this is singly in order to let the objective prevail. Irony is now pervasive, satisfying each particular feature so there is neither too much nor too little, so that everything receives its due... The greater the oppositions involved in this movement, so much the more irony is required to control and master those spirits which obstinately seek to storm forth; while the more irony is present, so much the more freely and poetically does the poet hover above his composition.<sup>11</sup>

Presumably, then, Shakespeare negated or sublimated the "oppositions," "collisions," and "spirits" that afflicted him, converting the raw power of madness into coherent form through irony, which Kierkegaard seems to have viewed as being comparable in effects to what modern aestheticians since Bullough have called "psychical distance." Thus Kierkegaard, the supreme ironist who expressed his own "collisions" and released his own "spirits" from behind a score of masks, saw in Shakespeare his own alter ego, a "mad" kindred spirit who, like himself, mastered inner turbulence by objectifying it in manifold artistic forms that could never be "universally understood." If, as Henry James once said, Shakespeare was a "magician with a thousand masks," Kierkegaard imagined the magician to be as tortured, paradoxical, and "mad" as himself. In view of this strange conception, and of Kierkegaard's own protean role-playing in his philosophical discourses, we can only speculate as to what extent Shakespeare played a part in shaping Kierkegaard's ironic techniques of personal revelation.

Much more certain is the role Shakespeare played in providing Kierkegaard with heuristic illustrations of philosophical and psychological principles, especially those in opposition to Hegel's philosophy. On June 14, 1834 Kierkegaard wrote in his *Journals* a repudiation of Hegel's principle of the mediation of contradictions that echoes *Hamlet*:

Verily, we do not need Hegel, to tell us that relative contradictions can be mediated, since the fact that they can be separated is found in the ancients; and personality will protest in all eternity against the proposition that absolute contradictions can be mediated... It will repeat its immortal dilemma through all eternity: "to be or not to be, that is the question."<sup>12</sup>

Ten years later, again attacking Hegel with reference to *Hamlet*, he asserts that German philosophy, because of its addiction to Hegelian

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Journals*, p. 74.

logic and metaphysics, proclaims that "There is nothing new under the sun," whereas the motto of the "new Danish philosophy" must be, in the words of Hamlet, "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."<sup>13</sup> For Kierkegaard, *Hamlet* illustrated the baffling complexity of human life and the failure of any philosophical system, least of all Hegel's, to explain its paradoxes and ambiguities. "As Hamlet says," notes Kierkegaard, "existence and non-existence have only subjective significance."<sup>14</sup>

For Kierkegaard, Shakespeare was the supreme psychologist who anticipated some of his own discoveries of the "categories" of existence, and especially of the category Kierkegaard calls the "demoniacal"—that enigmatic cast of mind which repudiates both the "particular," the religious imperative, and the "universal," the ethical obligation. "Of this demonic 'collision,'" states Kierkegaard, "Shakespeare constantly remains the hero."<sup>15</sup> In this collision between the religious and the ethical, demonic men rage against existence until their despair becomes the essence of themselves, and their own lives come to represent the chief example of cosmic injustice. Such men are the opposite of "believers" like Abraham, for their "dialectical force," says Kierkegaard, is in the other direction, toward Satan rather than God. This mania Kierkegaard finds brilliantly portrayed in Shakespeare's Richard III, who, according to Kierkegaard, rejects both God and man, both "particular" and "universal," because "he could not bear the pity he had been subjected to since childhood."<sup>16</sup> This last is an especially interesting comment, for nowhere in *Richard III* is Richard pitied in the way Kierkegaard suggests. Richard's deformity is always referred to with contempt and disdain by other characters in the play, even by Richard's mother, the Duchess of York. Kierkegaard's observation, then, represents his tendency to read beyond the play, or, perhaps more accurately, to read his own childhood agonies into Shakespeare's story of Richard.

In any event Shakespeare's Richard III convinced Kierkegaard that no stretch of logic or reason could explain the demonic temperament, for Richard contradicted Hegel's rational conception of existence as much as Dostoevsky's Underground Man baffled the pristine reason

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> "Concluding Unscientific Postscript" in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. David P. Swenson and ed. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, 1941), p. 173.

<sup>15</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* W. H. Auden compares Richard III and Kierkegaard in *The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard* (New York, 1952), p. 4. Kierkegaard's spinal deformity, resulting from a childhood accident, is discussed with reference to Richard III by Theodore Haecker in *Kierkegaard the Cripple*, trans. C. Van O. Bruyn (Philosophical Library, 1950).

symbolized by the Crystal Palace. Again chiding Hegel for his facile concept of "mediation," Kierkegaard observes that "such natures as that of Gloucester one cannot save by mediating them into an idea of society," and that Richard's first soliloquy in Act I, Scene I "is worth more than all the moral systems which have no inkling of the terrors of existence or of the explanation of them."<sup>17</sup> Richard could only be explained in terms of Kierkegaard's own crisis psychology. Being cheated by "dissembling" nature, Richard becomes "disoriented in relation to the universal," and, defying both religion and ethics, enters into an absolute relationship with evil. The dialectical antithesis of Kierkegaard's "knight of faith," Abraham, who enters into an "absolute relationship with God" by a "teleological suspension of the ethical," Richard suspends the ethical to enter into an absolute relationship with himself—that is, with the devil incarnate.

Kierkegaard finds a similar pattern in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which he interprets as a dramatization of "despairing over one's sin," to the point of "demoniacal introversion." Unlike most nineteenth-century critics, Kierkegaard is less concerned with Macbeth's motives in murdering Duncan than with Macbeth's reactions to the crime. He observes that the momentum of Macbeth's actions after the murder is maintained not by ambition but by guilt, by sheer energy of despair. Like Richard, Macbeth is transformed by "demoniacal introversion" and can "only maintain himself by sinking deeper." Kierkegaard finds Macbeth's words in Act II, Scene 3 especially expressive of this psychology of sin:

For, from this instant,  
There's nothing serious in mortality:  
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead.

In commenting on these lines, Kierkegaard describes how Macbeth's "borrowed robes" lead to "a crisis of identity":

By sin, that is, by despairing over his sin, he has lost every relation to grace—and to himself at the same time. His selfish self culminates in ambition. Now he is indeed become king, and yet, by despairing over his sin, and about the reality of repentance, about grace, he has also lost himself. He cannot even maintain himself in his own eyes, and he is precisely as far from being able to enjoy his own self in ambition as he is from grasping grace.<sup>18</sup>

Macbeth purchases sceptre and crown at the price of his own identity, at the cost of reality itself, and since his new reality is predicated on sinful illusion, it can be sustained only by intensifying sin. Good Augustinian that he is, Kierkegaard views Macbeth's fall as a condition, not

<sup>17</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> *Sickness unto Death*, p. 241.

as an act. Falling into a condition of sin through ambition, and experiencing a "breach with repentance" through despair, Macbeth can sense life and continuity only by energetic reinforcement of the evil on which his fallen self depends: "By perdition he is blinded to the fact that his life, instead of possessing the essential continuity of the eternal by being before God in faith, has the continuity of sin."<sup>19</sup> According to Kierkegaard, Shakespeare strikes a "masterly stroke" when he has Macbeth say, "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill."<sup>20</sup>

Kierkegaard seems to have read Shakespeare's plays selectively; he writes only about tragedies and history plays.<sup>21</sup> He may not have seen or read the comedies, a neglect all the more difficult to explain in view of his interest in the psychology of comedy and his enthusiasm for German farce. It is almost certain that he did not read *The Merchant of Venice*, for he cites, instead, John Cumberland's execrable play *The Jew*, presented several times at the Royal Theater in Copenhagen between 1785 and 1834, and available in a Danish translation done in 1796. In treating the state of the demonic and the condition of despair, he would certainly have found Shakespeare's Shylock a more profound character than Cumberland's Scheva. But those few plays that he returns to again and again—*Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, and *Macbeth*—he comments on with keen insight and appreciation. Like his great predecessors Goethe, Coleridge, and Hegel, he is a subjective, intensely responsive, and creative reader who discovered in Shakespeare's plays confirmation of his own psychology and philosophy, and haunting expressions of his own perplexed existence.

What he did not find, in Shakespeare or anywhere else, presumably, was a coherent theory of tragedy; for it has been suggested that he makes no allowance for tragedy as a valid expression of the human condition.<sup>22</sup> Yet it can be demonstrated, I think, that he does not reject the possibility of tragedy, but challenges some orthodox conceptions

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> He quotes Schlegel and Tieck's translation, which gives the passage an emphasis quite different from Shakespeare's: "Works sprung from sin acquire only through sin their strength and power."

<sup>21</sup> To illustrate the "consent of the whole personality to despair," he cites Richard II in Act III, Scene 2 and not Hamlet, who would seem the inevitable choice (see *Sickness unto Death*, p. 236). As I explain below, Kierkegaard carefully distinguishes between the willful despair of a Richard II, which is "demonic" and not tragic, and the ineluctable despair of Hamlet, which is, says Kierkegaard, "deeply tragic" because it stems from hereditary guilt (*Arvesynd*) and is thus without individual consent or personal responsibility.

<sup>22</sup> See Pierre Mesnard, "Is the Category of the 'Tragic' Absent from the Life and Thought of Kierkegaard?" in *A Kierkegaard Critique*, ed. H. A. Johnson and Niels Thulstrup (New York, 1962), pp. 101-115. Mesnard concludes that because Kierkegaard conceived of existence exclusively in terms of the religious, ethical, and aesthetic categories, he found no place for tragic reality.

of the genre. He was, in his own words, a *tortor heroum*, a critic "very inventive when it is a question of putting heroes to the torture."<sup>23</sup> In *Fear and Trembling* he argues that tragedy does not belong in the religious category by distinguishing between the tragic hero and his own "knight of faith," Abraham. Whereas the tragic hero experiences an ethical conflict, the knight of faith suffers the ethical as a temptation. For Abraham to obey the prohibition "Thou shalt not kill" would be to defy God's command to sacrifice Isaac, but for the tragic hero there can be no such "teleological suspension of the ethical" because tragedy is by its very definition "a dialectical within the context of morality."<sup>24</sup> Thus, states Kierkegaard, "Whereas the tragic hero is great by reason of his moral virtue, Abraham is great by reason of a purely personal virtue."<sup>25</sup> In contrast to Abraham, the tragic hero does not enter into a personal relationship with divinity; for the tragic hero, the ethical is divinity.

Here, Kierkegaard seems to have been influenced by Hegel's *Ästhetik*, which defines tragedy as a conflict of antithetical moral values resolved by the triumph of an overpowering ethical force greater than either of the contending claims. For Hegel, tragedy was not a conflict of good and evil but of one apparent good against another, both representing absolute claims and both being transcended by a synthesis greater than these antitheses. The essence of tragedy is not, therefore, in its suffering but in the nature of its conflict. Now, although Kierkegaard generally accepts Hegel's view that tragedy is essentially ethical, he insists on passion as an essential additive to Hegel's tragic formula; for in any ethical conflict, he maintains, only passion pitted against passion affords "a truly poetic collision." Agamemnon makes an ethical choice in sacrificing Iphigenia, but that decision also necessitates the gratification of one passion over another, the repression of paternal passion and the assertion of political passion. His choice is ethical because its affinities are to the "universal"; it is coherent, intelligible, understood by others. His choice involves a "movement" away from the "particular," or religious, and in this sense, "the tragic hero renounces himself in order to express the universal."<sup>26</sup>

Yet a few great tragedies may transcend the ethical and approach the *horror religiosus* if the hero's passion renders him unintelligible and he can draw no comfort from any ethical justification. "To be misunderstood," Kierkegaard writes in the first pages of the *Journals*, "is the height of tragedy." Thus Kierkegaard insists on the total isolation of

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<sup>23</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p. 119.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

the tragic hero, the complete removal of his agony from the human community and its rational values. He maintains that *Antigone*—which he admired as much as did Hegel—would have been “purer” tragedy had Antigone known of Oedipus’ guilt before Oedipus himself discovered it, for then Antigone’s “collision” would not have been of family against state, as Sophocles portrays it, but of passionate loyalty to father against equally passionate devotion to lover. In such a dilemma Antigone could not have “spoken out” to reveal her father’s guilt, nor could she have married Haimon, for such a union would have required her total sincerity. Thus Antigone is forced to bear an appalling guilt that is not her own, and it is just this “ambiguous innocence” that Kierkegaard considers “truly tragic.”<sup>27</sup> Such a “collision” parallels, of course, Kierkegaard’s own struggle in the Regina Olsen affair, wherein he saw himself in just such a position of “ambiguous innocence” between a guilty father and an unsuspecting fiancée. More important, however, such a reconstruction of *Antigone* indicates that Kierkegaard interprets Aristotle’s *hamartia* to mean, quite simply, *guilt*, and it only remained for him to spell out the guilt most appropriate to tragedy.

He finds this in that “ambiguous innocence” wherein the tragic hero vacillates between action and suffering, activity and passivity. The hero’s guilt is inexpressible because it is irrational and passionately personal; because it finds no justification in the ethical, and because it is a secret burden imposed by others. Where there is responsibility for guilt, Kierkegaard reasons, guilt becomes evil, as in the “demonic” sphere, and evil is an ethical, not an aesthetic category. Neither *Richard III* nor *Macbeth*, by his criterion, is “pure” tragedy, for the demonic conveys an illusion of self-determination and moral independence that is either comic or melodramatic. Finding in Hegel’s *Ästhetik* the thesis that ancient tragedy expresses and modern tragedy ignores the religious values of the community, Kierkegaard urges the idea a step further by asserting that any such illusion of moral autonomy in the hero precludes the realities of God, family, and society, and must therefore be comedy, farce, or melodrama. Modern tragedy, wherein the hero himself resolves the conflict of good and evil, is of necessity a hybrid form, a pseudo-genre: “Our age has lost all the substantial categories of family, state, and race. It must leave the individual entirely to himself, so that in a stricter sense he becomes his own creation; his guilt is consequently sin, his pain remorse; but this nullifies tragedy.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> See “The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern” in *Either/Or*, I, 111-113. Kierkegaard’s “revision” of *Antigone* and his discussion of “ambiguous innocence” are in this essay.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

Yet, in spite of these esoteric requirements, Kierkegaard praises Shakespeare as the great master of tragedy. Hence Kierkegaard does not deny the possibility of tragedy, but finds that what passes for tragedy does not conform to his own prescription. The two plays most helpful in clarifying his own view of tragedy were *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Hamlet's guilt is appropriately an "ambiguous innocence," for unlike most of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, he suffers for the sins of others. Like Kierkegaard's Antigone, and in a way consistent with Kierkegaard's view of himself as a tragic hero in his relationship with Regina Olsen, Hamlet must "hold his tongue," and when he does utter his sorrow, he must do so in the soliloquies, or incoherently, in his deranged conversations. Moreover, he exists both passively and actively. A victim of a guilt that is not his own, he nevertheless responds actively to the consequences of his mother's sins, and yet, like Abraham, he can give no objective reality to his motives. Even while responding to his mother's guilt he has nothing more certain than an ironic, dreadful faith. As Kierkegaard observes, "Hamlet is deeply tragic because he *suspects* his mother's guilt."<sup>29</sup> Suspicion makes him guilty for a sin not his own; but because it is suspicion and not certainty, it leaves him with no sound ethical justification.

For Kierkegaard, Hamlet is the enigmatic hero of total concealment, and "concealment is the factor of tension."<sup>30</sup> Kierkegaard so emphasized secrecy as a necessity of the tragic hero that he interprets Aristotle's *anagnorisis*, or revelation, to mean psychic relieving of guilt and anxiety by way of verbal communication—virtually an attenuation of the passionate intensity Kierkegaard conceives vital to "pure" tragedy. Moreover, this concept of Aristotle's *anagnorisis* points up the crucial distinction between comedy and tragedy. Concealment of the nonsensical, states Kierkegaard, is comedy, but if the hero's concealment "stands in relation to the idea, he may come near being a tragic hero."<sup>31</sup> By this criterion, Cordelia and not Lear is the authentic tragic hero of Shakespeare's play. Like Hamlet's, Cordelia's concealment, her inability to speak coherently in terms of the "universal," suggests that she "stands in relation to the idea," just as Abraham stands in relation to the divine. She cannot "heave her heart into her mouth" but only appeal to her ineffable "bond," an irrational imperative entirely incomprehensible to others. Subsequently she balances between activity and passivity, and her "ambiguous innocence" is a guilt she bears for her father's sins.

What Kierkegaard emphasizes about Hamlet and Cordelia is the

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* Italics mine.

<sup>30</sup> *Fear and Trembling*, p. 93.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

integrity of their suffering: he does not view them as martyrs, or as characters with any particular religious significance. They inhabit the finite world of the aesthetic category, the world of time, death, and irremediable loss—the world of tragedy, which Kierkegaard saw clearly and felt deeply. In contrast to Abraham, the knight of faith, Cordelia transcends the ethical but falls short of the religious, for hers is a trial that for Kierkegaard remains entirely temporal. Unlike many modern scholars, he read Shakespeare's plays as dramatizations of life, not as religious allegories, and in Shakespeare's plays he came face to face with himself, not with God.<sup>32</sup> Although he acknowledges Shakespeare to be the greatest of tragedians, he also insists, with no more denigration of the tragic view than Karl Jaspers expresses in *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, that tragedy and Christianity are irreconcilable. If our existence is plotted on life's way from temporal to eternal, Shakespeare offers us a pellucid, frightening glimpse of the truth of our worldly existence, but that glimpse provides no hint of the eternal vistas beyond the range of earthly life. Like Santayana, Kierkegaard concluded that "Shakespeare himself seems to have shrunk back from the genuinely religious collisions. Perhaps these can only be expressed in the language of the gods. And this language no man can speak . . ."<sup>33</sup>

In conclusion, we can see that in terms of Kierkegaard's life and work, Shakespeare's plays represented "an entirely different thing" from what his niece, Henrietta Lund, could have suspected. But Kierkegaard's response to Shakespeare has still greater significance. In the history of Shakespearean criticism, Kierkegaard is, after Coleridge, among Shakespeare's earliest and most provocative "psychological" readers, and if much of what he wrote about Shakespeare may seem merely intuitive or fanciful, many of his ideas, especially those on tragedy, form an original and coherent body of criticism. In his conception of Shakespeare as a despairing, troubled prophet speaking of the human condition as a timeless metaphysical and historical crisis, he stands as a neglected forerunner of such twentieth-century commentators as Santayana, Moody Prior, Walter Kaufmann, and Karl Jaspers. In many important ways, he is among the first of Shakespeare's truly modern readers.

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<sup>32</sup> Indeed, modern "theologizers" who find Christ figures in Shakespeare's plays are anticipated by Kierkegaard's humorous comparison of Prince Hal and Jesus: "The incarnate God, if man wanted as it were to be a chum of His, would be an apt counterpart to Prince Henry . . ." (*Sickness unto Death*, p. 256). Kierkegaard suggests, of course, that anthropomorphism is God's "humour," and that men neglecting to realize the "infinite qualitative difference" between themselves and God will be rejected like Falstaff.

<sup>33</sup> *Sickness unto Death*, p. 258.