

Introduction

Imagine that, as in the current vogue of Saturday night British television, you are watching the Top 100 Shakespearean Tragic Moments. What will reach the top five? Macbeth clutching at an imaginary dagger? Lear with Cordelia in his arms? Cleopatra holding the asp to her breast? Juliet falling on Romeo's body? Number one would surely have to be one of two iconic moments from *Hamlet*: 'Alas, poor Yorick' or 'To be or not to be'. Do these moments have anything in common that helps us towards a definition of Shakespearean tragedy? The only more or less common factor is perhaps a relentless focus on the solitary individual; but this may be less an effect of Shakespearean tragedy itself than of a post-Romantic way of reading Shakespearean tragedy almost solely through the lens of the tragic hero. Of course Shakespearean tragedies do have heroes, some more heroic than others, and one or two very hard indeed either to admire or to sympathise with (Coriolanus or Timon, for example). These moments, however, are less individually focused than they may appear to be at first glance. Lear and Juliet are both embracing a lost loved one and Lear is surrounded by other people in that moment; Cleopatra has to struggle to get rid of the clown before she can put the asp to her breast, and Charmian remains at her side for the moment itself; Hamlet is with Horatio and has been exchanging jokes with the gravedigger when the gravedigger throws up Yorick's skull; Hamlet is observed by Claudius, Polonius and Ophelia when he ponders whether to live or die. Only Macbeth is alone when he reaches for the dagger.

Neither Shakespearean tragedy nor earlier Elizabethan tragedy would usually emphasise the individual to the exclusion of the state. Indeed a feature shared by all Shakespeare's tragedies, as well as by most of the tragedies written by Shakespeare's contemporaries, is that their closure depends on a restoration of political order following the central death or deaths of individuals. If we were to focus on the closing scenes of Shakespeare's tragedies rather than those moments that have permeated the collective memory, we would find that the stage is usually full and the focus is on two things: how the tragic hero will be remembered and how the rest will carry on. And if, alternatively, we pick out moments that appear insignificant and are often cut in performance,

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Excerpt

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we will go further towards understanding not only what is distinctive about Shakespearean tragedy but what is distinctive about each tragedy. In chapters that follow, therefore, one approach to be pursued is the close analysis of particular moments, some apparently peripheral, in order to examine how they speak of the play's particular concerns. Characters who appear in one scene only, like Lady Macduff in *Macbeth* or Cornwall's servant in *Lear*, may be as important to the shaping of tragedy as the designated tragic hero.

It is probably neither possible nor desirable to find a one-size-fits-all definition of tragedy, though the attempt is often made.

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

...
The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: Character holds the second place.

Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. vi

A tragedy is a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate.

A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904)

In aesthetics, tragedy is the quality of experience whereby, in and through some serious collision followed by fatal catastrophe or inner ruin, something valuable in personality becomes manifest, either as sublime or admirable in the hero, or as the triumph of an idea. The situation itself or its portrayal is termed tragedy. The characteristic subjective effect is that of a complex of strongly painful and pleasurable elements existing simultaneously, both of which may be regarded as arising from sympathy.

The Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/t/tragedy.htm>

Aristotle heads this selection of definitions because he has been the single most influential thinker on Western tragedy. Yet there are two important caveats in relation to assessing his relevance to Shakespearean tragedy. The first is that Shakespeare, along with most of his contemporaries, almost certainly never read his major work on tragedy, the *Poetics*; and the second is that Aristotle, when he wrote, was describing the Greek tragedy of the fifth century BCE, not prescribing what tragedy should be.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction 3

Raymond Williams' view of tragedy is helpful here. He argues that tragedy is specific to particular times and places, always arising out of the precise 'structure of feeling' determining what can be thought and created in that particular time and place.¹ Thus Greek tragedy differs from English medieval tragedy, which in turn differs from Elizabethan tragedy, because historically and culturally specific conditions of being created different possibilities for thinking and writing.

Our thinking about tragedy is important because it is a point of intersection between tradition and experience, and it would certainly be surprising if the intersection turned out to be a coincidence. Tragedy comes to us, as a word, from the long tradition of European civilization, and it is easy to see this tradition as a continuity in one important way: that so many of the later writers and thinkers have been conscious of the earlier, and have seen themselves as contributing to a common idea or form. Yet 'tradition' and 'continuity', as words, can lead us into a wholly wrong emphasis. When we come to study the tradition, we are immediately aware of change. All we can take quite for granted is the continuity of 'tragedy' as a word. It may well be that there are more important continuities, but we can certainly not begin by assuming them.

Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (1966)

It makes more sense, then, to ask questions about the particular forms of tragedy we are dealing with than to focus on the broad and reductive question that flattens out difference. In any case, our views of tragedy are now so thoroughly shaped by Shakespeare, that it is almost impossible to explore what we think it is or should be without reference to his plays; thus, arguments about the definition of tragedy *per se* in a post-Shakespearean era often tend towards circularity.

Even the most seemingly simple and uncontentious definitions can be found wanting. When Bradley writes that 'a tragedy is a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate', he ignores the fact that not all tragedies end in death, though all of Shakespeare's do. Attempts to reduce even Shakespearean tragedy, far less all tragedy, to formulaic definitions are doomed to failure partly by virtue of the fact that they are so reductive.

All of Shakespeare's tragic heroes have a flawed nature or blind spot that leads to their downfall:

for Hamlet it is procrastination
for Macbeth it is ambition
for Coriolanus and Othello it is pride

RSC website on *King Lear*, 2004–5, <http://www.rsc.org.uk/lear/tragedy/tragedies.html>

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespearean Tragedies*

Such formulations distort more than they reveal; and, as Jonathan Bate remarks, talk of a tragic flaw (derived from Aristotle's concept of *hamartia*) is very misleading, since *hamartia*, by Aristotle's account, is 'not a psychological predisposition but an event – not a character trait but a fatal action'.²

Though Williams' argument for thinking about tragedy primarily within its historical moment is a very powerful one, some studies have nevertheless usefully made comparisons across huge gaps in historical time. Emily Wilson for example, in a recent study comparing classical and Shakespearean tragedy (without making any argument for continuity or direct influence) shows that the idea of 'overliving', living beyond the point when life has any value, is shared by a select number of classical and Shakespearean tragedies and that this is one reason why death itself is not necessarily the end of every tragedy.

Tragic overliving often blurs the distinction between life and death. Excessive life is presented as a kind of living death.

Emily Wilson, *Mocked With Death* (2004)

Both *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, as Wilson points out, 'use parodic and perverted versions of the Resurrection to suggest the horrors of an unending life in the body', and *Macbeth*, as he comes to see his own life an endless sequence of repetitions, associates that sense of having lived too long with theatre itself, where the same plays are performed again and again.³

For Stephen Booth, the uniting factor of tragedy across time (though his book focuses only on Shakespearean tragedy) is indefininition.

Tragedy is the word by which the mind designates (and thus in part denies) its helplessness before a concrete, particular, and thus undeniable demonstration of the limits of human understanding . . . the traditional expense of time and effort on defining dramatic tragedy is explicable as an extension of the emergency measure that the word tragedy is itself; the whole subject exists to cope with human nervousness at the fact of indefininition. One can see, too, why some people have wanted to devote themselves to checking particular plays against particulars of Aristotle's formulas. As long as they attempt mastery only of the obviously limited problem they present themselves, they can avoid facing the intellectual limitation of which tragedy is the terrible advertisement. Along with the clown in *Othello*, they can say, 'To do this is within the compass of man's wit, and therefore I'll attempt the doing of it.'

Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (1983)

It may be possible in this way to reconcile the historical and the transhistorical approaches. If tragedy is a response to indefininition, it is only to be expected

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction 5

that different eras and even different individual writers will respond to that indefiniteness in distinct and distinctive ways.

Shakespeare's way, this book will argue, was experimental. In each play he set himself new challenges, playing with the idea of tragic form to produce very different effects, though some of the same concerns recur. The aim of the individual chapters that follow will be to explore the range of this experimentation within those changing contexts, giving full weight to the distinctiveness of each play within a developing sense of what the continuities are in Shakespearean tragedy. The plays covered are those that comprise the group named as 'Tragedies' in the First Folio, with the exception of *Cymbeline*, which is tragicomic rather than tragic.⁴ Quite how *Cymbeline* found its way into the tragic grouping is unclear. As the last play in the volume, it may simply have been added in at the last minute; or it may be that its focus on a British king gave it a superficial resemblance to *King Lear* and the history plays, several of which have a tragic shape. Indeed, those plays classified as 'Histories' in the Folio are grouped together only because their subject is relatively recent English history and their focus is on English kings. It is notable that Shakespeare's dialogue with history and historical sources in the wider sense is ongoing in a majority of the tragedies. Not only do *King Lear* and *Macbeth* centre respectively on ancient British and Scottish history, but three more tragedies, *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*, deal with Roman history as mediated through Plutarch; another, *Timon of Athens*, takes a Greek historical subject from Plutarch; and one further one, *Titus Andronicus*, while not following a known historical source, locates its tragedy in ancient Rome.

Troilus and Cressida, printed as *The Tragedy of Troilus and Cressida* in the Folio, between the histories and the tragedies, but not listed in its contents at all, and also dealing with Roman history, is more problematic. Its most prominent vein is satire, a vein that is also visible but nowhere else so dominant, in Shakespeare's other tragedies, and its structure is certainly unlike that of any of his other plays. We might fairly say that it defies generic categorisation. Discussion of *Troilus and Cressida* and some of the history plays would have usefully widened the consideration of what Shakespearean tragedy is, but it would also have cut the available space for discussing each play considered; and this pragmatic reason, more strongly than any reason of principle, has dictated their exclusion.

To attempt to cover even ten plays in a book of this size, in a field where so much has been written, is a daunting task, and readers are bound to feel cheated of all the subjects that are not discussed. Writing about a single Shakespearean tragedy within the context of a book on Shakespeare's tragedies, however, offers a unique opportunity to examine that play both individually and as

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Janette Dillon

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespearean Tragedies*

part of the broad sweep of Shakespeare's development of tragic form, and I have approached the writing with that perspective very much in mind. To speak of Shakespeare's development, moreover, is to include his collaborative development where that is relevant; and at least three of the tragedies, *Titus Andronicus*, *Timon of Athens* and *Macbeth*, have possible links with other dramatists. *Timon of Athens* is now widely agreed to represent a collaboration between Shakespeare and Middleton; evidence for Peele's co-authorship of *Titus Andronicus* is quite strong; and Middleton's hand, perhaps as reviser, is again evident in *Macbeth*.⁵ There is no space in a book of this kind to discuss these matters in any detail, but it is important to emphasise that discussing them as 'Shakespearean' should not be taken to imply sole authorship of all the plays. Collaboration was the norm in the theatre of his time, and Shakespeare was relatively unusual in being sole author of so many of his plays.

I explore these plays as part of an ongoing testing of tragic form by a dramatist who was nothing if not innovative, borrowing material from a wide and disparate range of sources, sometimes lifting passages wholesale as they stood, yet always making a new and highly theatrical whole out of the elements he brought together. My aim is above all to open up rather than close down the plays for readers; that is to say, I discuss ways of seeing and reading them, rather than offer closed interpretations. I do not seek to reduce each play to a single, unified meaning, but to suggest to the reader some of the multiple ways in which meanings are produced. I have also aimed throughout to maintain the reader's awareness of the plays as material events in material theatres as well as printed texts in a written tradition. To begin that exploration, then, we must start by looking historically at both the written and performance traditions of tragic theatre before Shakespeare.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Chapter 1

Tragedy before Shakespeare

The First Folio collected edition of Shakespeare's *Works*, published in 1623, seven years after his death, grouped his plays under three headings: comedies, histories and tragedies. To spectators and readers of Shakespeare now, those three terms are so familiar as to be almost impossible to imagine doing without; but this was not the case in 1623, when 'comedy' and 'tragedy' had been terms denoting types of plays for only a century or so in England, and 'history' in this sense, as a dramatic genre, was very new indeed. Samuel Johnson was of the opinion that neither Shakespeare nor '[t]he players, who in their edition divided our author's works into comedies, histories and tragedies, seem . . . to have distinguished the three kinds by any very exact or definite ideas'; and the evidence of the First Folio itself, with its classification of *Cymbeline* as a tragedy and its heading of *Richard III*, grouped with the histories, as *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*, confirms Johnson's view.¹

The terms 'comedy' and 'tragedy' in English usage were first applied to narrative poems with happy or unhappy endings respectively. (The words are both of Greek origin, reaching English via Old French from Latin.)² The earliest citation for both terms in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, written before 1388; and Chaucer also offered a definition of 'tragedy' in the Prologue to *The Monk's Tale*.

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende myght to make in som comedy!

Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, Book v, lines 1786–8

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

Geoffrey Chaucer, Prologue to *The Monk's Tale*

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Janette Dillon

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespearean Tragedies*

'Tragedies' in this period were primarily stories about the falls of princes (sometimes referred to via the Latin as *de casibus* tragedy). The Latin term *tragedia*, as a term describing a form of drama, was no doubt understood by those educated in Latin from their reading of such works as Horace's *Ars Poetica* and commentaries on Terence, but it is not noted in English until the fifteenth century, at which point it still refers to the classical dramatic form.³

It was really from about the 1530s that 'comedy' and 'tragedy' began to be used more widely as terms descriptive of dramatic genre, though 'comedy' could still be used to mean simply 'play' for some time after this. 'History', like 'comedy', had a broad general meaning (of 'story') which continued alongside its more specific meanings, and did not begin to become a generic term for a type of drama until the end of the 1590s. Shakespeare's *Henry IV* was published in quarto as *The History of Henry the Fourth* in 1598, at which point the word is hovering somewhere between its earlier and broader senses and the more specific sense which is about to develop. But by about 1600, Shakespeare himself has Polonius describe the actors who come to Elsinore as '[t]he best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene indivisible, or poem unlimited; Seneca cannot be too heavy, nor Plautus too light' (*Hamlet*, 2.2.396–401). The length and overcomplication of the list makes a joke of genre categorisation, but the joke tells us that categorisation according to genre was becoming an increasingly fashionable and complex matter.

Classical influences

Francis Meres, Shakespeare's contemporary, also used Plautus and Seneca as the comparators for Shakespeare's greatness in his own time.

As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for Comedy and Tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage.

Francis Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (1598)

Shakespeare's classical models, where he followed them, were late Roman plays, not early Greek theatre or theorists; and two of his earliest plays, one comedy and one tragedy (*The Comedy of Errors* (1594) and *Titus Andronicus* (1592)), show him openly imitating these two great predecessors.

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Janette Dillon

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Tragedy before Shakespeare* 9

The tragedies of Seneca, the first-century Roman dramatist, were far better known throughout Europe in this period than those of the ancient Greek dramatists (fifth century BCE) and affected the writing of English tragedy more substantially than any body of theoretical writing, including Aristotle's. His plays may not have been written for fully staged performance, but they were performed as well as printed in sixteenth-century Europe and shaped the tastes first of elite, and later of popular audiences. The earliest performances of classical plays in England, in the early sixteenth century, were of comedies, which were produced at the court of Henry VIII from about 1518. The earliest recorded performance of a classical tragedy in England was Alexander Nowell's production of Seneca's *Hippolytus* at Westminster School in the mid-1540s, but very few other productions of classical tragedy are known.⁴ Seneca's *Troades* was performed in Latin at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1551–2; translation of his work into English began towards the end of the 1550s; and Thomas Newton's collection of *Seneca His Ten Tragedies* was published in 1581.

Seneca's plays were especially influential in two ways: on violent and sensational content, especially in revenge tragedy, and on the development of an elevated rhetoric, including especially the pronouncement of *sententiae* (moral and universalising statements).⁵ These two areas of influence were singled out by the Elizabethan playwright and prose writer Thomas Nashe, who wrote sneeringly of the way dramatists with no Latin education were now turning to 'the endeavours of art' to produce 'Seneca let blood line by line and page by page' and to steal from English translations of Seneca 'many good sentences [*sententiae*], as Blood is a beggar, and so forth . . . whole Hamlets, I should say handfuls of tragical speeches' (Preface to Robert Greene's *Menaphon*, 1589). A further outcome of the revival of classical tragedy was 'the widespread attempt to Christianize classical tragedy – or, rather, to classicize Christian drama', resulting in drama on biblical subjects with 'Seneca's florid diction, five-act structure, and sententious choruses'.⁶

The work of Sophocles and Euripides was familiar only to a tiny elite, mainly via Latin translation, while Aeschylus' tragedies were barely known at all.⁷ English productions of Sophocles and Euripides recorded in the sixteenth century were staged privately at Cambridge colleges and the Inns of Court, and sought to turn the plays into quasi-medieval morality plays. John Pickering's *Orestes*, performed at court about 1567, shows this medievalisation of classical material to an extreme degree. In his hands the story of Orestes is punctuated with allegorical moralising and rustic comedy, and the central comic figure of the Vice takes on the allegorical role of Revenge.

As suggested in the Introduction above, however, the classical name most often associated with the study of Shakespeare nowadays, for no very good

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Janette Dillon

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespearean Tragedies*

reason, is Aristotle. Shakespeare almost certainly never read Aristotle, so that, as Alexander Pope put it in the preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1725), 'to judge . . . of Shakespeare by Aristotle's rules is like trying a man by the laws of one country who acted under those of another'. Aristotle's *Poetics* was printed in Latin translation in 1498, but did not become widely known until after the publication of Francesco Robertello's commentary in 1548, and was not translated into English until the eighteenth century. Sixteenth and early seventeenth-century definitions of tragedy available to Shakespeare were mainly quite simple and formulaic.

Tragoedia, A tragedy, being a lofty kind of poetry, and representing personages of great estate, and matter of much trouble, a great broil or stir.

Thomas Thomas, Latin dictionary (1587)

Tragédia, a tragedy or mournful play being a lofty kind of poetry, and representing personages of great state and matter of much trouble, a great broil or stir: it beginneth prosperously and endeth unfortunately or sometimes doubtfully, and is contrary to a comedy.

John Florio, Italian dictionary (1598)

Tragedy. A play or history ending with great sorrow and bloodshed.

John Bullokar, English dictionary of hard words (1616)⁸

Though often based, sometimes unwittingly, on Aristotle, they did not generally derive from a direct reading of his *Poetics* but from commentaries such as Robertello's or late Roman mediations of Aristotle's text, often further mediated through subsequent writers. As Dr Johnson, looking back from the middle of the eighteenth century, rather condescendingly summed up:

Tragedy was not in those times a poem of more general dignity or elevation than comedy; it required only a calamitous conclusion, with which the common criticism of that age was satisfied, whatever lighter pleasure it afforded in its progress.

Samuel Johnson, preface to his edition of Shakespeare (1765)

The view that tragedy requires a certain elevation of both style and content and concerns persons of high estate comes from Aristotle, whom Johnson, writing later than Sidney and Shakespeare, certainly did know; but Renaissance writers owed their awareness of such ideas to later Latin writers such as Horace (first century BCE), whose *Art of Poetry* was widely known, and Donatus, a fourth-century commentator on Terence whose work was part of the standard grammar-school curriculum in England.