Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

PART 1

ELIZABETHAN TRAGEDY

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

CHAPTER I

THE ELIZABETHAN TRAGIC WORLD

In the most general terms, great tragedy presents us with the problem: why is it that we are most acutely aware of the good and the valuable when they are attended by evil, chaos, loss, destruction? in what sense does order depend on the presence of disorder? Thinking specifically of English literature, these questions are brought up with such extraordinary vividness and richness by the Elizabethan playwrights that a further generalization may be possible: the central paradox of Elizabethan tragedy in particular seems to be that it sees the good and the valuable as – at least in part – actually nourished and supported by chaos and evil. This is not a matter either of the 'pity and terror' we may feel at tragic loss, or of the regenerative force of love and goodness seen the more keenly because it is in opposition to evil and tragic destruction. It is a more complex question than these, and one indeed which cannot satisfactorily be grasped in philosophical, ethical, or religious terms. Terms like 'good' and 'evil', in particular, must be taken only as approximations in any argument about Elizabethan tragedy, and their significance will change from play to play. Nevertheless there is a sense in which, for the Elizabethans generally, to experience the tragic and the chaotic is at the same time to experience the energy and richness of life itself. Thus Shakespeare is at his greatest, not in the last plays, but in the tragedies. In part this means that in tragedy he has seen and felt more keenly than elsewhere the central mystery of death and the loss of human potentiality. More than this, however, it means that in the tragedies there is a richer sense of the manifold possibilities of living than any Shakespeare achieved in the earlier or later plays.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

And this is so, I think, not because tragedy illuminates by contrast the nature of goodness, but because what Shakespeare has seen in the chaos and destruction of tragedy – even, possibly, in evil itself – is a source of energy and vitality greater than any he found elsewhere. Less richly, and with greatly varying emphases, the writing of the other Elizabethan dramatists bears out the truth of this central paradox: the deepest response to evil and good, or to the valuable and the chaotic, sees them as, in some sense, dependent on each other for their form, substance, and very existence.

My main aim in this introductory chapter is to develop further such general questions about the nature of the Elizabethan tragic world and the continuing relevance it may have for us today. Clearly these are questions which in the end can only be answered in terms of a full critical examination of the value (or otherwise) of particular plays. Themes of 'appearance and reality', 'accident and design', 'the condition of nature' have long been a popular refuge for criticism, but they are meaningless except in so far as they can be seen embodied in the quality of the dramatic writing given us over the whole extent of a given play. And where this can be done, what emerges will only with difficulty, or for purposes perhaps of quick summary, be called a 'theme' at all. For drama – great drama, at least – is never merely a matter of 'dramatized philosophy', or 'illustrated Christianity', or even 'eternal truths rendered in human and dramatic terms'. Each major play we consider is a fresh experience, a fresh insight; not something already implicit in, and hence merely dramatized from, a Thomist philosophy, or a concept of Tragedy derived from earlier writers, or an attitude to the breakdown of feudal society obtainable from material outside the limits of the play. The critic who can claim that the problem of justice is the same for Shakespeare as it was for Socrates, and further that the solution Shakespeare offers 'is that of St Augustine and St Thomas, translated . . . into a pagan analogue'[1]

[1] M. D. H. Parker, *The Slave of Life* (London, 1955), p. 130.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

has missed both what Shakespeare has to say and the sense in which he *has* it to say. Further, he has not realized what drama is, what the nature of *dramatic* truth must inevitably be.

On the other hand, general questions about a given period must arise, and one of the first we have to ask – developing its implications wherever possible in terms of specific plays – is: What is the particular contribution that the plays, and the plays alone, have to make to our sense of the valuable in the Elizabethan experience? What is it that the tragic drama has to say which, even in an age as prolific as the Elizabethan, is not to be found expressed in any other form? What is the *nature* of tragedy? Again, it is easier to say what the answers to these questions are not, than to glimpse what they might be. Obviously, drama does not merely illustrate in other, more 'human', terms what Donne, for instance, said in his. When the phrase 'the play as a dramatic poem' is taken to mean simply that plays and poems are the same thing and offer identical insights, one has some sympathy with readers who want to return the critical emphasis to concepts of character and action.[1] But equally obviously, any explanation which stops at saying that the Elizabethans were intensely interested in the theatre, or in people ('drama is a social art'), is merely skating the surface of the problem. These remarks may be true as generalizations, but the trouble with them is that they could too easily apply to other ages – even other national dramas – as well. The Elizabethan insights are – at their best – always intensely particular.

Clearly, then, if we are looking for the nature of the Elizabethan dramatic insight – or more specifically of its tragic insight – we must find some approach which cuts through matters of form and technique and reveals what tragedy has to say about the human condition. There is, I think, one very particular sense in which

[1] Cf. William Rosen, *Shakespeare and the Craft of Tragedy* (Harvard, 1960). Mr Rosen's thesis, however, leads him to see Shakespeare as placing man's 'nobility of spirit' against 'the fearful elements of the world'; Mr Rosen is thus adopting what seems to me a quite unacceptable position (see the discussion of Clifford Leech's thesis below, and note 1, p. 6).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

Shakespeare, at least, can be said to have founded his plays on a peculiarly *Elizabethan* view of the relations between man and the tragic universe around him, and this is the sense brought out most clearly by L. C. Knights in his examination of Nature in *Lear* and *Macbeth*. Professor Knights does not claim that his approach to tragedy is exhaustive, or the only one possible, but it is, I think, a better starting point for general formulations than any other suggested so far. However, before looking at this in some detail, it is important to distinguish other approaches which at first sight look complementary or even similar to his, but which in fact are radically different. Many, if not all, recent approaches seem to me insubstantial in that they have missed the essential points made by Professor Knights and also those made by Dr Leavis in his shorter studies of Shakespeare.

For instance, it is clear that almost all recent critics, English and American, are concerned to stress, in different ways and with different qualifications, what is nevertheless basically the same point: the isolation of the tragic hero from the universe, or the people, around him. The trouble with this kind of approach is that it almost always ends by attempting to make what is undoubtedly one element in some plays, the key element in all. One of the clearest and most uncompromising formulations is Clifford Leech's in his book *Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Despite Dr Leavis's earlier remarks in *Education and the University* on the nature and function of Shakespeare's verse in *Macbeth*, Professor Leech feels free to claim that 'When we think of Shakespeare's tragedies . . . what we recall is made up of an indifferent universe and certain characters who seem to demand our admiration'.[1] The centre of the tragic vision, for Professor Leech, is in the hero who shares with all of us a

[1] C. Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London, 1950). And compare theses like that of D. G. James, *The Dream of Learning* (Oxford, 1951) which stresses Shakespeare's imaginative ability to 'see things as they really are', but develops this in terms of Shakespeare's 'forcing apart . . . of virtue from life itself'. For Mr James, *Lear* is a play 'designed to exhibit suffering and helpless virtue' (p. 111). Compare also Geoffrey Bush, *Shakespeare and the*

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

human weakness but who is greater than we are because he shows 'an increasing readiness to endure, an ever greater awareness'; and what this 'awareness' consists in is simply a clearer and steadier vision of man's plight in the face of an alien universe, and in the face of a 'justice' which is 'indifferent' and 'cares no whit for the individual'.[1] This, like Bradley's earlier but basically similar approach, would if it were true certainly give a clear account of man's place in the universe and would consequently offer a rationale for the view that drama has indeed a unique function in the Elizabethan age: the 'character' element in drama brings home man's plight, and man's nobility, in more specific terms than poetry could. But the trouble is, as we shall see more fully later on, little or nothing in Shakespeare's universe, or even Webster's, corresponds to Professor Leech's idea of it. Terms like 'an indifferent universe'– or its complement 'dramatic irony'– are completely inadequate in the face of the health and vitality given us, as Dr Leavis points out,[2] in Banquo's 'This guest of summer . . .' or even in Lady Macbeth's 'All our service, / In every point twice done . . .'. Approaches like that of Professor Leech can serve to stress, as it should be stressed, the human *suffering* in these plays – especially in *Lear* with its agonized questioning so reminiscent of Sophocles: 'Who is it that can tell me who I am?' – but they are quite misleading on the relationships this suffering bears to the world of nature given us in *Macbeth*, or the different universe given us in *Lear*, or the investigation of the flux of nature, different again, in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Professor Leech's over-simplification of the tragic world of Shakespeare is mirrored in another, much more commonly held, approach. Recent publications reveal a growing body of criticism

Natural Condition (Harvard, 1956). For similar approaches to later, Jacobean tragedy see C. Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study* (London, 1951); and Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (University of Wisconsin, 1960).

[1] Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, p. 14.

[2] F. R. Leavis, *Education and the University* (London, 1943).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

which centres on *Lear* and talks in terms of Lear's 'spiritual journey' of self-discovery on the Heath; of the redemptive aspects of the play and Lear's discovery, through suffering, of his one-ness with humanity; and of the great positive value of love, conceived variously in Christian and Humanist terms. Formulations of this kind – and there are many more than I have suggested here – look at first sight as if they offer a more positive approach than those of the 'irrational universe' type, but on inspection they turn out almost invariably to be merely variations of it. Undeniably, Shakespeare in *King Lear* (and elsewhere) *is* preoccupied with what several critics call the 'mystery of human suffering', and it is equally clear that this is one reason why he felt compelled to write plays as well as poems. But critics, and audiences, neglect at their peril the dominating qualities of Shakespeare's dramatic verse as it changes from play to play. It is the fabric of the verse, varying from play to play and from situation to situation, which offers, not a 'background' of order or chaos, but the very substance of the play; and this is a substance which, as we shall see, changes radically with each fresh insight, each new tragedy written. With *Lear*, even though this play appears to fit 'redemptive' theories better than most (the struggle is waning to find nobility in Macbeth's character sufficient to fit any such theories), nevertheless neglect of the true importance of the verse fabric ends either in isolating Lear and Cordelia from the natural world around them, or, as in the 'pathetic fallacy' theories, using the natural world merely as background. The characters appear, once again, as in total opposition to or in isolation from a chaotic universe (the storm), or a chaotic and evil society (Edmund and the bad daughters), and the play's complex and particular insights are lost. The way is then opened to over-generalized pronouncements about human love as a value in itself, and once generalizations about Shakespeare's world are permitted, sentimentality beckons at every turn of the argument. The following are typical of many

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

recent formulations of the problem of suffering in *Lear* and its relation to the other plays:

> Descent may be, and perhaps must be, a preliminary to ascent; and from Shakespeare's hell there is an open but not easy path to heaven. Essentially it is love's path. Truth to one's Self, fidelity to Love, and creative mercy are inseparable . . . Shakespeare traces the soul's journey from the pit of chaos, to a point where it seems about to unfold celestial wings . . .[1]

> As Lear is revealed to us in the last scene of the play . . . he represents for us the final affliction of suffering humanity; but he represents, too, the tenderness, the love of suffering humanity, and the dignity, the almost mystical dignity, with which that love is invested. It is a moment too solemn for tears. In his figure, as his great heart falters and dies, we recognise a supreme value that the ancients never knew, a value which surpasses – for us, at least – even the Sophoclean value of justice: the value of human love.[2]

In both these examples, the very softness of the critical prose itself betrays sentimentality and an inadequate response to Shakespeare's much tougher, and more particular, view.

Of course one must admit that there are tougher minded critics in plenty. For instance Professor John Lawlor, in his book *The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare*,[3] writes critical prose which could not be accused of the softness and sentimentality of most of the redemptivists. But even Professor Lawlor's view seems to me to be

[1] John Vyvyan, *The Shakespearean Ethic* (London, 1959), pp. 204–5.

[2] Harold S. Wilson, *On the Design of Shakespearian Tragedy* (Toronto, 1957), pp. 208–9. In the many other articles and books offering similar 'redemptivist' interpretations of *Lear* and the other plays there are minor differences of emphasis. Some see Lear as foolish but redeemed; others as the good man struggling on behalf of humanity against Edmund and the bad daughters. Some see a background of 'order' in the poetry; others merely 'dramatic irony'. In all these cases the hero's personality is given as the main issue, the order (or lack of it) merely background; or alternatively Shakespearean order is something we might find as readily in St Thomas Aquinas (cf. Parker, *op. cit.*).

[3] J. Lawlor, *The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare* (London, 1960). For a similar approach to *Macbeth*, see C. C. Clarke, 'Darkened Reason in *Macbeth*', *The Durham University Journal*, N.S. XXII, 1960, 11–18.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

one which fatally isolates the protagonists from the world in which Shakespeare presents them as living and acting. Much of the book is devoted to a discussion of the freedom of choice a tragic hero is given, and though the discussion is much fuller, and the argument much keener, than that of the many earlier critics who chose the same ground, it still seems to me to be looking in the wrong directions. Concentration on the tragic choice leads often to what looks in fact like sophistical argument:

> To the question what is Fate? we can make no adequate answer. But our question is simpler. How can the dramatist represent Fate without impairing his character's power of choice?; and to this we may now attempt a reply. Fate must be shown as a limitation of the character's field of choice – not, be it emphasized, his power of choosing, but the things there are to choose from. His whole universe must be narrowed to a single 'either-or'; *and the 'or' must represent what he cannot do without ceasing to be the character introduced or established for us.*
>
> (p. 121, my italics)

Even apart from the shaky logic of the argument here, the reduction of choice to these rigid alternatives is false to our sense of the *manifold* possibilities of life in Shakespeare's play (here *Macbeth*). Concentration to this degree on the tragic choice offered the protagonist tends to reduce everything else the verse of the play has to offer to mere background, and so it is not surprising that when Professor Lawlor comes to make claims for the imagery and 'word-play' in *Macbeth* he tends to see it merely as 'reinforcing' thematic structures on the one hand, and, on the other, lending 'deepest irony' to Banquo's speech about Macbeth's castle. The poetry is thus denied its most positive impact on us, and the uniqueness of Elizabethan dramatic insight is fatally obscured.

More particularly – and here Professor Lawlor's account is characteristic of a growing body of opinion about Shakespeare – the dominating themes of the tragedies tend by this method to be stated exclusively in terms of the natural bond between man and

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-14827-6 - A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy
T. B. Tomlinson
Excerpt
More information

man. 'Here again,' says Professor Lawlor of the gathering of the forces of right at the end of the tragedies, 'we meet the unwearied Shakespearian sense of the endlessly fruitful possibilities of the natural tie . . .'[1] Taken by itself this could be a true enough statement, but it is disturbing when we realize that Professor Lawlor is here thinking of the specifically human relationships or alignments *and of these alone*. Responding to the whole range of the drama and poetry in a Shakespearean tragedy, we realize that this concept of 'the natural' is a crippling limitation of Shakespeare's deeper insights.

And it is indeed a deeper insight into Shakespeare's view of 'the natural', and of our possible relations to it (and hence of order, value and, ultimately, tragedy), which is absolutely essential if we are to see either the true nature of his plays or the particular contribution the drama as a whole has to make in the Elizabethan age. The greatness and individuality of drama certainly depends on its ability to deal with people and their problems more fully and deeply than short poems, at any rate, can readily do. On the other hand, a poetic drama is not a tale illustrated in verse. Clearly we respond to the poetry in fuller and more demonstrably specific ways than this. It is on questions of this kind that Professor Knights's concept of the relations between man and the natural world given us in Shakespeare's plays is so immensely valuable. Like Dr Leavis, Professor Knights rejects any concept of Shakespearean tragedy which would see it in terms of a simple opposition between man and an irrational universe, or in terms of the natural bond between man and man, or even between man and an essentially benevolent natural 'order'. The point, rather, is that in the fabric of Shakespeare's verse the world of nature is given us as having an existence which, paradoxically, is at once independent of, and intimately related to, man's status and worth. Any full

[1] Lawlor, *op. cit.*, p. 125. For a similar interpretation of the 'Nature' theme in *Lear*, see John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (London, 1949), p. 131.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org