

1

Introduction: Shakespeare and the idea of tragedy

WHEN THE EDITORS OF THE FIRST COLLECTED EDITION OF Shakespeare's plays (the First Folio of 1623) decided on a classification of the thirty-six plays they had assembled, they divided them into three groups, namely 'Comedies', 'Histories' and 'Tragedies'. In this they were making use of traditional generic terms that had hardly ever been seriously questioned and are still in use today, even though an exact definition or a clear distinction between them may not be possible in each particular case. The history play, to be sure, is largely a product of the Renaissance and has always occupied a rather special place, but comedy and tragedy have been firmly established types of drama almost from the beginnings of Western literature and theatre; they are among the most long-lived of all literary genres. Thus, tragedy, in spite of many variations in form and substance, has proved remarkably consistent, and this can hardly be explained by literary reasons alone. In common usage the word 'tragedy' denotes not just a form of drama, but a particular kind of event, a specific experience, or even a general view of our world-order. 'Tragedy' can mean some strikingly unhappy accident or a merciless, arbitrary destiny, a moral *exemplum* of just retribution or an unfathomable catastrophe, suggesting an essentially malevolent fate. As a rule, to be properly called tragedy, the disaster has to have an element of heroic pathos or some sensational and astounding quality. In the context of literature, tragic suffering implies an idea of dignity and of inevitability, of more than average stature, even though this may not be true of every single stage tragedy. The lasting impact of tragedy throughout the centuries can only be explained by the fact that its subject is more than some individual, regrettable misfortune. Any great tragedy touches on the fundamental questions of the ultimate cause of human suffering, the origin and nature of evil in man, and the existence of a destructive or benevolent fate. It is an expression of a universal desire to come to terms with these disturbing uncertainties.

In this connection, it is significant that in English, the word 'tragedy'

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[More information](#)

SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: AN INTRODUCTION

appears for the first time in Chaucer's translation of Boethius' *Consolatio Philosophiae*, a work in which the experience of suffering and the feeling of utter helplessness produced by it are discussed with particular intensity. For Boethius and Chaucer, tragedy is an experience as universal as it is incomprehensible, an experience that makes the sufferer feel very much in need of explanation and consolation.

Chaucer explains the term for his readers as if it had been unfamiliar to them before:

Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrecchidnesse.¹

By his fall from a state of happiness and prosperity into misery, man is forced to face the problem of guilt, destiny and divine providence.

Shakespeare's tragedies, though shaped by very different literary conventions, have to be seen within this tradition. Lear's agonized question, 'Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?' (*King Lear*(III.6.76–7)), is repeated, in some form or other, in nearly all his tragedies. Man's bewildered attempt to come to terms with suffering, loss, or disillusionment is at the heart of almost every tragedy of his age. The problems of tragic guilt, catharsis and Christian redemption in Shakespearean tragedy that have been debated time and again in Shakespeare criticism, are all aspects of this impact.

It is much more difficult, however, to find a less general common denominator for Shakespeare's tragedies. Most critics are agreed that these plays do not follow a fixed literary pattern, though not all would go as far as Kenneth Muir, who begins his own survey with a warning that has often been quoted since:

There is no such thing as Shakespearean Tragedy: there are only Shakespearean tragedies.²

True enough, the twelve plays gathered under the heading 'Tragedies' in the First Folio are so different from each other – leaving aside the problem that they include *Troilus and Cressida* and *Cymbeline* – that so far there has been no successful and convincing attempt to formulate a definition applicable to all of them. Either a group is singled out, such as the 'great' tragedies, while others are ranked below them as deviations from the ideal type; or else the common features listed are so general that they could just as well apply to many other plays, either by contemporaries of Shakespeare or even from very different periods. This difficulty is to be attributed above all to the undogmatic delight in experiment that is so characteristic of many Elizabethan dramatists who, unworried by any fixed poetic precepts or narrowing conventions, produced a multiplicity of forms that resists any neat systematization. As to subject-

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[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

matter, form, dramaturgy and language, the Elizabethan dramatist had so many options before him that the diversity of plays, even when composed almost simultaneously, is often astonishing. *Othello*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear* are so different from each other that it is very difficult to say anything useful that applies to them all. If we include Shakespeare's other tragedies, the diversity becomes so overwhelming that Kenneth Muir's pragmatic refusal to accept any abstract model is all too understandable.³ He is, of course, aware of the fact that the historical and literary context imposes certain limits, wide and indistinct though they may be, and provides certain models not really valid for other periods in the history of drama, so that none of Shakespeare's tragedies, for all their diversity, could really be confused with a play by Sophocles, Racine, Schiller or Ibsen. The history of the reception of Shakespeare's plays suggests, moreover, that many generations of playgoers and readers have found his tragedies to be something very special and unmistakable. They are certainly more than just an arbitrary collection of individual plays and they keep challenging the critic to find some common elements even though it is, in the last resort, much more interesting and rewarding to study the specific shape and substance of each tragedy by itself.

Chaucer's definition of tragedy in the context of his translation of Boethius has already made clear that for him, 'tragedy' was not in any way related to drama or theatre, but referred to a particular type of story or rather story-pattern. Chaucer himself gave a demonstration of this in the monotonous series of sad stories contributed by the Monk to the *Canterbury Tales* and, more seriously, in his *Troilus and Criseyde*, an ambitious epic poem he himself calls a tragedy, which draws on some central ideas of Boethius, describing the 'double sorrow' of the hero in the context of a running debate about the causes of misery, the power of capricious fortune and the problems of free will. It is certainly the most moving tragic work of literature in English before Shakespeare. Other works that have been discussed as antecedents or models of Renaissance tragedy, such as Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium* (1355–60) or the Elizabethan collection of 'tragedies' published and repeatedly augmented under the title *Mirror for Magistrates*, often reduce the tragic to a pathetic account of a 'fall': the lamentable descent of a formerly powerful and prosperous person becomes a tragedy in the narration.⁴ This aspect is taken up in Shakespeare's *Richard II* (often described as a tragedy by critics) where the King presents his own pitiful situation as an occasion for retelling the tragedies of others:

For God's sake let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings,
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,

SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: AN INTRODUCTION

Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
 Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed,
 All murdered. (III.2.155–60)⁵

This sounds like a brief summary of collections of 'tragedies' in the sense of Chaucer's *Monk* or the authors of the *Mirror for Magistrates*; later in the play, the King talks of his own story as 'the lamentable tale of me' (V.1.44) that will move later listeners to tears. Such utterances suggest that for the Elizabethans too, the subject and its application was more important as the essence of tragedy than any formal conventions. Seneca's tragedies, for instance, often discussed as important models for Elizabethan tragedy, were only one among many different influences and certainly did not determine either its form or its tragic themes.⁶ It is true of Shakespeare, as of most of his contemporaries, that each of his tragedies tries out new ways, from the choice of subject to its scenic presentation, without being cramped by many abstract concepts, such as the classical unities of time, place and plot, or rigorous ideas of linguistic decorum.

The only thing that seems to be, at first sight, really indispensable for Elizabethan tragedy is a marked turn of fate, ending in the hero's destruction. In the simpler forms of the *de-casibus* tragedy the fall of the protagonist is a demonstration either of man's guiltless subjection to an unpredictable fate or capricious fortune or else of well-deserved punishment for criminal wickedness or overweening pride. In more subtle ways, these questions have been endlessly debated by Shakespeare critics over the last three centuries: the hero's downfall is explained by some 'tragic flaw', some recognizable weakness of character or fatal error. That the tragic ending is, if not a just retribution, then at least a kind of sacrificial atonement for an offence against the moral order, is the view of those critics in particular who try to understand the tragedies from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. It is only too easy, however, to overestimate the didactic definiteness of Shakespeare's plays. In this respect, there seems to be a fundamental difference between the medieval morality plays or many overtly didactic plays by contemporaries, and his own kind of drama, which leaves much of the moral evaluation and application to the individual member of his audience.

This explains, at least in part, the number of contradictory, even mutually exclusive interpretations of the tragedies, but at the same time it has contributed to the lasting impression the plays have made on the most diverse kinds of readers. It is, of course, a commonplace, often repeated, that each generation finds in Shakespeare what it is looking for, but this is not an invitation to arbitrary reading, rather a manifestation of a shared experience: Shakespeare does not impose on his audience a ready-made

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INTRODUCTION

appraisal of the dramatic events and characters; rather he confronts us with surprises, incongruities and contradictions to provoke doubt and second thoughts. One only has to compare one of Shakespeare's tragedies with any of the countless smoothing or simplifying adaptations – from Dryden's *All for Love* to Edward Bond's *Lear* – to become aware of the difference between an undogmatic, continually stimulating work of art and one that seems quickly exhausted and will hardly ever spark off any creatively controversial debate. This is also why no interpretation should aim at relieving the reader of the effort to face the coexistence of conflicting points of view and to come to terms with undogmatic indefiniteness.

The question, certainly of central importance, of the relationship between tragedy and Christian beliefs provides an instructive example. It is, no doubt, a simplification to claim that tragedy and Christian orthodoxy are basically incompatible.⁷ On the other hand, Elizabethan tragedy strikes us as most disturbing where it does not simply confirm traditional tenets or generally accepted moral principles, but presents without mitigation the experienced reality of evil, the unpredictability of human nature and man's helplessness in the face of a fate that seems indifferent if not hostile. Few readers will perceive an untroubled affirmation of a justly and reasonably ordered world in Shakespeare's tragic endings, and if they do, it must be their own assurance, not the play's. Kenneth Muir's comment on *King Lear* can be applied, though with differing emphasis, to nearly every tragedy by Shakespeare or one of his more interesting contemporaries:

The play could not have been written in the ages of faith, but neither could it have been written in an age of unbelief or an age of reason. At the beginning of the seventeenth century the right conditions existed: a universal Christian society, but with some of its basic tenets called in question by intellectuals; a realisation that the qualities which make for success are not the basic Christian virtues; and the beginnings of a conflict between science and faith.⁸

The unmistakable dynamic quality of Elizabethan tragedy comes from the discovery of the individual human character, from a burning interest in its potentialities for good or evil, its corruptibility as well as its exhilarating power to inspire and impress:

What piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god: the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals –

(*Hamlet* II.2.303–7)

Hamlet here describes one of the fundamental discoveries of the Renaissance, but his own attitude mirrors the dilemma on which this tragedy – and not just this one – is based:

SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: AN INTRODUCTION

and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? (308)

The biblical allusion to man's transitory nature is a moving reminder of the precariousness and uncertainty of humanist optimism.

All this may help to explain why, from the beginning, problems of character, above all of the protagonist's character, have been at the centre of most discussions of Shakespearian tragedy; for the spectator, too, the impact of a Shakespeare play is produced most of all by the characters, even though Shakespeare criticism has from time to time appeared to deny this and concentrated on other aspects of the plays.

This does not at all mean that interpretation is reduced to psychological speculation or that we confuse the plays with the more realistic literature of later ages. Nor does the refusal to discuss the plays in narrowly theological or eschatological terms necessarily imply that we deny the presence of supernatural agencies or the reality of religious experience. However, in their painful struggle with destructive forces within themselves or from the world outside, Shakespeare's heroes receive no help from any power beyond. Providence and fate are hardly ever blamed for the hero's downfall, at least not alone. Even where the concept of tragic guilt can hardly be applied, as, for instance, in the early tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* or the late *Timon of Athens*, we are made to feel that tragedy is a matter of human responsibility and moral decisions rather than of an anonymous Fortune.

Thus, we can hardly describe Shakespearian tragedy in terms of external action and story-pattern alone. In nearly every case, the real tragedy is produced by the protagonist's experience, his realization that he himself or what is most dear to him has been destroyed and that he has to face this sense of utter and final loss.⁹ As a rule, however, this is not only a question of the individual's disillusion, since the hero's hopes and disappointments are experienced within the context of a community whose peace and happiness are closely related to the fate of its most prominent members. Romeo and Juliet are agents and victims of the family feud that threatens the internal order of Verona; Hamlet is heir to the throne of Denmark and his life is most closely associated with the political health of the state; even Othello's downfall is by no means presented as a 'domestic tragedy' only, but is firmly set within a political and social context. The interdependence of conflict within the individual character and the claims of the community is crucial for Shakespeare's idea of tragedy. Thus, a much larger number of characters is usually involved in or at least vaguely connected with the protagonist's fate than, for instance, in Greek tragedy, and they are often quite different in social rank. The protagonists are surrounded by a more or less diversified group of minor figures some of whom are drawn into the catastrophe against

INTRODUCTION

their will or are deeply affected by it. In the histories, the moral and political foundations of society and the threats of its precarious order are the central concerns, but this aspect is never really lost sight of in the tragedies either.

As far as the hero's individual character is concerned, Shakespeare's tragedy is not confined to a narrow range of types. Although, in a very general sense, Aristotle's famous dictum that there should be no completely good nor any completely bad character in tragedy seems to be observed, it would be difficult to discover many character traits common to Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth that would be very helpful in understanding their tragedies. If in spite of this, most readers get the impression that Shakespeare's tragedies somehow belong together and are noticeably different from the tragedies of his contemporaries, this is due to the sheer power and wealth of his poetical language, his inventive dramaturgy, and his surprising range of insights into human character more than to any clearly definable common elements of plot or theme. The impact of his tragedy is so complex and changeable because it is not produced by one single character or one clear-cut conflict, but by the way the reader is confronted with a whole world in which an often rather mixed group of human beings are trying to find their way, even though the hero's dilemma often overshadows all other concerns. This is why many interpretations of the tragedies attempt to elucidate the interplay of character constellation, plot and thematic associations and these recurring questions alone tell us something about the literary form of Shakespearian tragedy.

The real substance of the tragic conflict – most critics seem to be in basic agreement on this – can only be understood in moral categories, by the experience that there is a fundamental opposition of good and evil determining all human intercourse but resisting any simple explanation and never smoothed over by unambiguous type-casting or an uncritical application of poetical justice. The spectator is not put at his ease by a comforting distribution of reward and punishment; he is confronted, without homiletic soft-soaping, with the reality of wickedness and its power to corrupt the good, to make the world poorer and more hopeless. The history of Shakespeare criticism shows how very differently whole generations of readers as well as individual readers have reacted to the dramatist's habit of disappointing conventional expectations, but wherever this has led to attributing to the plays either a depressing lack of firm orientation or else an emphatic affirmation of moral order and humanist (or Christian) optimism, essential aspects of the tragedies and often even their most original qualities were left out of account or completely lost sight of. The most helpful and stimulating interpreta-

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SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES: AN INTRODUCTION

tions, however, are those aware of the intensity of doubt and bewilderment as well as of the presence of a moral order wanting to be realized in human society, a common desire for goodness and stability. Bradley's classical definition of Shakespearian tragedy may sound a little too much like a semi-theological 'system' and does not quite speak in the language of our own generation and its literary criticism, but I do not think it has really been surpassed either in the force of pregnant expression or depth of insight:

Shakespeare was not attempting to justify the ways of God to men, or to show the universe as a Divine Comedy. He was writing tragedy, and tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery . . .

We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact, or the no less inexplicable appearance, of a world travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste. And this fact or appearance is tragedy.¹⁰

Critics of a later generation who tell us that we come away from *King Lear*, for all the despair and suffering it so mercilessly presents, with the conviction that it is better to be Cordelia or Edgar than Goneril or Edmund obviously mean something very similar.¹¹ It is, of course, in the first place a description of individual subjective impressions, but these are supported by very clear statements and signals in the text which the reader has to become sensitive to, perhaps with the help of perceptive critics. Any reader who finds in the tragedies only despair and defeat is in danger of imposing his own convictions on the text just as, on the other side, the critic who is sure of his own Christian point of view believes he alone is able to 'reach the heart of tragedy'.¹² If we approach the texts with an open mind we will not be content with simple alternatives nor try to fix the dynamic movement of dramatic action by inflexible definitions which are all too often inappropriate for any work of creative fiction and for Shakespeare's tragedies in particular.¹³

A NOTE ON THE PROBLEM OF CLASSIFICATION

The heterogeneous nature of Shakespeare's tragedies, not ruled by any strict formal conventions, makes classification problematic and not particularly relevant. Any kind of grouping according to action or theme is based only on some partial common denominator and may be useful for the larger area of Elizabethan drama, but is not very satisfactory for Shakespeare's tragedies. To group *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* together as 'love tragedies' can help us to become aware of important connections and developments.¹⁴ Other labels, like 'revenge tragedy', 'tragedy of intrigue' or 'tragedy of power', are less

INTRODUCTION

useful when it comes to Shakespeare's plays. The bracketing of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* as Shakespeare's 'great' or 'mature' tragedies, largely due to Bradley's authority, has, for all its subjectiveness, been sanctioned by tradition. The same can be said of the Roman plays, evidently linked by their subject and Shakespeare's source. One should, perhaps, not attach too much importance to the problem of classification because any grouping can illuminate certain essential connections while at the same time drawing artificial dividing lines.

For the purposes of my own survey I have arranged the plays partly according to chronological aspects and partly according to their subject matter, not to replace familiar classifications by a new one, but to point out certain patterns and parallels and, above all, to stand as little in the way of an appreciation of each individual play as possible. It seems to me important to note, however, that Shakespeare's source and the nature of the plot he chose to dramatize are more important for the form of each tragedy than any formal models or conventions, even though, as in the case of the Roman plays, the source was very little help to the dramatist as far as scenic arrangement was concerned. *Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens* were, presumably, very much affected by particular stage conditions and by their transmission, but it is also worth noting that they are both dramatizations of classical stories. *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* make use of legendary history and this links these plays together, as much as the fact that Shakespeare's art of tragedy seems to have reached its peak with these tragedies. *Othello* occupies something of a special place among the 'great' tragedies, which is partly explained by Shakespeare's use of an Italian *novella*; this in turn accounts for the love theme and, perhaps, for the prominence of comic elements in the play. Whether one considers similarities with *Hamlet* and *King Lear* to be more important than those with *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, or vice versa, largely depends on the way one looks at the plays and need not be decided here. Date and literary context provide good reasons for grouping the two early tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, together; the traditional four 'great' tragedies can be seen as a series of attempts to widen the scope of the tragic hero's experience in various directions. Lastly, the Roman plays and the other two tragedies on classical subjects are usefully seen together. The arrangement is not, however, of crucial importance for this study, which is concerned primarily with the plays themselves, not with any all-embracing system, and makes no claim to present a general theory of Shakespearean tragedy.

2

 The early tragedies

ALTHOUGH SEVERAL OF SHAKESPEARE'S EARLY PLAYS CANNOT BE dated with complete certainty, we can confidently assume that his first two tragedies, *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*, along with two of the histories that come closest to tragedy, *Richard III* and *Richard II*, are separated from the later tragedies by an interval of a few years.¹ After that, it seems hardly possible to group the tragedies chronologically. At the beginning of his career as a dramatist, however, Shakespeare evidently experimented with various forms of tragedy available at the time, wrote his cycle of history plays and then turned to comedy. With *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* he returned to tragedy and these two plays show very clearly how much Shakespeare's own style and, presumably, the tastes of his audience had changed in that short space of time.

Both *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet* appeared in print fairly soon after their first performance and must have been very successful. *Romeo and Juliet* has always been one of the best-loved and most frequently performed of Shakespeare's plays while *Titus Andronicus* is, by and large, appreciated only by specialists and is rarely seen on stage. This is not necessarily an absolute indication of artistic inferiority, but, if anything, evidence of striking differences in the longevity of literary conventions and of unpredictable changes in taste.

TITUS ANDRONICUS

Shakespeare's first tragedy, it seems, is based on conventions that were out of fashion less than a generation after its first performance.² We may deduce this from the often quoted allusion to the play in the 'Induction' to Ben Jonson's comedy *Bartholomew Fair* of 1614, where the individual playgoers' judgements and tastes are satirically discussed. One particular type of playgoer, the sort who stubbornly refuses to adapt his opinion to changing tastes, is characterized as 'He that will swear *Jeronimo* or *Andronicus* are the best plays yet, shall pass unexcepted at, here, as a man