
A FEW LINES OF SHAKESPEARE...

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Shakespeare has said so much, his achievement in a succession of plays and poems is so vast, that one is tempted to believe he found it easy to write with such flowing and consummate artistry. Effortlessly, it seems, his imaginative insight swept over all aspects of human life, probing and illuminating and creating a body of work which seems beyond the scope of just one man. It is the work of one man, nevertheless, and the serious student of Shakespeare must be prepared to look closely at Shakespeare's craftsmanship. His achievement can be analysed as well as dazzle us, and his mastery of detail confirmed.

For reasons of space two examples must suffice and their analysis be confined to dramatic significance – that is to say, the ways in which the lines fit into the larger pattern of each play – and to the quality of poetic expression, which involves some consideration of matters such as diction and imagery and the way the verse moves and should be spoken.

The first extract is from *Othello*, a play which deals with sexual jealousy and its tragic consequences:

This fellow's of exceeding honesty,
And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit,
Of human dealing. If I do prove her haggard,
Though that her jesses were my dear heart-strings, 5
I'd whistle her off and let her down the wind
To prey at fortune. Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declin'd
Into the vale of years – yet that's not much –
She's gone; I am abus'd; and relief 10
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,
And live upon the vapour of a dungeon,
Than keep a corner in the thing I love 15
For others' uses.

Othello himself speaks here. His first line refers to Iago, who, from sheer

delight in evil and knowing he is trusted by Othello, has made up a tale that Desdemona, Othello's wife, has been unfaithful to him. Knowing he has poisoned Othello's mind, Iago cunningly pleads with him to hold Desdemona 'free' from suspicion and departs, leaving Othello alone on stage.

As far as the dramatic significance of these lines is concerned, this is the pivotal part of a play which abounds with examples of suggestion seen as truth itself, none with a more tragic outcome than here. That Othello so readily believes Iago exemplifies, perhaps, his credulous foolishness, but all the other characters also believe in Iago's 'honesty' and are taken in by him.

The piercing effect of Iago's insinuations is seen in Othello's reflections on women. From a contemplation of Desdemona's individual waywardness and his soldierly resolution to cast her off should she prove false (lines 3-6), he descends to the sort of belittling generalization that Iago earlier makes about Venetian women: they may be 'delicate' but they have 'appetites' and Othello fears he may have been drawn into a monstrous liaison. His search for reasons for Desdemona's supposed adulterous behaviour – his blackness, age, and lack of sophistication – quickly gives way to an appraisal of his own tarnished image, as if his self-esteem depends upon total possession of the loved one. Desdemona thus becomes 'the thing' to be possessed. Failing that, he feels her rebellious and abhorrent actions dishonour him and reduce his life to a base level.

Though he says 'I'll not believe't' when she enters a moment later, the speed of his arousal to an uncontrollable jealous fury is remarkable. The suggestion that Desdemona is unfaithful leads Othello immediately to demand 'the ocular proof'. He is quickly convinced of her guilt by 'trifles' and his commanding nobility in the first scenes of the play collapses in distress.

If we now turn to the poetic expression of these lines, we can see that the passage opens with a straightforward announcement (yet again) of Iago's 'honesty' – the word becoming more grating and ironic as the play progresses – and an observation on Iago's knowledge of many types of people. In Othello's view this worldly experience implicitly justifies suspicion of Desdemona.

More complex is the image of Desdemona as 'haggard' – that is to say, as a partly trained hawk that has gone wild again. Othello sees himself as her trainer, tying her to his wrist by his heart-strings as a falconer would secure a hawk by leather straps ('jesses'). At this stage he does not

think of death as the punishment for Desdemona's wildness, or promiscuity. He will merely release her like an untameable hawk and leave her to fend for herself.

The speech intensifies as Othello identifies within himself possible causes for Desdemona's unfaithfulness, but these speculations are superseded in line 10 by the brief and simplistic conclusion 'I am abus'd'. His anguish is emphasized by the natural stresses on important words: 'gone', 'abus'd', 'loathe', 'curse'. Relief from torment will now come only through a developing hatred. The contrast between 'delicate' physical appearance or character on the one hand and excessive sensual behaviour on the other ('appetites') repels and horrifies Othello. He cannot cope with such disparity between appearance and reality.

The speech marks a change in the verbal patterns of the play. Desdemona has been described as a hawk and a creature, and it is evident that Othello, confessing he would 'rather be a toad', is beginning to use the animal imagery so characteristic of Iago. The toad image reveals how humiliated Othello feels by his wife's imagined, insatiable lust. From now on the debasement of his thoughts to disgusting and bestial levels is mirrored in his language and actions. His tone, already bitter and recriminating, is soon to degenerate into mental rage.

The second extract, taken from the last act of *Antony and Cleopatra*, is spoken by Cleopatra in praise of her lover, Antony, who is now dead:

His legs bestrid the ocean; his rear'd arm
 Crested the world. His voice was propertied
 As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;
 But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,
 He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty, 5
 There was no winter in't; an autumn 'twas
 That grew the more by reaping. His delights
 Were dolphin-like: they show'd his back above
 The element they liv'd in. In his livery
 Walk'd crowns and crownets; realms and islands were 10
 As plates dropp'd from his pocket.

Having been taken captive by the Roman army, she speaks these lines, almost in reverie, in the presence of Dolabella, who has relieved Proculeius as Cleopatra's guard, and he soon confirms her suspicion that Caesar will lead her in triumph as his prisoner through the streets of Rome. Rather than submit to such humiliation, she commits suicide.

Part of the dramatic significance of the play is that it presents two conflicting views of Antony. One is of an Antony who is described by Philo in the play's first scene as 'a strumpet's fool' and who earns the contempt of Caesar and of Rome for his 'lascivious wassails' and neglect of duty. The other, which Cleopatra describes here, is of Antony the fearsome general, courageous and all-conquering, whose greatness and magnanimity inspire loyalty and devotion among his followers. Cleopatra's 'dream' of Antony's noble qualities is supported by other evidence: by his sending treasures, for example, to Enobarbus who has deserted him, by Pompey's comment that 'His soldiership/Is twice the other twain', and by the praise that Caesar rather grudgingly gives him. At the same time, his actions in determining to fight by sea, in having Thidias whipped, and in challenging Caesar to single combat, lend some justification to Caesar's description of him as 'the old ruffian'.

Our view of Cleopatra is similarly divided, though whatever we may have thought of her in the past, this speech dispels any idea of her being merely a wanton, fickle and temperamental. Now Antony is dead, she stands alone against Caesar. Her love of Antony, for so long based – as we thought – upon sensuality and caprice, is raised and exalted in Act V. Unshakeable in her resolution to follow her 'husband', in her praise of Antony she herself acquires the dignity and stature of a great tragic figure. Their love, a consuming passion, has been their ruin. The fact that they give all for love is also cause for celebration.

Much of the diction of the passage is drawn from nature ('ocean'), the references to the seasons and harvest ('dolphin-like', 'realms and islands') and from the larger universe ('world', 'tuned spheres', 'orb'). The diction exaggerates Antony's physical size to suggest his greatness of power and character. This is Cleopatra's dream of her lover and her statements are compliments on the grand scale.

These lines exhibit what has been called the 'cosmic' imagery of the play. Antony is described in colossal terms. The first half line suggests the extent of Antony's influence and control, and the heraldic image 'his rear'd arm/Crested the world' conveys his military power. In contrast, his voice is compared with the harmonious music of the spheres, when he spoke to friends, and with 'thunder' when he was angry. His generosity was like the harvest reaped in autumn. As dolphins show their backs above the waves, so Antony rose above the pleasures that were his element. Lines 9-11 convey the idea of conquest over kings and princes, the comparison of 'realms and islands' with silver coins ('plates dropp'd from his pocket') being evidence of Antony's richness and liberality. He

appears to be the source of everything.

The verse is eloquent and moving. Cleopatra speaks the lines with a deep sense of admiration. She is sad, but the short sentences build in a restraining effect. To her, they are statements of fact rather than grief, and there is a sense of marvel and wonder at the man's greatness as each sentence adds to the praise of its predecessor. Cleopatra's recollection of her lover is of something grand, precious, varied and ennobling, and her words are suitably rhapsodic and lyrical.

It should be obvious that the study of Shakespeare's poetry must involve a willingness to get to grips with the vocabulary of his time. It is essential to find out what his words mean before profitable analysis can be undertaken. The word 'jesses', not in common use, is a good example, if the image is to be appreciated; so, too, are 'haggard' and 'plates', both of which could easily be misunderstood by a modern reader. Of course, a narrow focus on a few lines cannot convey the mighty impact each full and magnificent play has on its audience, but it can give some idea of the amazing range of effects Shakespeare achieves through his handling of language. After all, the plays did not just happen. They were *made* by a conscious artist, and to study his superb craftsmanship is the source of much enrichment.

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