Coleridge on Shakespeare’s Villains

SYLVAN BARNET

The Romantic writers have been accused, not merely by their enemies—the Babbitts and Mores—but even by their friends and by themselves of confounding good with evil, of writing so well of the devil because they were on the devil’s side, and of leaving the wars of truth so they might uninterruptedly practice their “slender lyric gift”. But this thesis, of course, is factitious, and if their ethical standards did not always please their fellows or their critics, they were none the less concerned with morality if not with morals.

English Romantic criticism of Shakespeare never tires of reminding us that he keeps to the high road of morality, and Coleridge, “adverting to the opinion of a Greek writer . . . that none but a good man could be a great poet, . . . concurred, . . . and thought, moreover, that moral excellence was necessary to the perfection of the understanding and the taste” (MC, p. 225). For Coleridge, then, Shakespeare’s moral nature was never suspect, and the mere fact that the plays delighted successive audiences proved, in his view, that they and their author were rich in goodness (but not, he elsewhere indicates, in goodness [MC, p. 427]), for it is impossible “to keep up any pleasurable interest in a tale in which there is no goodness of heart” (MC, p. 55). Thus, Coleridge’s aesthetics are intimately related to his moral values, and we should not be surprised to find that he is uneasy when in the presence of several of the plays which Willard Farnham has recently characterized as representing Shakespeare’s “Tragic Frontier”. Some of the difficulties that critics encounter in these dramas, where the heroes are so deeply tainted that they cannot merely be said to have a tragic “flaw” or to “miss the mark”, may owe their origin to the aesthetic inferiority of the works themselves, but we can clearly see that morality rather than aesthetics (however intimately the two may be related) is the cause of the embarrassment Coleridge exhibits in his remarks on Coriolanus and Timon of Athens. Of the latter, “his admiration of some parts . . . was unbounded; but he maintained that it was, on the whole, a painful and disagreeable production, because it gave only a disadvantageous picture of human nature, very inconsistent with what, he firmly believed, was our great poet’s real view of the characters of his fellow-creatures. . . . Coleridge could not help suspecting that the subject might have been taken up under some temporary feeling of vexation and disappointment” (SC, I, 85). Surprisingly, however, Shakespeare’s hero-villains were less of a problem to Coleridge than were the out-and-out villains. And this was so, not only because the non-heroic villains act with unmitigated villainy, but also because the good characters, whose opinions we must, in general, honor and make our

own, clearly indicate their disapproval. Moreover, the villain of the Elizabethan stage did not have the reluctance of his modern counterpart to reveal his inmost thoughts. Today’s theatre-goer, nourished on the predominantly naturalistic drama of the last fifty years, has difficulty in accepting the unabashed confessions of a black heart. And just so, Coleridge, who, like all his contemporaries, had a relatively slight knowledge of Elizabethan stage conventions, found himself continually disquieted by Shakespeare’s villains. Furthermore, his interest in what was later to be called psychology caused him to seek in the drama realistic portrayals of the workings of the human mind.

But why did villains pose a special problem? The answer, perhaps, is partly to be found in T. E. Hulme’s definition of a Romantic as one who does not believe in the fall of man. In a sense Hulme’s statement is just, though Coleridge, when in a theological mood, quite literally did believe that man had fallen and was in a condition of sin. Romanticism is fundamentally optimistic, and its view of man and the universe as essentially good leaves little room for the powers of darkness. Moreover, most philosophic systems tend to exclude the possibility of tragedy, if for no other reason than that they explain too much, whereas the genuinely tragic poet’s awareness and sensitivity exceed his knowledge. The “closed” system which the philosopher strives to create almost always includes an explanation of the cause of evil, and once evil has been explained, it rarely can hold its place in tragedy. Romanticism, with its organic view of nature, with its concept of a continually evolving world, and, most important, with its principle of reconciliation of opposites, is incompatible with the tragic view. Now, Coleridge, the most philosophic of all the English Romantics, was deeply attached to these views, and they inform much of his criticism. His analysis of Richard II, for example, with its emphasis on the first scene as containing “the germ of all the after events” (SC, I, 153; see also I, 68; I, 144; I, 148-149), is based on his view of organic development, while his description of the end of Romeo and Juliet is indebted to his concept of the reconciliation of opposites. “A beautiful close—poetic justice indeed! All are punished! The spring and winter meet, and winter assumes the character of spring, spring the sadness of winter” (SC, I, 12).

That the principle of reconciliation of opposites, if too tenaciously held, is fatal to tragedy can clearly be seen in the writings of Goethe. For him, opposites meet, good and evil are ultimately reconciled, partly because evil is necessary for the existence of good, and tragedy ceases to exist. Faust is not a tragedy (though Goethe called it one) simply because the ending is unconditionally happy, and we are not permitted to have a consciousness of the waste that Bradley finds essential to tragedy because we are told to rejoice in nature’s method of developing man through a devious course. Coleridge, fortunately, never allowed his

---

8 See Arthur O. Lovejoy, “Coleridge and Kant’s Two Worlds,” ELH, VII (1940), 341-362.
6 Goethe’s position is summed up simply and accurately by the late Karl Vítor: “Goethe was fond of gentle endings... An irreconcilably tragic case did not interest him, and in general... the irreconcilable seemed to him ‘quite absurd’” (Goethe the Poet [Cambridge, Mass., 1949], p. 316). See also Erich Heller’s essay, “Goethe and the Avoidance of Tragedy”, in his The Disinherited Mind (Cambridge, 1952).
philosophical opinions to intrude quite so obviously into his dramatic criticism, but one cannot help noticing the relative lack of attention to the ends of the tragedies he discusses, a lack which cannot merely be explained by insisting that the Romantics were interested in character and not in plot. The plain truth seems to be that Coleridge was not at ease in discussing tragedy, however perceptive he may have been as a student of poetry. His comments, for example, on the Player's Speech in Hamlet, or on the opening act of that play, show an acute mind ranging over material which it finds congenial, in contrast to his few half-hearted endeavors to study the tragic outcomes of the plays whose opening scenes he found so fascinating. Nor can this lack of attention to the catastrophes be explained away by invoking Coleridge's dilatory temperament, for the problem is not that he never got to the ends of the plays, but rather that for the most part he preferred to talk—on the platform and off—about their beginnings.

Coleridge's attitude toward evil, and specifically toward Shakespeare's villains, entails further complications. He was a philosopher, and his aesthetics were closely bound up with his metaphysics as well as his ethics. His view of artistic creation, briefly, is this: the poet portrays the universal ideal through the particular. "Shakespeare's characters, from Othello and Macbeth down to Dogberry and the Gravedigger, may be termed ideal realities. They are not the things themselves, so much as abstracts of the things, which a great mind takes into itself, and there naturalises them to its own conception. Take Dogberry: are no important truths there conveyed, no admirable lessons taught, and no valuable allusions made to reigning follies, which the poet saw must for ever reign? He is not the creature of the day, to disappear with the day, but the representative and abstract of truth which must ever be true, and of humour which must ever be humourous" (SC, II, 162). Coleridge is here setting forth a doctrine of Ideas which is obviously Platonic in origin. And though he alludes to an "idea" of folly, his philosophic principles, especially his adherence to the doctrine of reconciliation, will not allow him to believe in an "idea" of villainy, any more than Plato, in the Parmenides, would allow that there could be an "idea" of dirt.

One more point must be added to what is already a long preamble to a tale. The artist, according to Coleridge, employs one of two processes in the creative operation. The dramatist may create a character on the basis of his limited observation, that is, select and combine details from persons with whom he has come into contact, or he may employ the superior method of constructing his characters from aspects of his infinitely varied self. This latter method was the one generally employed by Shakespeare, according to Coleridge. "It was Shakespeare's prerogative to have the universal which is potentially in each particular, opened out to him in the homo generalis, not as an abstraction of observation from a variety of men, but as the substance capable of endless modifications, of which his own personal existence was but one, and to use this one as the eye that beheld the other, and as the tongue that could convey the discovery" (MC, p. 44). Coleridge goes on to clarify his point and to warn the dramatist against drawing from his particular existence. What is advocated is a creative process which operates not on a thing merely observed, and thus only partially known, but on an aspect of the protean creator himself. Thus "Shakespeare [was able] to paint
truly, and according to the colouring of nature, a vast number of personages by
the simple force of meditation: he had only to imitate certain parts of his own
character, or to exaggerate such as existed in possibility, and they were at once
trueness to nature, and fragments of the divine mind that drew them” (SC, II, 117).5

Over and over again in Coleridge’s Shakespeare criticism we hear that the truly
great artist—and Shakespeare is for Coleridge, of course, the greatest—contains a
spirit “which has the same ground with nature”, and that the artist who merely
imitates external nature produces “masks only, not forms breathing life” (BL, II, 258). In short, “Shakespeare describes feelings which no observation could
teach. Shakespeare made himself all characters; he left out parts of himself, and
supplied what might have been in himself” (SC, II, 17).6

We have now, however briefly, journeyed through the narrow and the
steep of the relevant parts of Coleridge’s aesthetic theory, and are at last in a
position to see the problem he has posed for himself with regard to Shakespeare’s
villains. If the finest method of creation is by meditation upon some aspects of
the self, if the great artist portrays only what he knows, and the surest key to
knowledge is not observation but a study of the particular in the universal self,
and—most important—if “to know is to resemble, when we speak of objects out
of ourselves, even as within ourselves to learn is, according to Plato, only to
recollect” (BL, IV, 259), then how can we explain Shakespeare’s astounding suc-
cess in portraying villains? Here is the dilemma in which Coleridge found him-
self, and Coleridge’s attempts at a solution are what will occupy our attention.
Never one to permit the rules of consistency to hamper him, and unashamed to
offer the thought of a moment as the product of Truth long sought and at last
captured, Coleridge hit upon a variety of possible explanations.

The one premise that Coleridge never alters, nor is ever inclined in the
slightest to alter, is the moral nature of Shakespeare, for he firmly believed that
a poet’s “heart must be pure” (MG, p. 427; see also SC, II, 16: II, 34-38). Perhaps
the simplest way of solving the problem, then, was to deny that there was a
problem, and this is, in effect, what Coleridge did when he announced, in the
course of a lecture in 1811, that Shakespeare “became Othello, and therefore
spoke like him. Shakespeare became, in fact, all beings but the vicious” (SC, II,
204). Taken at its face value, and in conjunction with some of the ideas already
presented here, this statement allows for two alternatives: either Shakespeare’s
villains were created not by meditation but by observation, and hence are neces-
sarily inferior, artistically, to his virtuous characters, or they are not really so
villainous as we supposed. In fact, their villainy might conceivably be denied
altogether, and that Coleridge held this view—at least for an instant—is lent
some support by his comment that Shakespeare “never portrayed [avarice], for
avarice is a factitious passion” (SC, II, 204). But surely Coleridge has overlooked,
rather than ameliorated, the characters of Timon’s “trencher-friends”, and
Alcibiades’ mistresses, Timandra and Phrynia, who will “do anything for gold”.
If Coleridge over-stated his point, he was quite right in suggesting that avarice

5 Goethe expressed a similar thought: “All the characters of Sophocles bear something of that
great poet’s lofty soul; and it is the same with the characters of Shakespeare” (Conversations of
Goethe with Eckermann [London, 1930], p. 166).
6 This, like much of Coleridge’s criticism, is suspiciously close to Schlegel. But we are not here
concerned with the sources of Coleridge’s ideas.
is not easily found in Shakespeare's characters. Avarice, however, is but one of the seven deadly sins, and though Coleridge could forget its infrequent appearance in Shakespeare's plays, could he close one eye and squint the other in such a way as to change black into white? But how much black is there in Shakespeare? That Shakespeare is against sin has been clear to almost all critics, and even Dr. Johnson, who hesitated for a moment, ultimately agreed that Shakespeare keeps, in Coleridge's famous phrase, "at all times the high road of life" (SC, II, 266). Coleridge was aware that although the life-web of Shakespeare's characters is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together, nevertheless, in the dramas "vice never walked, as it were, in twilight" (SC, II, 268).

We may agree that Shakespeare portrayed characters who can be fairly termed "villains", and we may further agree that Coleridge, except perhaps in rare moments of forgetfulness, or of temporary blindness when he was "talking for victory", would find himself in accord with us, so long as our opinion was thus broadly stated. And if we were to utilize Alfred Harbage's four categories, "people who are indubitably good", "people good in the main but not proof against temptation or free from flaw", "people bad in the main but with compensating moral qualities or an extenuating background", and "people indubitably bad"?, we would find that Coleridge would not generally take exception to our distribution, and he would surely not be reluctant to separate the good from the bad, the morally acceptable from the morally reprehensible, if the four categories were reduced to two. When, however, we seek to categorize some figures as "indubitably bad" as opposed to others who can be seen against "an extenuating background", we are on thin ice, chiefly because Shakespeare himself does not always make such distinctions. Characters in a drama are usually drawn rather broadly, and Shakespeare's, however subtle compared with those of most dramatists, are less complex than, say, the figures in a Proust novel. But to how many of them can the melodramatic tag "arrant villain" be applied? And are there arrant villains in life? Did Shakespeare think so? Did Coleridge?

I have already suggested that Coleridge, for all his theological talk about sin, was reluctant to see evil as such in the universe. Shakespeare, at least for dramatic purposes, was not so hesitant. Meredith's belief that

\[ \text{In tragic life, God wot,} \\ \text{No villain need be! Passions spin the plot;} \\ \text{We are betrayed by what is false within} \]

may be correct, but the writer of tragedy is not always willing to heap all of the blame upon the victim's head. For the dramatist there is generally something outside, too, that brings about the kind of destruction which we call tragic. Was Cordelia destroyed by what was false within? Was Othello wholly responsible for his fate? What is the function of an Edmund, a Goneril, a Regan, or an Iago? Now, we cannot generalize broadly about evil in Shakespearian tragedy, but this at least we can say: evil is not merely an element in a Lear who is justly punished for his willfulness or in a Cordelia who has "some little faulty admixture of pride and sullenness" (SC, I, 60), which must be redeemed by death. Evil is greater than this, and is frequently personified in tragedy by a

\[ ^7 \text{As They Liked It (New York, 1947), pp. 165-166.} \]
character who merits the name of villain. There may be no real man who is
so black as a villain in tragedy, but that objection is not relevant here. A drama
consists of an artist's perceptions and insights, and these are of necessity com-
municated through numerous conventions. As Coleridge himself puts it, art is an
"abridgment of nature" (BL, II, 262). But the conventional aspect of drama
may easily be overemphasized. Shakespeare's characters—his villains no less
than his heroes—often cannot be neatly pigeon-holed. They serve their proper
dramatic function, are duly villainous when the plot demands that they be so,
and yet somehow acquire larger dimensions. There is at least some truth in
Coleridge's observation that "Shakespeare's characters are like those in life, to
be inferred by the reader, not told to him.... If you take what... [a charac-
ter's] friends say, you may be deceived—still more so, if his enemies; and the
character himself sees himself thro' the medium of his character, not exactly as
it is. But the clown or the fool will suggest a shrewd hint; and take all together,
and the impression is right, and all [the spectators] have it" (SC, I, 227; see also
I, 232). This view, however, fails to recognize sufficiently some of the basic
Elizabethan conventions which Shakespeare employed. The Elizabethan villain,
when he reveals his horrible intentions to the audience, is rarely seeing "himself
thro' the medium of his character". On the contrary, he sees himself as the good
people of the play see him or will ultimately see him, and as the dramatist wants
the audience to see him. His soliloquies are, for the most part, to be taken at
face value, their content alone is to be accepted, and the audience need not
draw further conclusions about the nature of a man who would admit such
things to himself—and aloud, too!

Our experience, of course, is not likely to bring us into contact with any
people so base as Shakespeare's basest villains. They are "out of nature", a judg-
ment which the Romantics were reluctant to accept. Because Coleridge and his
contemporaries were somewhat deficient in a knowledge of dramatic conven-
tions, and because they were inclined to an optimistic view of human nature,
they were perturbed at finding in Shakespeare's work characters who, when
carefully examined in the closet, failed to pass the test of reality. Since most of
Coleridge's comments on such characters are impromptu utterances, they vary.
Generally they reveal his eagerness to place the villain against a background of
extenuating circumstances, or, when this is impossible, to indicate that the
particular character under discussion is unique among Shakespeare's creations, a
lapse on the part of the dramatist, or, preferably, a creation which though
strange to mortal eyes, may perhaps embody a truth we at the moment fail to
perceive. Discussing this or that particular play, Coleridge is apt to characterize
one of the villains of the piece as unique in the body of Shakespeare's work—
unique in his unmitigated evil. Thus, Oswald "the Steward (as a contrast to
Kent) [is] the only character of utter unredeemable baseness in Shakespeare"
(SC, I, 62). Yet a moment later Coleridge speaks of the "monster Goneril",

8 Oswald has not lacked for defenders. Dr. Johnson remarked—though in a puzzled tone—
on his fidelity, and Bradley and Kittredge also comment on this alleged virtue. Most recently Robert
Metcalf Smith has put in "A Good Word for Oswald," in A Tribute to George Coffin Taylor, ed.
Arnold Williams (Chapel Hill, 1951), pp. 62-66. But Oswald's fidelity is necessary for the exigencies of the plot. Furthermore, this is a fidelity which, in its dramatic context, is so deficient in the
moral connotations which normally accompany that word that we should rather attribute to him a persistence in evil. He is a relatively minor figure, and our attitude toward him depends to a
Othello presented by Robert Academy of Robert College, Turkey.
Twelfth Night, Schauspielhaus, Zurich, Switzerland. Staged by Oskar Walterlin, setting by Teo Otto. Photo by W. E. Baur.
and notes that “Regan and Cornwall [are] in perfect sympathy of monstrosity” (SC, I, 63). Elsewhere, he jotted down his opinion that “Regan and Goneril are the only pictures of the unnatural in Shakespeare—the pure unnatural; and you will observe that Shakespeare has left their hideousness unsoftened or diversified by a single line of goodness or common human frailty” (SC, I, 354). Alfréd Harbage, however, will not allow that even these two “unnatural hags” are the monsters of Coleridge’s statement. For him, “Regan is not so bad as Goneril, and thus shades off from black to dark-grey”. That the two elder daughters are not identical is obvious and dramatically necessary, but need one be better than the other? A certain variety of characterization is demanded by the audience, but cannot two creatures both be villainous, and yet embody different aspects of villainy? Though Alexander Pope overstated his case when he insisted that no two characters in a play speak in similar tones, he was surely correct in suggesting that Shakespeare excels not merely in drawing characters who differ from each other in passion and nature, but can even discriminate between characters who may be said, in broad terms, to have the same general nature. So it is with Goneril and Regan. Though they are not copies of one of the other, each is, in the view of the audience, a “she-fox” whose baseness is not mitigated either by the evil of the other, or the faults in Lear himself. That the vices of Regan differ from those of Goneril is obvious, but whose vices are worse is a problem which cannot easily be decided, and perhaps should not be decided. Harbage finds Regan the better, but Bradley, who was thoroughly aware that Regan lacked the initiative of her sister, found her the “more loathsome”. Coleridge, I think, is on safer ground when he places them both in the realm of the “unnatural”. He was inclined to hold to his view that the sisters were utterly evil and, in fact, went so far as to admire the “superlative judgment and the finest moral tact” which dared to utilize these “utter monsters, nulla virtute redemptae”, as a means of “deepening...[the] noblest emotions towards...Lear, Cordelia, etc.” (MC, 83).

Edmund, on the other hand, is thought by Coleridge to have sufficient motives for his deeds, and thus to be within the pale of nature. Shakespeare, he says, wishes to avoid drawing Edmund as a monster, and seeks “to prevent the guilt from passing into utter monstrosity—which...depends on the presence or absence of causes and temptations sufficient to account for the wickedness, without the necessity of recurring to a thorough fiendishness of nature for its origination” (SC, I, 58). Edmund is despised and his sense of “shame sharpens a pre-disposition in the heart to evil. For it is a profound moral, that shame will naturally generate guilt; the oppressed will be vindictive, like Shylock, and in the anguish of undeserved ignominy the delusion secretly springs up, of getting over the moral quality of an action by fixing the mind on the mere

---

9 As They Liked It, p. 66.
physical act alone” (SC, I, 62).\textsuperscript{12} In contrast to the monstrosity of Regan and Goneril, “in Edmund, for whom passion, the sense of shame as a bastard, and ambition, offer some plausible excuses, Shakespeare has placed many redeeming traits. Edmund is what, under certain circumstances, any man of powerful intellect might be, if some other qualities and feelings were cut off” (SC, II, 354). Note, first of all, that Coleridge has, by his last phrase, implicitly brought Edmund into the company of those great dramatic creations which are the product of Shakespeare’s meditation, not of his observation and copying. “The great prerogative of genius (and Shakespeare felt and availed himself of it) is now to swell itself to the dignity of a god, and now to subdue and keep dormant some part of that lofty nature, and to descend even to the lowest character—to become everything, in fact, but the vicious” (SC, I, 133). Second, it is important to observe that Coleridge regards Edmund’s illegitimacy as, in some degree, an indirect cause of his evil acts. Edmund not only is ashamed of his descent, but he displays righteous indignation, says Coleridge, when he “hears his mother and the circumstances of his birth spoken of with a most degrading and licentious levity” (SC, I, 56). But as Kittredge has pointed out, though Edmund is on the stage when Gloucester tells Kent of his old lust, he presumably does not hear the conversation.\textsuperscript{13} Most important, however, is Coleridge’s attitude toward bastardy, which simply does not coincide with what seems to have been Shakespeare’s view. Putting aside the notable exception of Faulconbridge, who is “a good blunt fellow”, it is clear that bastards were regarded as deficient in virtue. The taint of their birth was not so much a cause of their villainy, but a symptom of their moral deviation.

Coleridge, then, seeks to “naturalize” Edmund by endowing him with a “powerful intellect”, on which certain forces operate to turn him to a course of evil. In short, Coleridge wishes to justify the psychology of Edmund’s behavior. It is improbable, however, that Shakespeare was similarly concerned. The Elizabethans were much more willing than theatre-goers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to take the villain for what he seemed to be, and to pay closer attention to what he did than to why he did it. Yet we cannot deny that Edmund is an impressive character; and he does seem to be endowed with that mental power which Coleridge attributes to him. This strength of intellect, however, is not given Edmund to make him psychologically consistent, but to lend force and immediacy to the power of evil, which will do such great harm before the drama is over. Shakespeare does not mitigate the destructive forces, nor does he build his tragedy on mere “mistakes”. And he does not wish, at least in \textit{King Lear}, to have evil reside solely within the character of the principal personage. The German critics of the last century, who were so anxious to portray Shakespeare as a dispenser of poetic justice, unduly emphasized the evil in the characters whom we may, speaking broadly, call “good”, and tended to minimize the fact that Shakespeare often portrays evil as a force of terrible

\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, Coleridge observes (MC, p. 430) that the Second Murderer in \textit{Macbeth} is not “a perfect monster” because he has been incensed by “the vile blows and buffetts of the world” and therefore is reckless of what he does (IV, i, 167-116). But Shakespeare is, I think, not so concerned with motivating the killer, as with telling the audience that here is a wretch who will not refuse to perform any deed of horror. We are assured, not that the murderer has reasons for being anti-social, but that Banquo will die.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Sixteen Plays of Shakespeare} (Boston, 1946), p. 1157.
power, capable of bringing to material ruin much goodness. Edmund is drawn on an impressive scale because dramatically he must be impressive. If he seems to us to have a more powerful intellect than Don John of Much Ado, it is because Lear is a tragedy and the decorum requires a villain of stature, while in comedy the villain, if drawn too powerfully, may overshadow the happy outcome, as Shylock often does when misplayed today.

The characteristics that give weight to the villain are, in Shakespeare, not to be used as devices for explaining his villainy, but to make him a sufficiently impressive adversary. As Stoll, among others has pointed out, Shakespeare does not so much relate his villains' "virtues" to their vices, as superimpose some element of magnitude on to the evil qualities. This method makes for good theatre, but the closet student of drama, whose interest runs not so much to what Dryden called "bold strokes" as to subtlety of characterization, frequently finds it disconcerting. At the same time, his bardolatry will not allow him to cry of the author, "the less Shakespeare he", so instead he exclaims of the character, "the less villain he".

Coleridge's comments on Shakespeare's creative method, and the resulting problem of accounting for his success in depicting villains, did not fall on deaf ears. The Romantic writers who trooped more or less faithfully to the Royal Institution lecture room found amid the ramblings of the lecturer (Charles Lamb said that the talk on Romeo and Juliet was delivered in the character of the Nurse [3C, II, 216]) much that was provocative. Henry Crabb Robinson and Lamb were stimulated by his remarks.

C. L. [i.e., Lamb] spoke well about Shakespeare. I had objected to Coleridge's assertion in his lecture, that Shakespeare became every thing except the vicious, observing that if Shakespeare becoming a character is to be determined by the truth and vivacity with which he describes them and enters into their feelings, [Shakespeare becomes the vicious characters also]. C. L. justified Coleridge's remark by saying (what by the bye was inclusive [conclusive?]) that Shakespeare never gives truly odious and detestable characters. He always mingles strokes of nature and humanity in his pictures. I adduced the King in Hamlet as altogether mean. He allowed this to be the worst of Shakespeare's characters. He has not another like it. I cited Lady M. I think this one of Shakespeare's worst [i.e., poorest] characters, said Lamb. It is at the same time inconsistent with itself. Her sleep-walking does not suit such a hardened being.—(it however occurs to me that this sleep-walking is perhaps the vindication of Shakespeare in his portraiture of the character, as it certainly is his excellence that he does not create monsters, but always saves the honour of human nature, if I may use such an expression. So in this, while the voluntary actions and sentiments of Lady M. are all inhuman, her involuntary nature rises against her habitual feelings springing out of depraved passions, and in her sleep she shews to be a woman, while waking she is a monster.) I then referred to the Bastard in Lear, but Lamb considers his character as vindicated by the provocation arising out of his illegitimacy. And L. mentioned as admirable illustrations of the skill with which Shakespeare could make his worst

14 See, for example, his Shakespeare Studies (New York, 1927), pp. 337-402.
18 Greek tragedy rarely portrays a villain, but when it does, as in Aeschylus' delineation of Clytemnestra, the villain is drawn "greater than life" and endowed with heroic (though perverse) qualities which do not explain the villainy, but make it awful.
characters interesting, Iago and Richard III. I noticed King John and Lewis, as if Shakespeare meant like a Jacobin to shew how base and vile kings are; L. did not remark on this, but said King John is one of the plays he likes the least (SC, II, 216-217).

We have already examined Coleridge’s remarks on Edmund. Of King John and Lewis the Dauphin, he has nothing to say; of King Claudius, a bit; of Lady Macbeth, Iago, and Richard III, rather more.

Referring to Claudius’ speech, “There’s such divinity doth hedge a king”, Coleridge observes: “Proof, as indeed all else is, that Shakespeare never intended us to see the king with Hamlet’s eyes, tho’, I suspect, the managers have long done so” (SC, I, 34). Coleridge was quite right in seeing the danger of assuming one character to be what the others say, but his desire to find a complex personality in Claudius, as in each of Shakespeare’s major figures, leads him to ignore or to slight some of the obvious signposts by which a dramatist must guide his audience.16

Lady Macbeth, whom Dr. Johnson “detested”, and in whom he could see “no nice discriminations of character”,17 was regarded more tolerantly by the Romantics. In her refusal to kill the king because he resembled her father, Coleridge found, as did Mrs. Siddons,18 “confirmation that Shakespeare never meant Lady Macbeth more than Macbeth himself for [a] moral monster like Goneril” (MC, 449). He sought to show, in an elaborate analysis of her character, that she was not “out of nature and without conscience”, and to explain her actions in terms of her “visionary and day-dreaming turn of mind”. Furthermore, “a passage where she alludes to ‘plucking her nipple from the boneless gums of her infant’, though usually thought to prove a merciless and unwomanly nature, proves the direct opposite: she brings it as the most solemn enforcement to Macbeth of the solemnity of his promise to undertake the plot against Duncan. Had she so sworn, she would have done that which was most horrible to her feelings, rather than break the oath” (SC, II, 270-271). Coleridge here is overlooking the context of the speech, and he is eager to do this because he cannot conceive of any woman in life as monstrous. Lady Macbeth is not, in this speech, showing her belief in the binding power of an oath by announcing her willingness to sin horribly rather than break a vow—a vow which, by the way, could have no meaning in a moral universe—rather, she is devilishly urging her faltering husband to commit a monstrous crime. Perhaps Malcolm’s description of Lady Macbeth, a “fiend-like queen”, is too strong, but we should keep the early part of the play in mind and remember that if her deeds do not always equal her words, and her conscience ultimately torments her, there is nevertheless little evidence for the view that “her constant effort throughout the play was, if the expression may be forgiven, to bully conscience” (SC, II, 270-271), and that she “sinks in the season of remorse” (SC, I, 72).

In only one instance, says Coleridge, has Shakespeare presented us with

16 It is perhaps significant that Coleridge’s statement, “It is a common error to mistake the epithets applied by the dramatis personae to each other, as truly descriptive of what the audience ought to see or know” (SC, I, 47), is used as a defense against accepting Othello as a Negro. I must point out, however, that the authenticity of this remark is suspect. See Rayson’s note, SC, I, 47, n. 1.

17 The Plays of William Shakespeare (London, 1765), VI, 484.

"what is admirable—what our nature compels us to admire—in the mind, and what is most detestable in the heart" (SC, I, 58). Iago, he says, is Shakespeare's single presentation of "utter monstrosity—which . . . depends on the . . . absence of causes" (SC, I, 58). Iago is not a man among men, and Hamlet's soliloquy on death could not be spoken by this fiend, for it shows "too habitual a communion with the heart, that belongs or ought to belong, to all mankind" (SC, I, 29). A "passionless character", Iago in his soliloquy at the close of Act I displays "the motive-hunting of motiveless malignity. . . . In itself fiendish" (SC, I, 49). Iago is more fiend than man, and only the genius of Shakespeare, with "the opulence of its resources" (SC, I, 58), could have succeeded in so daring an endeavor.

Richard III, on the other hand, is not sheer fiendish intellect,19 devoid of influences of the heart, but, on the contrary, his intellectual capabilities are closely related to his other faculties. In him Shakespeare has given not only the "character grown up and completed, but he has shown us its very source and generation. The inferiority of his person made the hero seek consolation and compensation in the superiority of his intellect; he thus endeavoured to counterbalance his deficiency. This striking feature is portrayed most admirably by Shakespeare, who represents Richard bringing forward his very defects and deformities as matters of boast" (SC, II, 181). Iago and Richard, though differing, are closely allied, for in Richard, as in Iago, there was "an overprizing of the intellectual above the moral character" (SC, II, 284). Both, in Coleridge's estimation, were men "who reverse the order of things, who place intellect at the head, whereas it ought to follow like geometry, to prove and to confirm" (SC, II, 286-287).

The heart has its reasons, says Pascal, which reason cannot know. And in his study of Shakespeare's villains, as in his other writings, Coleridge reveals that his allegiance is ultimately not to reason, but to the heart, not to the intellectual bent, which is so often disposed to evil, but to the moral nature of man. As one inclined to philosophic speculation and psychological investigation, however, he was not willing to drop the matter here. If mind and morality are not always reconciled now, as they must ultimately be, in his view, nevertheless both are powerful and demand attention. Why are Shakespeare's villains so fascinating? Because Shakespeare "had read nature too heedfully not to know that courage, intellect, and strength of character were the most impressive forms of power, and that to power in itself, without reference to any moral end, an inevitable admiration and complacency appertains, whether it be displayed in the conquests of a Napoleon or Tamerlane, or in the foam and thunder of a cataract" (SC, I, 58).

Thus, Coleridge holds, even the unique case of Iago's motiveless malignity is artistically acceptable, simply because of the tremendous truth in the brilliant portrait of unimpeded intellect. It is Iago, not Regan, who is anatomized, who is only part of a human being, a part which in life cannot subsist alone, but which Shakespeare has portrayed so knowingly that we gladly accept it and do not demand that the clarity of our view of the cell be obscured by presentation of

19 Coleridge concluded that "in Richard the 3d. cruelty is less the prominent trait than pride" (SC, II, 209).
the surrounding tissue. If we wish to know why it is that even the enemies of righteousness have, in Shakespeare's dramas, the power of holding our interest, we must recall Coleridge's view of Shakespeare's creative method, a method based not on observation but on meditation, on feeding upon parts of the self. "To know is to resemble" (BL, II, 259), says Coleridge, but Shakespeare resembles his villains not in their lack of moral sentiment, but in their power of mind. "They are all cast in the mould of Shakespeare's own gigantic intellect; and this is the open attraction of his Richard, Iago, Edmund" (BL, II, 189).

By a variety of explanations, then, not all of which were mutually consistent, Coleridge attempted to force Shakespeare's plays into the mold of his own aesthetic theory. It is but one of the marks of Shakespeare's greatness that he can stimulate a mind so fertile as Coleridge's, and yet foil the searchings of mortality.

*Tufts University*