CHAPTER - THREE

THE EARLY SHAKESPEARE
The Histories are directly involved in the devastation by death. The chronicle Plays are nearer the Medieval concept of chivalry of honour. There is carnage for getting power and thereafter there are murders of friends and foes alike. This part of history is rank power-lust unconnected with any religious impulse. The crown is the symbol of power and death lurks in it. The crown is handled, stolen, snatched away. Each History Play deals with the death of a King and the agony of the mother or the wife. In these plays the road to power is the road to cemetery. Death, in History Plays, is raw and brutal, callous and mechanical, violent and reckless, sometimes mingled with ambition and revenge and at times with honour. History records the inexorable working of time. Death is the final happening in these plays. Shakespeare is unique in perception of the singular response of humble men to death against the grand tragic pattern of history. The History plays do not have the spiritual and metaphysical depth of the great Tragedies. The remarkable points, apart from the gruesomeness and brutality of death in the Histories are (1) the glory of heroic death and (2) the philosophic vision of death through humble eyes.

In the youthful comedies, there is hardly any scope for death. Love is life. And youth is love. But illusory bereavement and the return of those believed dead, strengthens dramatic and poetic interest in the plays. The sunlit gardens of Shakespeare's bright comedies are not without shadows of death. In 'The Merchant of Venice', death casts its shadows all over.
Here death looms large but does not kill anyone. Death only makes itself ubiquitous, holding a threat almost every moment but killing none, none at all. It seems in the world of Shakespearean comedies love conquers all turning its back on death.

In 'Romeo and Juliet' death is most overshadowing. It takes the toll of the young. The old largely linger on. It is the lovers' confrontation with death which has great impact on us. Shakespeare has touched the beyond-death intuition in Romeo's Emperor dream and in Juliet's apprehension of Romeo-in-the-grave. Here death has its victory in Social redemption. The lovers die in the prime of beauty and the dramatist presents death as an aesthetic experience.
Shakespeare's Histories are replete with violence and death. Particularly in 'Richard III' it accompanies the protagonist like his shadow and falls on any one and every one that stands or he fears he stands in his royal road. What is intriguing is the way the killer shudders eventually in the face of his own death - offering even the Kingdom for a horse to flee from death. In a world of violence and unsettled times, death struts about unfettered. Stories of Kingcraft are matched by effective stagecraft. Dreams, prophecies, visions and curses build up an atmosphere of supernatural intimations.

Most of his History Plays were written between Titus Andronicus and King Lear. They depict situations of extreme injustice. The victims call on Heaven for help but the Gods appear to be absent and the prayers have no effect. The Mother of the Princes murdered by Richard III accuses God of sleeping when the deed was done. Richard II discovers that God does not protect him against his enemies. History Plays reveal that history is a purely secular affair in which men receive no supernatural aid. They receive, at the
Shakespeare's sense of tragedy is deeply rooted in history. Shakespeare masters the art of play making in the Workshop of Chronicle plays. He could see a dramatic and philosophical pattern in the chronicle history of Albion.

"Royalty and England tend to involve each other, and these in turn involve strenuous themes of war and peace, order and disorder, conflicts of personal ambition, and communal necessity, contrasts of tyranny and justice. ... and aspiring to Christian sanctions."

The national history of England — her past, present and future — is the theme of Shakespeare's History Plays. For an age of growing nationalism, History Plays gave expression to a newly awakened national spirit.

"They formed an immortal epic of which England was the true protagonist."

Shakespeare's thinking in History Plays is essentially patriotic. If Shakespeare's London had a real religion, it was that of patriotism. The patriotic emotion of the
time strengthened by the overthrow of the Spanish Armada finds unforgettable expression in Shakespeare. Dying Gaunt in Richard II and of the Bastard in King John are assertions of English Patriotism. Gaunt in his eulogy on England describes:

"This royal throne of kings, this Sceptre'd Isle: This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, This other Eden, demi-Paradise".

Richard II (II,i, 40-42)

"This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, England, This nurse, this teeming womb of royal Kings"

Richard II (II,i, 50-51)

Bastard in King John exclaims:

"This England never did, nor never shall, Lie at the proud foot of a conqueror".

King John (V,vii,112-113)

Shakespeare has viewed history as the study of Nemesis. Evil in the History Plays is wrong-doing which is followed by inevitable retribution. Richard II was a corrupt King providentially overthrown by Bolingbroke. Shakespeare seems to have understood God's Providential
plan for England - for the dethronement and murder of Richard II, a penitential process completed on the accession of Richmond, God's chosen agent. But when we see that the pious idealist King Henry VI is tormented and the murderess Margaret of Anjou is spared, the historical events appear arbitrary and even unjust, they do not appear Providential. Such events do not show any scheme of divine retribution. They depict a world from which God's will is concealed. They reveal a world uninfluenced by God.

In History Plays, Kingship is invariably presented as a burden. Kings may be saintly as Henry VI, villainous as Richard III, weak as Richard II, practical as Henry V: all are individuals as well as sacred symbols. The threat of death is the common background of these plays. Violent deaths occur more than natural deaths in History Plays. Cruel slaughters are committed for power. The crown is the image of power. The ruler trails behind him a long chain of crimes to reach the crown. Almost every History Play ends with the monarch's death and a new coronation. Every step towards power is marked by murder, violence, treachery, perfidy. At every stage is heard the cry of a bereaved mother or widow. Every ruler murders his enemies, then his former allies.
He executes possible successors and pretenders to the crown. Everyone of these rulers is an executioner and a victim in turn. Sometimes the executioner is transformed into a victim and the victim into an executioner. Some rulers make history and some fall victims to it. But as Jan Kott points out "The road to Power is the way to death."

There is no primrose path to power. It is a path always dotted with death as milestones.

In the History Plays, Kingship is not a business to be taken up and put down at will. It is a destiny that sets a man apart whether for triumph or for defeat, but it cannot be refused. Triumph in a battle is both a cause of celebration and that of mourning. The King has led men into a situation where they have little time or opportunity to prepare for death. Shakespeare's concern about common man is well expressed in the comment from a common soldier Michael Williams in 'Henry V':

"We died at such a place; some swearing, some crying for a surgeon, some upon their wives left poor behind them, some upon the debts they owe, some upon their children rawly left. I am afraid there are few die well that die in a battle."

Henry V (IV, 1,145-150)
History, in a sense, is carnage.

"Death in childbirth, death in infancy, to a degree striking even in an age when of five children born to the aristocracy at least two failed to live out the first year and at least one more died before maturity — death in the promise of youth, death in battle or after battle, murder, sterility, death by execution — such was the descent unto the third and fourth generation of that Henry of Richmond that Galahad from Anglesey who appears ...... so full of hope after Bosworth." 4

As in Roman Plays, so in History Plays, characters get prophetic warnings. Clarence gets premonition of death. Before his murder he dreams that he dies and suffers Judgment, and on waking, he is murdered. Such supernatural warnings do not aid them to escape death. That is to happen, will happen.

The History Plays reflect the spirit of medieval chivalry. It was particularly on the battlefield that the soldier sought to redeem his honour by dying nobly.

As in Tragedies, so in History Plays, Shakespeare shows the disorder that follows the murder of the King.
Taking *Richard II*, *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2 and *Henry V* as a tetralogy, Shakespeare insists on the disorder that follows the murder of Richard II and then traces the gradual re-emergence of order and the evolution of the ideal King in Henry V.

"Raleigh .... took pains in his preface to review English history and to point out the repetition of the historical pattern which began with a seizing of the throne and which ended with its loss by the third heir or the third generation. The throne that Edward III gained, his grandson Richard II lost; the throne that Henry IV gained, his grandson, Henry VI lost; The throne that Edward IV gained, the third heir lost; the throne that Henry VII gained, passed from the Tudors with the death of his grandchild Elizabeth."

This merely shows that God does not take vengeance immediately after the crime is committed; but the grandchild of the offender has to pay for it.

Shakespeare underlines the lesson of history. The heroes accept the fact that the winner takes all and the loser loses all. Through such incidents, Shakespeare leads us to the meaninglessness of life, as history, without any logical reason or moral justification may
raise men to dizzy heights or reduce them to dust, may
punish the just, reward the wicked, betray the wise and
favour the fool. Shakespeare shows this dark abyss which
once a man has seen, there is nothing more to see.

Shakespeare shows the King that suffers death
more cruelly than other mortals.

"Gone is the oneness of the body natural
with the immortal body politic. Gone
also is the fiction of royal prerogative
of any kind, and all that remains is the
feeble human nature of a King."

It is ultimately man's mortal nature that replaces the
King as King.

In each History Play, there is a sacrificial
victim — young Arthur in 'King John' and the two young
princes in 'Richard III'. But we feel that death loves
the beauty it has taken. The young shade of a murdered
boy has the beauty of light, as is described by Clarence:

"A shadow like an angel, with bright hair
Dabbled in blood."

Richard III(I, iv, 53-54)

As in his Tragedies, so in History Plays,
Shakespeare is interested in the King as man. When the reversal has taken place, King Richard II says:

"My Crown, I am; but still my griefs and wrongs. You may my glories and my state depose; but not my griefs; still am I King of those."

Richard II (IV, i, 191-193)

Edith Sitwell makes a very sensitive remark:

"Behind the murdered Kings stand the queens and Princesses wife or mother, like Fates or Furies or like Fountains of tears."

Death in all its brutal cannibalism manifests itself in the history of royal deeds. It respects neither virtue nor innocence. The heroes are traffickers in death. They kill or get killed. Falstaff, the very incarnation of the lust for life, escapes death on the battlefield, only to die broken-hearted in the hour of victory.

Death in Shakespeare’s History Plays is the final transformation his characters undergo in a world which is governed by time. The characters make choices consistently with the kind of people they are and in turn their choices
determine the kind of people they become. Whatever Bolingbroke hoped to gain by taking the throne, he had surely not chosen for himself ceaseless anxieties and sleepless nights. This merely proves that the crime may seem to succeed but it takes its own toll. Kings, however powerful they may seem, have to bow before griefs and death. Kingship means death and destruction.

Shakespeare not only dramatizes the material of history but also dramatizes the psychology of Kings and their rivals. Though the protagonists in History Plays do not undergo the metaphysical anguish of Hamlet, they do feel disillusioned weariness like other tragic heroes. There is neither morality nor justice in the violent struggle for power. History knows power only. It has neither heart nor head. A battle ends in victory and yet in mourning. Battles therefore reveal the twin aspect of personal and national nemesis. Though he has hinted that Kingship is the province of Destiny and not a business to be selected or rejected; yet he has imposed a scheme of providence on the sequence of history from 'Richard II' to 'Henry VIII'.
In "King Henry IV", the chief issue is the battle Henry IV had seized the throne, with not the least shadow of right, by dethroning and then ordering the murder of Richard II. But far deeper than the issue of battle is the issue of death — the reasons men court it and the courage or fear with which they accept it. The old man’s maxim cannot be refuted. Death obliterates the value of life. Facing life requires hazards of death. Hotspur dies regretting his loss of honour more than loss of life:

"O, Harry! thou hast robb’d me of my youth.
I better brook the loss of brittle life
Than those proud titles thou hast won of me."

1 King Henry IV(V, iv, 77-79)

Hal pays due respect to his courage but comments on its insignificance before death. Hotspur the young hero remains faithful to his own credo to the end. In him Shakespeare has created a man dominated by the passion for honour. For him life without greatness is not worth living.

"By heaven methinks it were an easy leap
To pluck bright honour from the pale-fac’d moon,
Or dive into the bottom of the deep."

1 King Henry IV(I, iii, 201-203)
He regrets the loss of duration not so much as the loss of splendour implied by his defeat. It is satisfying that he dies as he had lived in splendid grandeur of the heroic ideal. He scorns to consider his own safety where honour is at stake, and welcomes the death he must of necessity accept. Death is the true barometer of one's greatness. Hotspur dies for honour as he has lived for honour. His death equals the rest of his life.

In the last Act of *King Henry IV* Part I, we see Hotspur dead at Hal's feet. Now there is a time for courtesy, for chivalry towards the dead. The heir apparent covers the dead man's face with his own plumes. Hal's eulogy of the dead Hotspur indicates Shakespeare's pattern in portraying the deaths of his later heroes. Prince Hal says:

"When that this body did contain a spirit,  
A Kingdom for it was too small a bound;  
But now, two paces of the vilest earth  
Is room enough: this earth, that bears  
dead, Bears not alive so stout a gentleman."

1 Henry IV (V,iv, 89-93)

The antagonism between Prince Hal and his King-father is obvious. *King Henry IV* is haunted by the vision
of being slain by the son he had publicly rejected, and whom he at times hates. Hal is his 'nearest and dearest enemy'. On his death-bed Henry awakes to find the crown taken by his son. Hal says, he never thought, the King would speak again. He then attributes the patricidal impulse to the crown: "That had before my face murder'd my father." King Henry IV (IV,v, 166). Here, the visible pattern is a conflict between the King Father and the Prince Son. The father has created a wasteland through the murder of Richard II. The son is his nemesis.

The real father, being sin-ridden Hal seeks the father image in Falstaff - the opposite of the real father. Falstaff without a son of his own has found that son in Hal; and Hal, rejecting and rejected by his real father, has found Falstaff. The Prince could not love the sinful King. He therefore chose a father figure in Falstaff. Thus Hal seeks a father substitute in Falstaff.

Henry IV died with the guilt of Richard's murder so a sacrifice was needed to bring regeneration to the wasteland — the sacrifice of Falstaff. Falstaff is the father figure who is killed by the Prince when he becomes King. "I banish thee, on pain of death." 2 King Henry IV (V,v, 68). As Philip Williams noted:
"Arche-typal images of King-Fathers and Sacrificial rites are our inescapable heritage no less than they were Shakespeare's."

Thus death is assigned a Priest-like task of purification in *Henry IV*.

Falstaff loves life so much that he is determined to survive at all costs.

"give me life; which if I can save, 
So, if not, honour comes unlooked for and 
there's an end."

1 *King Henry IV* (V,iii,62-63)

He runs away from battle and counterfeits death. He pretends to be a corpse, as he feels that the main thing is to remain alive. He falls apparently dead. Hal thinks him to be dead. When alone, he rises from his counterfeit death with some rollicking philosophy.


1 *Henry IV* (V,i, 133-137)
He can lie and connive his way through the jaws of death, betraying every rule of honour and decency. He has preserved life at the sacrifice of honour and refuses to be swept away by delusive ideals. He believes that no posthumous fame can repay the loss of life. So when Douglas attacked him, he fell down and shammed death. He did not want to die. He wanted to live and be merry. He had reduced the idea of honour ad absurdum and avoided death with the satisfaction of playing a colossal joke. He dies only when he cannot conquer the king's unkindness. He is the Father substitute killed metaphorically by Prince Henry. He would not die therefore he has to be killed. It is only after the death of Falstaff that Hal becomes the real hero King. This is the one character "whom Shakespeare was compelled to kill," as J.M. Murry believes. He would not die therefore he has to be killed. According to Maurice Morgann, Shakespeare felt that "Falstaff could not be completely dismissed but by death." Falstaff is one of those very few characters who die in bed. His is a glowing instance of natural death. His death is not presented on the stage but it is reported by Mrs. Quickley, the hostess so sentimentally that the profound human moment redeems both the reporter and the dead of their human failings.
"Nay, sure, he's not in hell; he's in
Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to
Arthur's bosom. A' made a finer end and
went away an it had been any christom
child; a' parted even just between twelve
and one, even at the turning o' the tide:
for after I saw him fumble with the sheets
and play with flowers and smile upon his
fingers' ends, I knew there was but one way;
for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and a'
babbled of green fields. 'How now, Sir John!'
quoth I: 'what man! be of good cheer.' So
a' cried out 'God, God, God!' three or four
times; now I, to comfort him, bid him a'
should not think of God, I hoped there was no
need to trouble himself with any such thoughts
yet. So a' bade me lay more clothes on his
feet: I put my hand into the bed and felt
them, and they were as cold as any stone;
then I felt to his knees, and so upward, and
upward, and all was as cold as any stone."

Henry V (II,iii, 9-23)

The death of Falstaff has created a controversy.
He has paid a cruel price for his association with Hal in
the wild days before the Prince was crowned. Hal as Henry V
is Apollonian - glorious and majestic but his glory is
purchased with the rejection of the Dionysian Falstaff who
was a father-figure to a Prince, rejected by his own father.
The cracking of Falstaff's heart is the cleansing sacrifice for a resurgent England. Falstaff is a sufficient object for the sacrifice, owing to his personal standing and his relationship to Hal. There is a sacrificial quality in Falstaff. His death is necessary for the regeneration of a diseased land. Only after the death of Falstaff, Henry V becomes in word and deed, the national hero, the mirror of all Christian kings.

"Carl Jung's concept of the collective unconscious of the race offers a possible explanation of why the rejection and death of Falstaff are felt to be inevitable and just. .... Shakespeare penetrates this largely unexplored region of the human psyche." 11

The death of Falstaff is unique. It is therefore reported in a unique manner. J.M. Murry rightly points out:

"There is no death like Falstaff's. Therefore there is no description of a death like this." 12

John Wain, in 'The Living World of Shakespeare' has paid a fine tribute:

"The death of Falstaff takes on the same kind of lofty pathos as the death of Dido in 'Aeneid'. It can fittingly take its place in the epic world of an English 'Aeneas'." 13
In History Plays, Shakespeare shows that the common Englishman is capable of heroism but not of heroic speeches. In 'King Henry IV' Shakespeare expresses the voice of the common man who carries the burden on his back — the voice of little Feeble, the woman's tailor, marching off to the wars from which his rich neighbours have bought themselves out.

"By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death."

King 2 Henry IV (III, ii, 253-254)

Death is not that important to Henry V, to the Lords, to the army, even to the citizens of Harfleur. Henry V has accepted danger and is prepared for death. The king's spirit is 'honour' whereas Falstaff's spirit is the rejection of honour.

The First Part of King Henry VI
The Second Part of King Henry VI
The Third Part of King Henry VI

In 'King Henry VI' Part I, the two Talbots — father and son argue who should stay and preserve the family honour. Talbot and his son are surrounded on the battlefield by the French forces. The Old Talbot urges
his son to escape since he is the only heir who can perpetuate the family line. "That Talbot's name might be in thee reviv'd" 1 Henry VI (IV, v, 3). But the young Talbot refuses to flee as he does not wish to dishonour his mother's honourable name.

"And shall I fly? O! if you love my mother, Dishonour not her honourable name,  
To make a bastard and a slave of me;  
The world will say he is not Talbot's blood  
That basely fled when noble Talbot stood."

1 Henry VI (IV, v, 13-17)

Finally neither of them leaves the battlefield and they die together in battle. The continuity of the family line is destroyed but they gain immortality through posthumous fame. Talbots did not allow their great worth to be cheapened by fleeing the battlefield.

"... and crave death

Rake. Rake. I would be so vile - esteem'd"

1 Henry VI (I, iv, 32-33)

Suffolk's death is an act of Lynch law,

"which is a satisfying act of retribution and therefore a recognition of the chronicle Providence and a barbarous and
bloody spectacle and therefore a moral and aesthetic challenge to the validity of that Providence." 14

References to Heaven are rare and exceedingly brief. The dying words of Warwick are:

"Sweet rest his soul! Fly, lords, and save yourselves; For Warwick bids you all farewell, to meet in heaven."

3 Henry VI (V, ii, 48-49)

A reflection on death is found in Warwick's dying recognition that:

"... of all my lands
Is nothin' left me but my body's length.
Why, what is pomp, rule, reign, but earth and dust?
And, live we how we can, yet die we must."

3 Henry VI (V, ii, 25-23)

Such expressions are essentially commonplaces both of the classical and the Christian traditions, as is found in Shakespeare's treatment of death.

In 'King Henry VI' the bark-death association is remarkable. The lovers Queen Margaret and Suffolk part, when Suffolk says:
"Even as a splitted bark, so sunder we:
This way fall I to death."

2 Henry VI (III, ii,411-412)

Later the prophecy is fulfilled when he dies by water. Thus his death scene is of great significance.

In this play York at Wakefield, young Clifford at Towton, Warwick at Barnet and Prince Edward at Tewksbury die defiantly without remorse. Henry dies as a Christian. His final words are of forgiveness to his murderer:

"0, God forgive my sins, and pardon thee!"

3 Henry VI (V, vi, 60)

These words are an echo of the words of dying Christ.

Henry VI was better suited for the role of a saint than of ruler.

The Tragedy of King Richard II

In Shakespeare's History Plays natural death is a rare occurrence, exception being the death of Duke of Gaunt at the ripe old age. He accepts death naturally and therefore to him, death ceases to be a threat. Death does not seem to come as a calamity but comes with a burst of patriotic passion.
"This land of such dear souls, this dear, dear land, Dear for her reputation through the world".

(II, i, 57-58)

Thus he dies not with the name of God on his lips, but with a paean of praise for England and a proud outburst of patriotism.

The exile of Bolingbroke was the initial wrong committed by Richard. At the same time, usurpation by Balingbroke is a black deed for which he has to fear his own conscience. The crown so grasped, brings new worries and no peace.

To Richard II, kingship itself comes to mean death and nothing but death. In his famous speech about the antic death, death sits in the hollow crown.

"For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground And tell sad stories of the death of kings: How some have been depos'd, some slain in war, some haunted by the ghosts they have depos'd, some poison'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd; All murder'd: for within the hollow crown That rounds the mortal temples of a king keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits, scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp."

(III, ii, 155-163)
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Not only the pre-Christian characters speak of
death in universal terms but even a Christian king
Richard II remarks about death:

"And nothing can we call our own but death,
And that small model of the barren earth
which serves as paste and cover to our bones".

(III, ii, 152-154)

This remark by Richard II can be compared with Calvin's
remark that though our greed for power and wealth can
swallow up the whole earth

"yet we be once dead, we must have
no more ground than our own length
wherein to rot and consume away
to nothing."

Richard II had often longed for death because it
would bring oblivion, but as he faced assassination, he
experienced royal anger. On the point of death, he showed
sudden energy, and killed two of his assailants, and died,
in Exton's words, "As full of valour as of royal blood."
(V, v, 114).

Having passed through the bitterness of struggle
with the world, he arrived at a reconciliation with it. At the end he has realized the vanity of the world. He finds that as all the flatterers are gone, only one subject remains — Death; and death is no flatterer.

Sense of guilt in the wrong doers is their punishment. As Exton declares after murdering Richard II

"For now the devil, that told me I did well, says that this deed is chronicled in hell."

(V, v, 116-117)

Shakespeare makes judicious but minimum references to everlasting life for building up the dramatic character within the limits of the stageable play. Richard II spoke his last faint words preparing himself for Heaven:

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

(V, v, 112-113)

These words are all the more impressive by contrast with the tumult within.

Even though the dying Richard II declares that his soul's 'Seat is upon high', we do not
find Shakespeare going beyond this brief line to focus our attention on the everlasting fate of Richard's soul.

The deposed monarch whom "... waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down", (III, iv, 66) prepares himself for Heaven by the disciplines of humility and affliction. As Calvin puts it

"even that we ought to strive after newness of life, for Heaven is our home and in the school of suffering we must prepare ourselves for our final departure."  

The Tragedy of King Richard III

In Richard II Shakespeare has dramatised the powerlust of a ruthless killer, who nevertheless hypnotised all around him with his assertive personality. Richard III is a Machiavellian figure. Richard III, the hunchback king is incited to unnatural deeds by the consciousness of his physical deformity:

"... since I cannot prove a lover, I am determined to prove a villain."

(I, i, 28-30)
The large number of victims in "Richard III" provide the material for contemplation of the indiscriminate cruel pattern of life, known to the Age of Shakespeare.

As Banquo’s ghost torments Macbeth, the ghost of Prince Edward tortures King Richard III.

"Let me sit heavy on thy soul to-morrow! Think how thou stab’dst me in my prime of youth. At Tewksbury: despair, therefore and die!"

(V, iii, 119-127)

The same is the prophetic curse of the ghost of Clarence.

"Let me sit heavy on thy soul to-morrow! I, that was wash’d to death with fulsome wine, poor Clarence, by thy guile betray’d to death! To-morrow in the battle think on me, And fall thy edgeless sword: despair, and die!"

(V, iii, 132-136)

But the same spirits prophesy good fortune for Earl of Richmond, afterwards King Henry VII.

The Weird sisters, through their prophecies have
promised future for Banquo, so here the ghost of King Henry VI has a happy prophecy for Earl of Richmond:

"Virtuous and holy, be thou conqueror!
Harry, that prophesied thou shouldst be the king,
Both comfort thee in thy sleep; live thou and flourish!"

(V, iii, 129-131)

The same is the prophetic blessing of the ghost of Clarence for Earl of Richmond:

"Thou offspring of the house of Lancaster,
The wronged heirs of York do pray for thee:
Good angels guard thy battle! live, and flourish!

(V, iii, 137-139)

Richard III, like Macbeth gives credence to prophecies

"Because a bard of Ireland told me once
I should not live long, after I saw Richmond."

(IV, ii, 105 106)

Even Richmond has a premonition of a joyous victory on the eve of the battle as Calpurnia has a premonition of evil doom
for Caesar on the eve of his murder.

"Methought their souls, whose bodies
Richard
murder'd,
Came to my tent and cried on victory:
I promise you, my heart is very jocund
In the remembrance of so fair a dream."

(V, iii, 231-234)

Richard III, like an Italiane villain is free
from all moral scruples. Like Iago he finds joy in his heartless intrigues. He is a weeder out of his enemies. His victims like Clarence and Stanley are warned by dreams. England under Richard III becomes a slaughter house. The Tower is a symbol of Treacherous Death. The prophecies and curses of his victims, alive or dead, catch up with him at the end. Hastings curses prophetically:

"O bloody Richard! Miserable England!
I prophesy the fearfull' st time to thee
That ever wretched age hath look'd upon."

(III, iv, 102-104)

Queen Margaret is tortured by the villainy of Richard III

"I had an Edward, till a Richard kill'd him
I had a Harry, till a Richard kill'd him."

(IV, iv, 40-41)
And a piteous curse wrung from her heart

"Cancel his bond of life, dear God! I pray,
That I may live to say, The dog is dead."

(IV, iv, 77-78)

The three widows — Queen Margaret, Queen Elizabeth and Duchess of York sink their mutual hates to lay a curse on Richard III. Queen Margaret even blames Duchess of York, Richard’s mother

"From forth the Kennel of thy womb hath crept
A hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death."

(IV, iv, 47-48)

Even Duchess of York utters:

"And in the breath of bitter words let's 
My damned son."

(IV, iv, 133-134)

Even his mother joins other women in cursing him:

"Therefore take with thee my most grievous curse,
Which, in the day of battle, tire thee more
Than all the complete armous that thou wear'st!
My prayers on the adverse party fight;
And there the little souls of Edward's children
Whisper the spirits of their enemies
and promise them success and victory,
Bloody thou art, bloody will be thy end;
Shame serves thy life and doth thy death attend.”

(IV, vi, 138-196)

Like Macbeth, Richard is an isolated lonely soul in the ultimate moments of his life. The ghosts of his victims appear in his dreams. But like Macbeth he prefers to die in a flurry of action. His heroic spirit and the spirit of feudalism which inspired violent actions, set him out as a tragic figure irrespective of ethical considerations.

Here crime and punishment are connected. The play unfolds a system of wrongs and retribution. The ghosts of the men he had murdered, confront him. They bring the knowledge of hell in his own heart. “What do I fear myself? There’s none else by.” (V, iii, 183). He realizes that he cannot fly from the murderer, that is himself.

"Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am; Then fly; what I from myself?"

(V, iii, 185-186)
Like Milton's Satan, he realizes that wherever he flies, is hell. He cannot fly from himself. "Richard loves Richard; that is I am I".

As Sitwell points out

"He has avenged his sins upon himself through loving himself." 17

But his tragedy is that not only the world hates him, but that he hates himself. He is conscious of his guilt. He knows that he is a villain.

"Alack! I love myself—wherefore? for any good That I myself have done unto myself? 0! no. alas! I rather hate myself For hateful deeds committed by myself."

(V, iii, 188-191)

The cruelly brave Richard knows fear at the very end of his life, when he is surrounded by the ghosts of those he had killed.

"Have mercy. Jesu—soft! I did but dream O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me.

(V, iii, 179)

Though he crushes conscience, it asserts its power at last.
"My conscience hath a thousand several tongues;
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree;
Murder, stern murder in the direst degree;
All several sins, all used in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty! Guilty!"

(V, iii, 194-200)

"The man who had held himself above all law,
now finds himself surrounded by thousands
of furies crying 'guilty'!
The man who had deemed himself self sufficient
now finds himself dependent on human love
and pity."

Like Macbeth, he despairs

"There is no creature loves me;
And if I die, no soul will pity me;
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself

Find in myself no pity to myself?"

(V, iii, 201-204)

Thus Shakespeare has transformed Richard III, the
melodramatic monster into a tragic figure. Richard III is
a rebel figure who moves like a tornado through the Kingdom
of England. But the storm subsides at the end and order is re-established.

Though wicked, Richard III remains great, great in his undaunted courage and quenchless energy. The whole world was for Richard III a piece of clay to shape in his hands and now he himself is a piece of clay to be shaped by death.

Dowden observes:

"Shakespeare personifies in Queen Margaret the ancient nemesis; he gives her more than human proportions, and represents her as a supernatural apparition." 19

As in 'Macbeth', so in 'King Richard III', the sinner has to be destroyed if the Kingdom is to survive. The curses of the Queens the ghosts of the victims, ill omens and the terror of dreams — all push the sinner towards the unchanging end — the liquidation of the sinner and the reclamation of the land through Malcolm in Macbeth and Richmond in 'King Richard III'.
Comedies

Comedy, History, Tragedy - Shakespeare's idea of death grows more and more profound that way in step with the growth of his mind and art. Walter Raleigh's charting of the progress of Shakespeare's scheme as an expression of his thought most relevantly describes the progress of Shakespeare's apprehension and exploration of reality enveloping life and death.

"As he grew in power, Shakespeare made his scheme more and more adequate to express his thought, so that in his great tragedies, there is no escape from it. Comedy, History, Tragedy, the old order of the plays, gives a true enough statement of the development of his art and the progress of his mind." 20

Shakespeare's bright comedies are like a sunlit garden in which death is like a shadow, and nothing more. Shakespeare's romantic comedy celebrates youthful love and romance. It is a veritable festival of life. Life and love so intermingle here that death counts for nothing. Youth and love and joy steer far away from death which is reduced to nearly nothing.

Even in the first comedy Love's Labour's Lost,
with all its brilliance and laughter, the thought of death enters the play. It opens under the shadow of death, the great motivation of the academy, but after that opening speech of Navarre's, it vanishes altogether, never appearing again until the entrance of the ladies. They are the intruders from the outside world of reality. They bring death into the park. The Princess kills a deer, but the animal's death has no disturbing reality. Only in Act V, the death image becomes disturbing when Katherine's sister dies of melancholy. It is then that the atmosphere is filled with the presence of death. The God of love is responsible for this tragedy.

"He made her melancholy, sad, and
And so she died; had she been light, like you,
Of such a merry, nimble, stirring spirit,
She might ha' been a grandam eve she died;
And so may you, for a light heart lives long."

(V, ii, 14-13)

This reference to the death of Katherine's sister is a powerful death image and has a disturbing effect. With this image, is death brought before us, real and inescapable, although related to a world and a time beyond the play itself.
"The play which began with a paradox that of the Academe, closes with one as well. Only through the acceptance of the reality of death are life and love in their fullest sense made possible for the people of the play." 21

In "A Midsummer-Night's Dream", the love works its fairy charms under the threat of Draconian laws. The lovers are under the threat of exile and separation. Hermia's father orders Hermia to marry Demetrius "Or to her death" (I, 1, 44). In the forest Hermia has a nightmarish dream "Methought a serpent eat my heart away". (II, 11,149).

The play within the play stages death mirthfully. It turns the theme of death into a farcical tragedy. In the classical episode of "Pyramus and Thisbe", Shakespeare makes us aware of the presence of death. The presence of the fairy King Oberon and Queen Titania with Puck thrown in for good measure has a reassurance that life and love and laughter are such transcendental values that the Immortals (the fairies) are above and beyond death.

In 'The Merchant of Venice' the ebullient Portia has to subserve the will of a father dead. Unlike the ghost in 'Hamlet', Portia's dead father does not appear in the play
but the shadow of the dead man falls across the courtyards of Belmont. The dead father's will threatens to be more powerful than the romantic love in the heart of Portia.

The Merchant Antonio seems to bear the mark of death and moves as a mourner through the play. There is constant shadow of death on Antonio as Shylock proceeds to cut one pound of flesh nearest the victim's heart. The melancholy of Antonio indicates a suicidal temper. As Harold Goddard has remarked: Antonio is

"the victim of melancholia so intense it verged on the suicidal." 22

Antonio's letter to Bassanio at the supreme moment of his fulfilment casts a bleak shadow of death over Bassanio's joy of winning. Antonio moves in the shadow of death as tempests at sea have leagued with Shylock the Jew to take brutal revenge on Christian Antonio. What Shakespeare means by the word 'soul' can be understood from a passage in 'The Merchant of Venice'.

"... look, how the floor of Heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines  of bright gold;
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it."

(V, i, 53-65)

G. Wilson Knight has interpreted it:

"The soul is that in and beyond man that
inspires his best moments on earth and
survives death." 23

Antonio reaches almost the sacrificial altar of death for
a friend before he is reprieved. He confesses at the begin­
ning

"I hold the world but as the world,
A stage where every man must play a part
And mine a said one."

(I, i, 77-79)

In this comedy, his life is in danger. Shadow of death
hangs over it. Bassanio's joy is short-lived as there is
constant threat to his friend's life on his account.

Both the merchant and the Jew are tragic figures
silhouetted against the moonlit terraces of Belmont. Shylock's
house is Hell to his daughter. Shylock in his sable
gaberdine, white beard, pointed knife in one hand and
symbolic pair of scales in the other is at once the agent of death and a figure of death. Shylock with his wife dead, his daughter absconded; and alone and hated, is broken in spirit. After the Trial Scene, he is the victim of the forces of hate and experiences death-in-life. He is isolated from his world unhonoured and unwept. Shylock in his dark garment, leaving the court, is a walking symbol of tragic suffering and mortality. Being the personification of death in the beginning of the play, he ends as a victim of death. For Shakespeare, physical death is not the only death. The deeper wound, the unbearable grief is not in the deprivation of life but in the deprivation of all that gives meaning to life. The exit of Shylock is the exit of a man who has been forced to be nothing. He has lost his child to his enemy, so also his property but the greatest blow - a veritable death blow is to the pride of his religion, the solidarity with his tribe. Shylock, like Portia's dead father, is a shadow of death over the romantic pageant of the lovers at Belmont.

In "The Merchant of Venice", the shadows of death loom large from end to end. Beginning with faint echoes in Antonio's metaphysical anguish it keeps on stalking about, not sparing even the honey-mooners who even after the clouds
have rolled away, brood over the muddy vesture of decay.

Death is ubiquitous even in this comedy. Even Prince of Morocco sees death in the golden casket "A carrion Death, within whose empty eye There is a written scroll" (II,vii,63-64). Death hovers over Antonio's head like a Democles sword, the day he signs the bond, rather the bond itself is a covenant of death. Both, the golden casket with "Carrion Death" and the bond with the penalty of death are suggestive of mortality. Even the song that prompts Bassanio to his choice is a memento-mori - with rhymes for 'dead' and 'lead' and ding-dong bell. At the height of crisis in the Act IV, death threatens to strike every moment where we see Antonio "a tainted wether of the flock, Meetest for death" (IV,i, 114-115). Shylock is so callously intent on killing, that to Portia's plea

"Have by some surgeon, Shylock, on your Charge, To stop his wounds, lest he do bleed to death".

(IV,i, 258-259)

his answer is: "I cannot find it: 'tis not in the bond". (IV,i, 263). But no matter, how widely death haunts the play, it celebrates love and life. Love's accent of life proves too potent for death to destroy. Love is life. Where there is love, there is no death. No one dies in this
play where death seems to stretch from the opening to the ending. *The Merchant of Venice* is a classic example of how death fails altogether in spite of its sustained and almost ubiquitous presence of the threat of death. So the play ends with an assurance that

"How far that little candle throws his beams! So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

(V, 1, 90-91)

ultimately the world is safe for lovers to survive.

*Much Ado About Nothing*, a story of love, impinges upon betrayal till it is salvaged by mock death and funeral of Hero. Friar Francis devises a mock death for Hero, rejected by her lover Claudio. The image of the dead Hero killed by him, will teach Claudio what he has lost. Beatrice, the brightest heroine of Shakespearean Comedy is so hurt by the ill treatment of her cousin Hero that she orders Benedick, her lover to kill Claudio. The extent to which the essentially cheerful Beatrice is stirred with tragic bitterness, is recorded in her passionate cry "Kill Claudio!" The reported death of Hero leads to contrition in Claudio. Seeming death has contributed to the happy ending of the play.
'As You Like It' presents two distinct worlds —
the world of love and the world of hate; the court and the
Forest of Arden. There are frauds and violence and
death-traps but the young lovers get out unscathed, far
from the world of violence and hate.

The Forest of Arden is a veritable sanctuary.
Death if it appears at all, appears to be only a metaphor
and nothing more excepting for the wicked who are soon
destroyed. Celia faints almost to death for want of
food! It is around Adam that fatality seems to be lingering a bit. Orlando in his attempt to cheer him up, says:

"Thy conceit is nearer death than thy
powers. For my sake be comfortable,
hold death a while at the arm's end."

(II,vi, 8-10)

Orlando thus exhorts Adam to hold death awhile at arm's
length but Adam promises never failing fidelity although
he seems to be dying for food. "Master, go on; and I
will follow thee|To the last gasp with truth and

When Touchstone entreats William:

"Translate thy life into death,
thy liberty into bondage."

(V, 1, 59-60)
He equates life with liberty and death with bondage. To Touchstone, with all his 'joie de vivre', life is expansive freedom death a trap — the total loss of freedom. But it is the privilege of Jacques the melancholy philosopher to indulge in metaphysical reflection on life, death being only the other side of the coin.

"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages."

(II,vii, 139-143)

Shakespeare's Globe was to him the metaphor of the great globe itself. Here we have Shakespeare's thoughts on life and death taking some seminal direction. Jacques anticipates Prospero's find, utterances on life and death and visualizes "All the men and women merely players" who "have their exits and entrances" acting out seven ages.

Life's developing contours are most competently charted - when the infant in the nurse's arms grows into the whining school boy weeping like a snail unwilling to school, and again when the school boy grows into a lover sighing like a furnace etc. ... until
"Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history."

(II,vii, 163-164)

We are apt to be stirred with one pertinent question. When an infant grows into a schoolboy, is not the infant in him dead? Do we die from age to age and are the seven ages our seven reincarnations? The drama of life seems to have seven acts, the curtain opening up with birth, the curtain falling with death—both the mysteries off the stage, as it were!

Death and Time are intertwined. In 'As You Like It', life pulsates with the rhythm of Nature's Cycle of Seasons under the greenwood tree, unlike in Macbeth where time is rudely shaken. Rosalind outlines the ways of Time: "Time travels on divers paces with divers persons" (III,ii, 329-330). Time and Death are a marginalia in the world of Forest of Arden. There is only Holiday Time which is relevant in The Forest of Arden.

As Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice', so Orlando in 'As You Like It' suffers from the will of a dead father. His elder brother Oliver conspires with a wrestler to kill Orlando;
"I had as lief thou didst breaks his neck as his finger."

(I,i, 154-155)

The painted pomp of the court is lethal. The Junior Duke and Oliver embody the passion of hatred which characterizes the world of power and practical success. It contemplates and contrives deaths.

"If you outstay the time, upon my honour And in the greatness of my word you die"

The Forest of Arden presents the world of the exiles and of lovers. It is a utopia, wherein beauty and love breathe freely and death is at best an important threat. The lioness and the serpent in Arden cannot kill. Even the old servant can say:

"Yet fortune cannot recompense me better Than to die well and not my master's debtor."

(II,iii, 75-76)

Shakespeare who knew the illusion of performing arts, offers a grand retrospect of the plays performed on the stage of life. These plays end in oblivion of death.
He puts them in the mouth of the cynical Jaques to provide a smiling correction to the rosy dreams of romance in the Forest of Arden. Death subscribes to the lovers as suddenly as the figures of death—the wicked ones get converted to goodness and contrition at the close of the play.

In *Twelfth-Night*, both Viola and Olivia are bereaved, though at the end, Viola finds her brother and Olivia gains a lover. Feste, the fool, who contributes to the laughter of the play, ends the play in the darkness of night with the loneliness of death. In this sweet Ilyrian comedy not only are the three principal characters sad at heart but the play proceeds to unmask all the three; and unmasking is a kind of death, because it is a kind of regeneration. Olivia has put on the mask of mourning which is made untenable by her love for the boy Viola. Orsino has put on the mask of an extremely romantic love for Olivia, which is taken off when his fancy turns to Viola, who is obliged to masquerade as a boy page. The arrival of her brother gives her the opportunity to display her reality. This stripping of the mask is a kind of wraith of death. This feeling is emphasized through the bereavement suffered by Viola and Olivia.

Comedies are like a mariner's compass always turning towards the polestar of love; laughter and life.
Death, if not altogether banished, is almost defunct; as youthful romance turns its back on death.

Romeo and Juliet

'Romeo and Juliet' is the gateway opening up on a road not taken so far, the road to the Great Tragedies! Now onwards, death figures as an integral part of the playwright's tragic vision of life. Death is no longer a device, it is central to the scheme of things, a powerful instrument of the authority of the invisible.

'Romeo and Juliet' is Shakespeare's early step towards tragic drama, which was to come to maturity in his major Tragedies. Shakespeare's Sonnet-prologue in 'Romeo and Juliet' offers us a story of star-crossed lovers and their death-marked love. Does death choose the lovers or do they choose to die? Their tragic passion seeks its own destruction.

"In the voyage imagery, they abandon themselves to a rudderless course that must end in Shipwreck." 24

'Romeo and Juliet' is patterned on the medieval idea of the Tragedy of Fate illustrating that "man is never out of range of fate." 25 When Romeo and Juliet succeeded in
outwitting their families, when they almost made their escape, bad luck intervened again. A letter miscarried, a plan went awry and their love found its end in the double suicide in the tomb. Thus 'Romeo and Juliet' is a Medieval Fate tragedy, leaving the impression of pure pathos.

"Never was a story of more woe Than this of Juliet and her Romeo."

(V, iii, 309–310)

The star-crossed authority of the state opens and closes the play. It contains a powerful accent on external destiny operating in the lives of the characters.

"Romeo and Juliet" is the world's supreme drama of young love and early death. The death of young lovers is always pathetic but seldom tragic because tragedy requires a maturity in the tragic victim, and in this early tragedy Shakespeare's mature conception of tragedy had not taken shape. But pathos here at once verges on the tragic, and 'Romeo and Juliet' embodies what is going to evolve as the tragedy of waste. Apart from fate, what man has made of man is quite disturbing. There is a tragic sense of sheer waste in this tragedy.

Mercutio is the very embodiment of the Renaissance
concept of honour. He follows honour, not reason, and is lost in the quick movement of Fate. Mercutio does not want to die but he is not cowed down by death. He meets his death, as he had met his life—with a jest, with a pun on his lips.

"Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door but 'tis enough, 'twill serve: ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man".

(III, i, 101-103)

Mercutio is mercurial even in death. His reply to Romeo shows that death has no sting for him. Mercutio dies with a quibble that asserts his vitality in the teeth of death. He jests as long as he had breath. Mercutio's words of denunciation are like a curse: 'A plague o' both your houses' (III, i, 112). These dying words of Mercutio are like a prophecy which is tragically fulfilled.

Mercutio's death is important for what it leads to; it is a key link in a chain. His death is an anticipation of more deaths to follow. It establishes a pattern containing dangers, risks, threats—the threat of violent conflict and its fatal consequences:

"Mercutio's death is more than 'Exit Mercutio' writ large; it introduces the forces and the
pattern of dramatic action that lead
to the tragedy of the lovers." 

Mercutio's death affects the action critically and thoroughly alters the tone of the play. After it, the tone of the play moves toward death. Mercutio's death directly dominates the third Act, and is re-echoed all along the play. The death of Mercutio reveals that those who live adventurously and face life with a smile, can face death with a smile. Mercutio's death is the starting point of Romeo's tragedy. For him it becomes a question of honour. He challenges Tybalt and in a duel kills him. A moment after Romeo has killed Tybalt, he realizes: "O, I am fortune's fool." (III, i, 141).

Shakespeare's technique is to polarize the contrary ethical values between the Renaissance code of honour and the doctrine of Christianity. In the beginning when Tybalt insults Romeo, provokes him and challenges him, he does not retaliate in the same manner. As Curtis Watson describes: "Romeo turns the other cheek like a christian pacifist," but he takes up the challenge when his honour is at stake and in the duel, Tybalt is killed. Death is too heavy a penalty for so provoked an offence. The alternative is perpetual banishment, which for Romeo, is death in life.
"There is no world without Verona walls,
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.
Hence banished is banish'd from the world
And world's exile is death; then 'banished'
Is death mis-termed." (III, iii, 17-21)

Romeo's banishment is charged with overtones of death.
The lovers part under the shadow of death. The parting
of the lovers reveals a premonition of death. Both Romeo
and Juliet have presentiments of the destined disaster.
Romeo refers to his untimely death; as Juliet has a pre-
monition when she sees Romeo climbing down the rope.

"Methinks I see thee, now thou art so low
As one dead in the bottom of a tomb."

(III, v, 55-56)

Juliet's fear foretells their final death and
sends Romeo off into his death-in-banishment. When Juliet
refuses to marry Paris, Lady Capulet adds a cruel curse:

"I would the fool were married to her grave!" (III, v, 141)

Capulet proposes to arrange to have Romeo
poisoned. Her words turn prophetic, for Romeo dies by
poison, he himself purchased.

Juliet has isolated herself from the Capulet
household forever.
"At a single shock the girl is transformed into the heroic woman." 28

She is steeled to perfect self control. The friar's desperate plan kindles her dauntless spirit. She is prepared to undergo his plan of simulated death. She faces death in order to retain her love. She takes pseudo poison and embraces pseudo death. Romeo takes real poison to invalidate all decrees of banishment and accepts real death. Her pseudo-suicide ultimately makes her real suicide in the last Act psychologically possible.

"It is more ironic, more dramatic, more Shakespearean to have first a burlesque mourning scene, breaking the tension and carrying the false assurance of a happy issue; and then to follow it by real mourning, when the star-crossed lovers have finally yielded to their destiny." 29

She has proved that her love is stronger than her fear of death. She gets the full recognition of her possible death. Fear of Death is swallowed up in her love. Such love can command any sacrifice, even that of one's life. The lovers are isolated from each other and from society. They see their absolute love existing in the realm of eternity. Their love gives them strength to endure isolation and to face death. She drinks the potion daring all the nightmares of the unknown with childlike gallantry.
"Romeo, I come! this do I drink to thee." (IV, iii, 59).

Balthazar carries the news to Romeo:

"Her body sleeps in Capel's monument,
And her immortal part with angels lives."

(V, i, 18-19)

The moment Romeo receives the false tidings of Juliet's death, Romeo's reaction to this news is neither rhetorical nor poetic. He speaks in prosaic language, shattering in its natural simplicity. "Is it even so? then I defy you stars!" (V, i, 24). Now for the first time, he is completely free from the life of dream, completely adult and able to act with the initiative in his own will and with manly determination. Romeo

"had emerged from the life of dream
into the waking life of Truth."

When Romeo thinks Juliet lost, he can dream only of self-immolation at her tomb. He realizes that to die under such conditions may be a higher bliss than to live. Death has long been Romeo's rival and enjoys Juliet at the last.

"There he drinks his cup of poison in a kind of figura of the Christian mass. His
obsequies and true love's rite are a dark figura of the Christian rite - his is a Thursday Night Last supper, but the obverse of the Bible's. For Romeo it climaxes a religion of love which has transcended reason, only to lose itself not in God-the-Creator, but in the Creature's dream of self-transcendence. It is a Religion of Bros. It is natural love's dark analogue of a Supernatural love."

Romeo appears at his best just before his death. We find the sublimation of his character in the vicinity of death. He speaks with the maturity of an old man. He advises Paris to fly from a 'Mad Man', but his words being ineffectual, they fight and Paris is slain. Romeo takes his hand and with no thought of rivalry or jealousy, he buries him near Juliet. He approaches his end calmly.

"He is being attuned to an intuition beyond death. ..... He has climbed his hill." 32

He sees Tybalt's body and asks forgiveness. From the news of Juliet's death on, Romeo is a tragic protagonist of power. We see his development in the presence of death. He is in a state of supreme understanding above mortal conflict. Such is Romeo's triumph.
As Romeo, on the brink of death, turns to gaze
on the face of his bride with "beauty's ensign" (V, iii, 94)
one last gorgeous flash of the old fancy leaps up in the
thought that death not Paris is his rival for Juliet's
hand. Looking at her beauty, he addresses 'dead' Juliet:

"Death that hath suck'd the honey of the breath,
Hath had no power yet upon thy beauty:"

(V, iii, 92-93)

Looking upon Juliet's body, Romeo exclaims:

"Oh!
Will I set up my everlasting rest,
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh."

(V, iii, 109-112)

The graveyard scene is the dramatic visualization
of the death-marriage image. Enamoured of her beauty,
Romeo feels

"That unsubstantial Death is amorous,
And that the lean abhorred monster keeps
Thee here in dark to be his paramour?"

(V, iii, 103-105)

In 'Romeo and Juliet' the jaws of death are wide
open Romeo finds Juliet 'dead' and commits suicide. When she awakes from simulated death, she finds Romeo dead. There is only one way out. The love that had thrilled her life, now ends it. She awakes in the vault transfigured — grown up and mature. Under crisis, she has matured.

"One day a child and the next a woman!
Here is a life cut short in its brightness, and it is a cruel business, this slaughter of a child betrayed."

She has wakened to find the world empty of everything that glorified it.

"There is nothing left but to sink back into sleep, the self sought everlasting sleep of death."

She speaks to the dead Romeo without cries or tears, but with a quiet and tender affection. Finding the poison cup in her dead lover's hand, she speaks to him: "O churl! drunk all, and left no friendly drop|To help me after!" (V, iii, 163-164). Without hesitation, she stabs herself with dagger, as the only way out.
"We have seen how Romeo grew up in the course of the action. But Juliet has, nevertheless outgrown him." 35

Just four days encompass their love, its consummation and its end. "These violent delights have violent ends." (II, vi, 9). Edward Armstrong comments:

"The play moves on to the tragic consummation, which the life-death conflict demands. Love-darkness and death-darkness - both claimed Juliet." 36

A leitmotif of the play is death as Juliet's bridegroom. Even at their first meeting, Juliet's response is: ".... If he be married, My grave is like to be my wedding bed." (I, v, 138-139). At the news of Romeo's banishment, Juliet's reaction is: "And death, not Romeo, take my maindenhead!" (III, ii, 137). Juliet even implores her mother: ".... make the bridal bed | In that dim monument where Tybalt lies." (III, v, 202-203). Even old Capulet speaks to Paris:

"Death is my son-in-law, Death is my heir; My daughter he hath wedded: I will die, And leave him all; life, living, all is Death's!"

(IV, v, 38-40)
So the obsession of death is persistent. Juliet, though young, thinks of death and poison. After Romeo's banishment, she tells her mother:

"Madam, if you could find out but a man
To bear a poison, I would temper it,
That Romeo should, upon receipt thereof,
Soon sleep in quiet."

(III, v, 97-100)

How prophetic!

The lovers are star-crossed, their love is death-marked; foreboding plays a large part. Romeo is aware that the time of happiness is limited. His doom is in the stars. Even in the hour of marriage, Romeo had a feeling that his joy was only a shaft of Sunlight through a dark sky. Just before Romeo receives the news of Juliet's death, he refers to a dream of life beyond death:

"I dreamt my lady came and found me dead;
Strange dream, that gives a dead man leave to think;
And breath'd such life with kisses in my lips,
That I reviv'd, and was an emperor."

(V, i, 6-9)

It is true, the lovers have revived as Emperor and Empress in a Kingdom of Divine Love. Here
"Shakespeare has touched the beyond-death intuition." 37

Though they die, we feel, that their lives are accomplished. They take love to be the sum total of existence and they die for love they die into love. As Mahood observes:

"Romeo faces capture and death, Juliet the horror of being entombed alive, not because they want to die but because they want to live together." 38

Juliet says little, but her great confrontation with death is remarkable. At the tender age of fourteen, she suffers and suffers bravely and with dignity. Like Romeo, she also laments her misfortune:

"Alack, alack! that heaven should practise stratagems
Upon so soft a subject as myself."

(III, v, 211-212)

In such condition, death is welcomed as a release from unfairly burdened adds; it is more than that; their suicides will be the death-marriage.

"The readiness of two young people, whose observance of Christian morality is otherwise punctilious; to commit suicide
incurs no rebuke from the Friar, nor by implication from the dramatist. Shakespeare always takes suicide in his stride.... It carries the significance that if perfect love has expelled hatred from a society torn apart by it, love itself can be so perfect that there is no place for it in society." 39

In this early tragedy, Shakespeare has given prominence to Fate. He ascribes the tragedy to the operation of a vast external power. He makes the personal responsibility of the characters fade into the background of powerful impersonal forces. Something goes wrong by unlucky accident. If Romeo had not been a Montague, if Tybalt had not met Mercutio, if Friar John had delivered the letter, if Friar Laurence had reached the tomb five minutes earlier, then the tragedy would have been averted. In the end, even pestilence plays a crucial part.

As chance plays the decisive role, fear is the predominant passion. Fear has determined the fate of the story. As Goddard remarks:

"Whatever literal epidemic there may have been in the region, it is plain that fear is the real pestilence that pervades the play. It is fear of the code of honour, not
fate that drives Romeo to seek vengeance on Tybalt. It is fear of the Plague that leads to the miscarriage of Friar Laurence's message to Romeo. It is fear of poverty, not chance that lets the apothecary sell the poison. It is fear of the part he is playing, not age, that makes Friar Laurence's old feet stumble and brings him to the tomb just a few seconds too late to prevent Romeo's death. It is fear of being found at such a spot, at such a time, not coincidence that lets him desert Juliet. Fear, fear, fear. Fear is the evil 'star' that crosses the lovers. And fear resides not in the skies but in the human heart."

Fear is creative, as creative as faith. It brings into being what it imagines. With Shakespeare, suffering too, is creative. Suffering matures and ennobles the protagonists.

The lovers remain distinct until in death they are one and attain their greater selves. It is in a sense their victory — victory over time and society which would have made them old and worldly. Their love and finally their death serve a religious purpose. Their deaths heal the social wound. Their love is greater than the hatred that prevails in the society of Verona. The two warring
families have been united through their sacrificial deaths. Montagues and Capulets gaze upon the ruin, their hatred has wrought. The cruel shock of young deaths has chastened them. Even mourning is hushed in the infinite pity of the spectacle. The Friar is dumb. Moralizing maxims are of no avail and sentimental elegies are out of place. They are shocked into dropping their family vendetta and they are united in grief. They clasp hands but alas! over the dead bodies of their children. Providence uses the instruments of Fate to accomplish its own good end – the renewal of the society of Verona. Not political authority, but sacrificial death has changed the social order. The gold statues to commemorate their memory represent the awareness of the society of their redemptive act. The lives of the lovers are burnt up but the final effect is not wholly pessimistic. It is that of regeneration. Over the dead bodies of the lovers, Montagues and Capulets clasp hands and vendetta is buried for ever.

Romeo and Juliet die in the eyes of the world and yet remain alive. The play registers the triumph of love over which death has no power. The lovers challenge death. Romeo boasts: "Then love devouring death do what he dare." (II, vi, 7). Romeo's boast and Juliet's defiance of time
That death has no final power over the lovers is the great truth of this play. Here Shakespeare is totally successful in expressing the triumph of love over death, as if it were love and not destiny that is the indomitable force. Their love overcomes death through its redemptive power. In their death-marriage, they serve life by redeeming it through sacrificial love like true saints. There are two focuses: the lovers as Saints and the lovers as victims. The regenerative aspect of death and love, of death for love, is at the centre of the tragedy.

The love story is set in a context of social disorder. Conditions in Verona are virtually those of civil war. The play begins with social disorder. At the end the unhappy fate of the lovers has the effect of healing the disorder. It is a paradox that disorder is cured by the unhappy outcome of a relationship, which, in itself, deserved to be happy. The Capulet-Montague disorder destroys the lovers; the destruction of the lovers destroys the disorder and results in order.

Romeo and Juliet score a victory over death. Death
is the consummation of their love. They rush into the arms of death as their saviour. Death is no threat for them. They die before they lose their ideal. The lovers are immature at the initial stage, and in a short span of four days, prematurity is forced upon them. We see them confronting and in the end, dominating the end to which they are brought, not by a fighting withdrawal but by accepting and meeting their destiny. The 'ripeness' or 'readiness' as it is manifest between these fellow sufferers in love is all. If that bond of love holds, death is robbed of its greater glory.

Death is the test and the justification of their intensely romantic love. To quote G. Wilson Knight:

"The love problems and death problems are resolved by being harmonised in the unity of death-in-love .... by synchronizing a fine moment of love consciousness with the time-vanquishing act of death, the timeless nature of that love consciousness is made apparent; or that the death and love union represents a vision of immortality in terms of quality." 42

Death in 'Romeo and Juliet' is both a frustration and a fulfilment. To live without love would be a tragedy. Death saves them from that tragedy. Poetic justice comes
through death, which is their saviour. Romeo and Juliet cease to die by dying

"Our final emotion is neither the satisfaction we should feel in the lover's death ... nor the dismay of seeing two lives thwarted and destroyed by vicious fates, but a tragic equilibrium which includes and transcends both these feelings." 43

The ending, the death scene is a triumph, transcending the limits of mortality. The lyrical beauty of love's quintessential rapture softens the harsh experience of death and its pain.

To Romeo, as to Juliet, death is the vindication of their love.

"Because they loved each other, Romeo and Juliet could at the last extremity look upon death itself as an illumination, a column of fire 'stellifying' each other and transporting them to 'Paradisal Rose' — the Rose of God." 44

By boldly embracing death, they outstrip deaths finality.

As modern thinker W. Penn has noted:

"They that love beyond the world
 Cannot be separated.
Death cannot kill what never dies." 45
Here love and death tend to be nearly interchangeable as they jostle with each other, endeavouring to establish ascendancy. The young lovers also do not let life separate them if death can join them together. Love emerges as a greater harmonising force through the death of the lovers. Finally there seems to rise the Kingdom of love in Verona, love springing up like a phoenix out of the ashes of the lovers. Verona, the world of discord and hatred, almost torn to pieces, is regenerated at the dawn of reconciliation of Capulets and Montagues. After all the lovers' martyrdom is not in vain. Death traps lovers and destroys them but fails to annihilate love. At the end love conquers all, Shakespeare's evolving tragic vision establishes the triumph of life in the face of death. It is love, through death, that sets out on the pilgrimage of eternity.
Chapter - III

The Early Shakespeare

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