THE JOURNAL OF MENTAL SCIENCE.

[*Published by Authority of the Medico-Psychological Association*]

No. 113. NEW SERIES, No. 77. APRIL, 1880. VOL. XXVI.

PART 1.—ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

The Epilepsy of Othello. By ROBERT LAWSON, M.B., Deputy Commissioner in Lunacy for Scotland.

I have often stated in conversation that Shakspere, in depicting the agitation into which Othello was thrown by the artifices of Iago, subjected the Moor to an epileptic seizure. Almost without exception, this statement has at first been contradicted; but a perusal and an analysis of Scene 1, Act iv. of the tragedy of "Othello" have, I think, convinced all enquirers that the dramatist's design in the matter was not open to doubt.

It will be remembered that Iago, influenced by jealousy of Cassio and dislike to Othello, and incited by the importunities of Roderigo, his deluded victim, had, by the practice of subtle malevolence, aroused in Othello's mind a predisposition to believe in the unfaithfulness of Desdemona. By a dexterous use of simple current events, more effective than any preconcerted scheme could have been, Iago had worked upon the mind of the trustful Moor, turning even his virtues into weapons for his humiliation, and by perverted ocular demonstration, by the affectation of diffidence and the employment of the grossest effrontery, had influenced Othello's beliefs so thoroughly that nothing but the evidence of his own senses, or the confession of the guilty parties, was able to add intensity to his convictions. Having hinted that Iago should supply him with an actual demonstration of Desdemona's guilt, Iago, with convenient moral compunctions, disowns the possibility of such a course, but adds that—

> If imputation and strong circumstances
> Which lead directly to the door of truth
> Will give you satisfaction you might have it.

Forthwith, with a show of diffidence, he tells Othello that—

> There are a kind of men so loose of soul
> That in their sleeps will mutter their affairs;

and relates how in his hearing Cassio, in a dream, had given open evidence of his attachment to Desdemona. Having by this means intensified the bitterness of Othello towards his wife so much as to wring from him a threat to "tear her all to pieces," he pursues further the line of circumstantial evidence. He informs the Moor that Cassio possesses a handkerchief which he may have seen in the hands of Desdemona, and, by Iago's description, Othello at once recognises that Cassio has become the possessor of that which not only had a special value as being his first gift to Desdemona, but which (as subsequently shown by the Moor) by its having quitted the hands of the latter, supplied the most solemn evidence of tradition to the truth of the underhand suggestions of Iago. Othello now craves for a more terrible revenge than that of tearing Desdemona to pieces—

> Oh that the slave had forty thousand lives,
> One is too poor, too weak for my revenge.
> Now do I see 'tis true. Look here, Iago,
> All my fond love thus I do blow to heaven—
> 'Tis gone.
> Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell;
> Yield up Oh love thy crown and hearted throne
> To tyrannous hate! Swell bosom with thy fraught;
> For 'tis of aspick's tongues.

The malignity of Iago having feasted on the perturbation produced by "imputation and strong circumstances" takes one step farther, and, acting by broken sentences, too readily completed by the Moor, Iago now leads Othello to a belief in the existence of the crowning evidence of Cassio's guilt—his own confession.

Othello's response to this climax of Iago's villany is not characterised by an accession of fury such as had marked former steps in the development of the ancient's plot. He is to all appearance stunned; he becomes incoherent, and dreamily recalling the several signs by which Cassio's guilt had been manifested, he shakes and trembles, and with an imprecation showing the existence of strongly compressed emotion, "he falls in a trance."

It is this passage of the tragedy (Act iv., Scene 1) which

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.26.113.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

describes Othello's epileptic seizure, and in order that my remarks may be followed without interruption I transcribe such parts of the scene as are essential to my present purpose.

OTHELLO—Handkerchief—confessions—handkerchief. To confess and to be hanged for his labour. First to be hanged and then to confess. I tremble at it. Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shake me thus. Pish! Noses, ears and lips. Is't possible? Confess! Handkerchief. O, devil.

[*Falls, in a trance.*

IAGO—Work on,
My medicine, work! Thus credulous fools are caught
And many worthy and chaste dames even thus
All guiltless meet reproach. What ho! my lord!

Enter Cassio.

My lord, I say! Othello! How now, Cassio?
CASSIO—What is the matter?
IAGO—My lord is fallen into an epilepsy:
This is his second fit; he had one yesterday.
CASSIO—Rub him about the temples.
IAGO—No; forbear.
The lethargy must have his quiet course;
If not, he foams at mouth, and by-and-by
Breaks out to savage madness. Look, he stirs;
Do you withdraw yourself a little while.
He will recover straight. When he is gone
I would on great occasion speak with you.

[*Exit* CASSIO.

How is it, General, have you not hurt your head?

So acute a critic as Dr. Bucknill, misled by the habitual mendacity of Iago, has expressed an opinion that the designation of Othello's trance "as an epilepsy, of which it is the second fit, appears a mere falsehood."* I think I analysed the passage quoted so as to convince Dr. Bucknill that the "trance" into which Othello fell was a genuine epileptic seizure; and on commencing to write on the subject I find, in a different edition of Shakspere from that which I formerly used, that Charles Knight in a note bearing on the stage instruction "*falls, in a trance*" expresses a similar opinion. He says:—"The stage direction of the folio is

* "Shakspere's Medical Knowledge." By Dr. Bucknill, 1860, p. 274.

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'falls in a trance.' We have altered the punctuation to express what, no doubt, was meant, that Othello actually falls. The direction of the first quarto is '*he falls down.*' Iago's statement to Cassio—'My lord has fallen into an epilepsy' is not meant for a falsehood." ("Knight's Cabinet Shakspere:" W. & R. Chambers).

It will be my object, in the few remarks which are to follow, to show that the dramatist's intention was that Othello, at this stage of the progress of the tragedy, should present such of the features of an epileptic seizure as were consistent with the dignity and impressiveness of the drama. I shall advance evidence that in Shakspere's eyes there was a fitness in the representation of epilepsy as a result of high-strung emotion. I shall endeavour to show that there is much in the construction of the tragedy of "Othello" which makes the accession of epileptic unconsciousness in the Moor a highly sequential and most effective anti-climax, and by a short analysis of the passage quoted, I shall demonstrate the existence of internal evidence which leaves the poet's meaning clear.

That Shakspere looked upon epilepsy as a likely sequence of an intense emotional state is shown by the fact of his inflicting a fit upon Julius Cæsar during the disappointing emotions which were aroused in him by the applause with which the populace greeted his last refusal of the crown. The elements of Shakspere's description of the scene are borrowed from "Plutarch's Lives," ("Life of Cæsar." Ed. William Tegg, 1865, p. 515). And there is not only no evidence that at that time Julius Cæsar really had a fit; but there are strong reasons to lead to the positive conclusion that he had not. Plutarch says in the simplest words that when the populace showed how strongly they rejected the idea of Cæsar's assuming the royal insignia, he (instead of taking a fit, as Shakspere represents it) rose from the "golden chair upon the rostra," on which he had seated himself, "and ordered the diadem to be consecrated in the Capitol." Not only did the coronation befit a poetical invention, but by a careful reading of Plutarch one can trace the passage which most probably led Shakspere to introduce that seizure which the poet's Brutus spoke of as a likely termination to the scene. Comparison of Plutarch's Biography with the words placed in the mouth of Casca ("Julius Cæsar," Act i., Scene 2) shows that in the event spoken of by the Roman citizen, Shakspere utilises incidents which Plutarch mentions as having occurred, not

at the offer of the "diadem wreathed with laurel," but on previous manifestations of Cæsar's haughtiness. The cue for the epileptic seizure following on the abandoned coronation is to be found in Plutarch's remark that Cæsar, finding on reflection that it would be necessary to give some excuse for having received the consuls and prætors and the whole body of patricians, sitting, "bethought himself of alleging his distemper as an excuse, and asserted that those who are under its influence are apt to find their faculties fail them when they speak standing, a trembling and giddiness coming upon them, which bereaves them of their senses. *This, however, was not really the case.*"

Shakspere's account, therefore, of the circumstances of Cæsar's chagrin as put in the mouth of Casca, being evidently a reproduction of Plutarch's account, the fact of Shakspere's having introduced into the scene an epileptic seizure, which Plutarch not only does not mention, but which he distinctly repudiates, shows that in his innovation the poet was influenced by ideas of dramatic harmony and effect, and that to him it appeared natural that Cæsar should show his epileptic propensities at such a crisis in his career. It is important to notice with regard to Casca's description of Cæsar's epilepsy that no mention is made in it of the presence of convulsions. "He fell down in the market place, and foamed at the mouth, and was speechless." As, beyond the mention of shaking and trembling, there is no reference to a convulsive condition in the similar seizure of Othello, it is fair to assume that in the latter case, in which epilepsy may be regarded as somewhat unlikely, the convulsive part of the fit is suppressed—as it is in the undoubted case of Julius Cæsar—from motives of mere histrionic propriety and dignity. I may add that the existence in Shakspere's mind of the natural relationship between epilepsy and intense mental agitation is made all the more evident by the fact that the production of the tragedy of "Othello" was much earlier than that of "Julius Cæsar," and that the value of a device already introduced in one tragedy was to him sufficient excuse for the modification of Plutarch's history, so as to bring the agitation of Julius Cæsar into correspondence with a dramatic principle which he had employed in the depiction of the agony of Othello.*

*An illustration taken at random from Trousseau's Chapter on Epilepsy (Clinical Medicine, Vol. 1), will show that Shakspere's idea of epilepsy being primarily produced, and subsequently re-induced by painful emotions, was, to

What evidence is there in the development of the tragedy of "Othello" which makes an epileptic seizure presumable in his case? The character of Othello is apt to be much misunderstood. Shakspere's evident intention is to depict in the beginning and the end of the tragedy a hero distinguished for his magnanimity, his vital sense of honour, his attachment to whatever is noble and beautiful, his freedom from passion, and his affectionate constancy. One sees how much he was attached to the even tenor of his way by the fact that the gentle Desdemona had to assume an almost unwomanly part in raising him from a condition of general generosity to one of special attachment to herself—

> She bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
> I should but teach him how to tell my story,
> And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake.
> She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
> And I loved her that she did pity them.

And when, looking round upon the terrible reverse of this picture, one sees how much difficulty Iago at first experienced in poisoning Othello's mind with jealousy, it is again manifest how inapt he was to change his mental state. In fact, when a condition of variableness is suggested to him he exclaims—

> Why, why is this?
> Thinkst thou I'd make a life of jealousy
> To follow still the changes of the moon
> With fresh suspicions? No, to be once in doubt
> Is once to be resolved.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> And on the proof there is no more but this,
> Away at once with love or jealousy.

But when the wily accumulation of evidence has become so great as to lead him to the acceptance of the dishonour

say the least of it, a happy conception, which has its counter-part in clinical facts. I shall classify Trousseau's comments on a case to show the close resemblance of its features to those of the conception of Shakspere. *Primary Causation.*—One night the patient had been suddenly awakened and frightened by terrible shrieks from his wife, and a few days afterwards he had his *first* attack. The attacks recurred at regular intervals, and were brought on *by the slightest painful emotion.*

The features of a seizure were *quivering of the legs*, delirium, convulsions and *unconsciousness.* He looked *exactly like a delirious maniac.* The fits lasted about twenty minutes, and *without any transition* the patient became calm. The words which I have italicised have their counterpart in Iago's description of Othello's state, and in the words of Othello himself.

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.26.113.1 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which had fallen upon him through the supposed unfaithfulness of Desdemona, the platform of his very existence, so to speak, is knocked from under him; the conviction seizes him that the perils and labours and distinctions which had marked his life since in his own words,

> These arms of mine had seven years' pith,

were irretrievably eclipsed by the dishonour which had accrued to him through the unfaithfulness of Desdemona.

> My name that was as fresh
> As Dian's visage is now begrim'd and black
> As mine own face.

The chaos which he had predicted as a consequence of the absence of Desdemona's love surrounded him; he was "eaten up with passion," he became violent in his deeds, his love turned to hate, his hate to frenzy, his frenzy led to murder, and his mental oblivion caused him to exclaim—

> O, unsupportable! oh, heavy hour,
> Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
> Of sun and moon, and that the affrighted globe
> Did yawn at alteration.

Over and over again his friends testify to the absolute difference of his character from what it had been throughout his whole life, and Lodovico asks:—

> Are his wits safe? Is he not light of brain?

Shakspere's apparent intention in these numerous side enquiries and comments is to show that the principle of honour, upon which Othello's whole life had been constructed, having been shattered by the unfaithfulness of Desdemona, which was now a conviction in his mind, his consciousness was virtually abrogated. In a metaphysical sense this would no doubt be accepted as a safe conclusion. The sense of honour in which every thought and action of his noble life had had its existence, was, in his opinion, a thing of the past, and "he loses his self-control when all the props of his existence—at least, of his consciousness—have broken down."* To use a more modern phraseology—honour was the substratum of his consciousness; when honour failed his being failed; and the unconsciousness of his epilepsy is, so to speak, the index of his extreme divergence from his real personality.

* Ulrici, Shakspere's Dramatic Art, Vol. I.

Look at the meaning of the passage which I have quoted at length when it is regarded from a dramatic standpoint. Recall Othello's calmness in the Council Chamber while justifying his dealings with Desdemona—his nobility, his modest reserve, his manifestation of almost every quality which goes to constitute true greatness; and then picture the scene in which he lies prostrate "in a trance." Examine the grouping of the characters to see how strikingly Shakspere utilises the unconsciousness of Othello. Iago and he are at first alone. Iago has virtually completed his diabolical mission. He has

> Put the Moor
> At least into a jealousy so strong
> That judgment cannot cure.

He gives us the best assurance that Othello's unconsciousness is a reality, by the exultation which, with Satanic malignity, he manifests over the prostrate body of the Moor. Trustful nobility lies helpless in the presence of the spirit of evil, and Iago, with his heel virtually on the neck of his tortured victim, triumphantly proclaims the motive and the success of his prolonged machinations—

> Work on,
> My medicine work; thus credulous fools are caught,
> And many worthy and chaste dames even thus
> All guiltless meet reproach.

Passing still farther in the development of the tragedy to the period at which Othello, after the murder of Desdemona, has again had his honour established, and the dignified appearance in the Council Chamber is seen to have its balance on the other side of the scene of epileptic prostration in the final words and attitude of the Moor. He has proclaimed himself an "honourable murderer." To him the most revolting parts of the tragedy are but "unlucky deeds," because nought has been done "in hate, but all in honour," and his equanimity again gives such a nobility to his character that his cheerfulness presents no painful contrast to the carnage with which he is surrounded. Amidst the manifestations of tender emotions, with manly confessions and honourable reflections, he finds in the climax of a simple tale the violent climax of his own afflicted life. Regarded from this point of view, I think it will be seen that Othello's epilepsy has a definite and highly artistic place in Shakspere's tragedy, and that it gives completeness to a picture of

Othello during his period of extreme perturbation and the virtual annihilation of his individuality, which has its contrasts in the opening and closing dignities of the drama. This striking collocation of effects could not have remained in obscurity but for the fact that the portion of the tragedy which depicts Othello's epileptic trance, as well as another effective part which follows it, have no place in the ordinary acting edition.

After what has been already said, it seems to me that it is not necessary to enter into any minute analysis of the passage quoted to show that Shakspere's intention was that Othello should have on the stage an epileptic seizure. This, I believe, is the only passage in which Shakspere uses the word "epilepsy," but in King Lear, Act ii., Scene 2, Kent says to those who laugh constrainedly at his somewhat sarcastic speeches:—

A plague upon your epileptic visage.

To all appearance this is a mode of expression derived from the analogy between a fixed unnatural laugh and an epileptic contortion of the facial muscles. The fact that Shakspere puts this word "epilepsy" in the mouth of Iago in describing to Cassio the condition of Othello, and the words which he subsequently uses to convey to Cassio the impression that violence might follow an interruption of the fit, indicate that the dramatist meant, by Othello's falling into a trance, a condition very different from a simple unconsciousness. But there are in the passage other evidences of the poet's intention in this matter. In their order I shall indicate these briefly. Shakspere represents incoherence as a decided prelude to the occurrence of the fit, and the fifty words immediately preceding the fall in a trance are a jumble of phrases suggested by a loose retrospection of Iago's disclosures. At first Othello mistakes the nature of the muscular spasm from which he suffers. He expresses himself as trembling at the nature of the confession which he has just heard, and immediately before his fall he says, "It is not words that shake me thus." I have already said that the soliloquy of Iago over the body of the Moor sufficiently indicates the existence of his absolute unconsciousness; but if confirmation were needed, it would be found in the entrance of Cassio, which, if Othello had been cognisant of it, would have occasioned in him a terrible increase of mental commotion un-harmonious with the progress of the

tragedy. The entrance of Cassio during the climax of Iago's villany has no meaning, except in so far as it enhances the dramatic effect of the Moor's prostration, to which I have already referred. The originator of all Othello's troubles is represented by the dramatist as audibly exulting in the completion of his design; and the innocent passive agent of them, against whom Othello harbours the most murderous sentiments, passes across the stage without awakening in him the slightest evidence of perception. There can be no doubt that Shakspere's intention was that both these incidents should minister to a powerful dramatic effect, of which the absolute unconsciousness of Othello was the necessary condition. Iago is anxious that Cassio should withdraw before Othello regains consciousness, and he states the effects of interfering with the course of the fit in such terms as to leave no reasonable doubt that the "epilepsy" which the dramatist had in his mind was no other than the falling sickness. It might be advanced that Iago's avowed anticipation of violence as a consequence of interference with the natural progress of the seizure was designed to account, by anticipation, for the unrestrained fury which Othello, independently of his epilepsy, would have shown on coming to himself in the presence of Cassio. It seems to me, however, that a subtle touch of the dramatist has shown conclusively that Iago himself had a keen sense of the danger which he laboured under on the awakening of Othello from his "trance." After a significant inquiry as to whether the Moor had not hurt his head, followed by a few tentative suggestions, the result of which was not reassuring to Iago, he goes on to say to Othello:—

> *Stand you awhile apart;*
> *Confine yourself but in a patient list.*
> Whilst you were *here*, o'erwhelmed with your grief,
> (A passion most unsuiting such a man),
> Cassio came hither. I shifted him away,
> And laid good 'scuse upon your *ecstasy*.

Iago, evidently remembering the throttling which he had already received from Othello, desires to keep a safe distance between the Moor and himself at a time which he had confessed to Cassio was one of imminent danger. He consequently directs Othello to go to a distance, and the words, "whilst you were *here*," indicate that Iago remains in the place from which the Moor has risen. The use of the word,

"ecstasy," which Iago employs in speaking to the Moor himself, shows that he really believes the seizure of Othello to have been one different from a mere swoon—by being closely associated with madness—the words "madness" and "ecstasy" being, more or less synonymous in Shakspere's use of them. It is still further shown by what follows that Iago found it necessary to be cautious in assuming that Othello's mind had so far regained its balance as to make his proximity safe; and it is only when Othello states coherently his intention to continue his bloody work of retribution that Iago is reassured. Then, as if expressing an opinion as to Othello's restoration from his epilepsy, he says—

That's not amiss.
But yet keep time in all. Will you withdraw?

To me, then, it appears evident that Iago spoke so as to indicate the poet's intention, when he told Cassio that Othello was prostrate with epilepsy; that the term was meant to convey the same meaning as that which educated persons would gather from it at the present time; that comparison of "Othello" with "Julius Cæsar" shows the probability of a simple psychological motive in Shakspere's employment of epileptic seizures; and, finally, that the epilepsy of Othello, and the unconsciousness which accompanies it are synchronous with the extreme success of the villany of Iago, and that they form an essential and artistic feature in the development of the tragedy.

The Comparative Mortality of Different Classes of Patients in Asylums. By T. A. Chapman, M.D., Medical Superintendent of the Hereford County and City Asylum.

In the Journal of "Mental Science" for April, 1877, I published a note on this subject, and had to regret that the conclusions deduced were drawn from comparatively so small a number of cases, that some further statistics on the subject would be necessary to show how far the figures then given could be depended upon.

It occurred to me to secure the statistics of several other Asylums to form an aggregate for this purpose, and found three other Asylums who have supplied me with the necessary statistics. Several others promised to do so, but from various reasons the returns have not been received. The