

## Shakespeare's Tragedies *An Introduction*

This book introduces the student and the general reader to Shakespeare's tragedies and to many of the problems, both old and new, of interpreting them. Traditional questions and answers regarding the texts, as well as their realization in performance, are freshly examined, and it is shown how the plays do not offer easy or final solutions to the tragic dilemmas presented, but engage the reader and spectator in a debate with more than one possible outcome.

Each of the tragedies (*Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*, and *Troilus and Cressida*) is examined separately, with discussions of its provenance, its stage history and critical history, and of the problems associated with its categorization as part of the 'tragic' genre. The analyses do not pretend to lead up to a single authoritative thesis; Professor Mehl's intention is rather to point out conventions, difficulties, possible solutions, and beauties within the plays, and in the ways they have been treated by critics and theatre-goers alike. He refers widely to a representative body of Shakespearian criticism, and provides a useful bibliography which indicates the best, as well as the most up to date, sources for a reader wishing to pursue individual themes further.

The book is carefully written, and should serve as a valuable introduction for anyone wanting to gain a sense of the richness of the plays and the diversity of debate and interpretation that has surrounded them.

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Dieter Mehl

Frontmatter

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# Shakespeare's Tragedies

## *An Introduction*

DIETER MEHL



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## *Preface*

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THE ORIGINAL VERSION OF THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN AS AN introduction to the study of Shakespeare's tragedies for German students, and I can only hope that these interpretations will be of some interest and use to English readers too. There is, of course, no lack of critical aids of similar scope and it is not surprising that many books on Shakespeare begin with an attempt to justify their existence. Yet it is simply in the nature of great works of art that they refuse to be tied down to any 'definitive' reading. Each generation has to discover its own approach and even the most brilliant criticism, while it can make the task a lot easier, tends to strike us as distinctly dated after some time.

It has not been my intention to offer a comprehensive guide to all aspects of Shakespeare criticism or a handbook of facts and problems, but to sharpen the reader's awareness of the undiminished vitality of these plays. I have neither suppressed my own personal preferences nor, I hope, presented an all too one-sided view of the texts. Above all I have tried to encourage the kind of active collaboration of readers (and spectators) that seems to me the chief end of good criticism. I have put rather more emphasis on the dramatic characters than has been usual or fashionable for some time because it is still through these characters that most readers and theatre-goers begin to get interested in the plays. I have, at the same time, tried to give a reasonably full account of previous scholarship, of traditional problems and the more interesting controversies. Again, this is bound to be selective and personal, but the sheer bulk of Shakespearean criticism makes any other method equally questionable and I hope, at least, that many of the most stimulating critics are represented and that the reader is offered enough guidance to pursue his own interests further if he wishes to.

It is hardly necessary these days to remind ourselves that Shakespeare's tragedies were written first of all for performance, that they are the work of a practitioner as much as of a poet. The theatre has, in fact, done more to keep these plays, their poetry and their characters, alive than the

## PREFACE

scholars. But each new performance is, in the last resort, inspired by the same text, however freely it is treated, and the literary critic should not attempt to replace his explication of the text by an imaginary performance. Each production is, by its very nature, designed for a particular time and a particular audience, and even the most impressive performance is more transitory than what has survived of Shakespeare's words.

Of course, the student of Shakespeare should make himself familiar with the physical conditions and the practice of the Elizabethan theatre as well as with the history and the present state of Shakespearian production. The volumes of the new Oxford Shakespeare and the New Cambridge Shakespeare are particularly helpful in these matters. It is often astonishing to find how many problems of interpretation that have puzzled critics for centuries seem to vanish or appear in a new light when the printed text is transferred to the stage. I have tried to keep this in mind, even though I am primarily concerned with the words on the page and have only sporadically referred to questions of staging or to particular productions. At least, I am conscious that my appreciation of the tragedies owes as much to the theatre as it does to literary criticism.

The present book is a rather free translation, updated and revised in the light of discussions and impressions since the appearance of the German edition in 1983. Both the German and the English versions owe a great deal to the resources and to the hospitality of the Shakespeare Bibliothek in Munich, especially to Dr Ingeborg Boltz. This is, however, only a small part of my long association with Wolfgang Clemen and many of his pupils. Without his inspiring and generous scholarship this book would never have been written. It can only be a very modest and fragmentary expression of gratitude to a great scholar and teacher.

Marie-Theres Harst and Barbara Möller were reliable helpers when I was preparing the German edition. Throughout my work on the English adaptation I had the competent assistance of Christa Jansohn whose practical initiative and critical encouragement were a most valuable support. Jochen Meibrink did a very helpful amount of checking and compiled the index.

## *A note on the texts*

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AFTER SOME HESITATION, I HAVE DECIDED TO QUOTE THE TEXTS not from one of the single-volume editions most frequently used, but from what seemed to me the best and most up-to-date available edition of each play. Thus, I have used either the Arden Shakespeare, the New Penguin Shakespeare, the Oxford Shakespeare, or the New Cambridge Shakespeare, with references to other editions, as the case may be. The disadvantages of this procedure seem to me negligible: the line-numbering hardly ever differs enough to cause real inconvenience. More important is the advantage, to draw the reader's attention to the rich choice of thorough and stimulating modern editions and to discourage the illusion that there is such a thing as a definitive text.

I quote from the following editions:

- Titus Andronicus*, ed. Eugene M. Waith, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford, 1984)  
*Romeo and Juliet*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1984)  
*Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London, 1982)  
*Othello*, ed. Norman Sanders, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1984)  
*King Lear*, ed. G. K. Hunter, The New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, 1972)  
*Macbeth*, ed. G. K. Hunter, The New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, 1967)  
*Julius Caesar*, ed. Arthur Humphreys, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford, 1984)  
*Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. Emrys Jones, The New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, 1977)  
*Coriolanus*, ed. Philip Brockbank, The Arden Shakespeare (London, 1976)  
*Timon of Athens*, ed. G. R. Hibbard, The New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth, 1970)

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*Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Kenneth Palmer, The Arden Shakespeare  
(London, 1982)  
Other editions are referred to in the notes.