

CHAPTER I

*What is a Shakespearean tragedy?**Colin Burrow*

Aristotle (384–322 BC) defined tragedy as ‘a *mimēsis* of a high, complete action . . . in speech pleasurably enhanced . . . in dramatic, not narrative form, effecting through pity and fear the *catharsis* of such emotions’.¹ Aristotle was explicating and evaluating tragedies written in fifth-century Athens by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, all of whom were dead before he was born, and whose work he was attempting to assimilate into his own systematic philosophy. That philosophy encompassed rhetoric and ethics as well as biological theory. Aristotle’s range of intellectual interests both enriches and confuses his definition of tragedy. Scholars have fretted in particular over what Aristotle meant by ‘catharsis’. Did he believe that tragedy ‘purges’ excessive emotions in the way that medicines could purge excessive humours from the body? Did he think of tragedy as providing a kind of emotional education, which might help an audience learn how to experience the right kinds of emotion on appropriate occasions?² Which of those aims Aristotle wished to foreground is anybody’s guess. Whether any of his concerns were actually on the minds of the fifth-century tragedians about whom Aristotle principally writes is extremely doubtful.

There are two clear lessons here. Definitions of tragedy necessarily come after the fact, and are usually embedded in larger philosophical systems. As a result they tend to be messier and less widely applicable than they sound. Nonetheless, theoretical writing about tragedy has had a massive influence on the ways in which Shakespearean tragedy is read, understood and even performed. *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) by A. C. Bradley (1851–1935), perhaps now more often criticized than read, is the most influential single book on this subject. Bradley’s view of Shakespearean tragedy was deeply influenced by Aristotle, on whose *Metaphysics* Bradley wrote an essay early in his career, but his adaptation of Aristotle’s theory to suit Shakespeare is often awkward. Bradley argues that a ‘fatal imperfection or error’³ in the character of the hero is the driver of Shakespearean tragedy. This is an Edwardian simplification of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which argues that the

high-born and virtuous characters who are the principal subject of tragedy should, in a perfect example of the genre such as *Oedipus Rex*, suffer as a result of ‘some *hamartia*’ (*Poetics*, ch. 13, 1453a). By *hamartia* Aristotle probably meant not an ethical weakness or a flaw in character but a particular kind of ‘acting in ignorance’, when a protagonist unwittingly does something which under its proper description he would know to be wrong. This happens when Oedipus inadvertently kills his father at a crossroads.⁴ In the Christian era *hamartia* was often rendered simply as ‘sin’, and became associated with both the general weakness of fallen beings and the specific vices of particular agents. Bradley is heir to that transformation of terms and of ethical values, and his heirs in turn produced from his work the cod-moralizing belief that Shakespearean tragic heroes display a ‘tragic flaw’ (Bradley himself never uses this phrase) which is punished in the course of the play. That is a recipe for drama which could only appeal to those who want simply to see the bad bleed, and who have a clear idea of what ‘bad’ is. It is not the recipe by which Shakespearean tragedy was created, and does not even correspond very closely to what Bradley himself said about Shakespearean tragedy.

Bradley was not just a student of Aristotle. He worked with the idealist philosopher T. H. Green at Oxford, and spent a period in Germany. His brother, the philosopher F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), was one of the leading English followers of the German Romantic philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). Bradley himself was the most influential English popularizer of Hegel’s theory of tragedy. For Hegel tragedy was the highest form of literary art, which dramatized and then resolved conflicts in the ethical sphere. So in Sophocles’s *Antigone* (which is Hegel’s exemplary tragedy) loyalty to the family prompts the heroine to bury her brothers, while King Creon’s allegiance to the state leads him to have the bodies of rebels exposed to the air. In the tragic climax there is for Hegel a resolution of those distinct ethical perspectives, in which each is reabsorbed into a higher totality. Tragedy could therefore act as an engine of development in ethical thinking, which for Hegel, as for his follower Marx, evolves through a dialectic between two interconnected but opposing elements. Hegel regarded Shakespearean tragedy as a product of a late and ‘subjective’ stage of ethical thought, in which conflicts and their resolution were internal to its heroes rather than objectively embodied in different agents. The result is heroes like Hamlet who vacillate.⁵ Bradley’s focus on heroes who are ‘torn by an inward struggle’ marks him as a popularizer of Hegel as well as of Aristotle.⁶

It would be naïve to suppose that to understand the ‘real’ character of Shakespearean tragedy we should try simply to forget this critical tradition.

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The idea that there is something called ‘Shakespearean tragedy’ which has its own rationale and which offers unique insights into the world and into the conflicts that shape and misshape the lives of human beings is the reason this book is called *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*. However, it is tempting to try, by way of a thought-experiment, to set aside the theoretical arguments which developed after Shakespeare’s death, and initially ask not ‘what *is* a Shakespearean tragedy?’ but a rather different, historical question: ‘what *was* a Shakespearean tragedy so far as Shakespeare and his contemporaries were concerned?’ As we shall see, this question is not easy to answer, but asking it can alert us to many elements within Shakespeare’s tragedies which did not matter much to Bradley but which probably did matter to Shakespeare and his audiences.

What might one of Shakespeare’s contemporaries have thought while watching *Hamlet*, and what could it tell us? Perhaps not much. The responses of seventeenth-century theatregoers to Shakespeare’s plays were probably not much more interesting than the average remark overheard in the foyer during the interval of a theatrical performance today. We do have a few records of such thoughts, and they are not on the whole inspiring. When the diarist Samuel Pepys (1633–1703) saw a production of *Hamlet* in 1663 the main thing that struck him was not the prince’s psychological irresolution, but the fact that his wife’s maid was onstage in a non-speaking role. He loyally noted that ‘she becomes the stage very well’. Pepys certainly believed Shakespearean tragedy mattered: he devoted an afternoon a year later to learning “‘To bee or not to bee” without book’,⁷ but when he saw *Othello* in 1660 he just described it as ‘well done’ and remarked that ‘a very pretty lady that sot by me cried to see Desdimona smothered’.⁸ Had the lady in question not been pretty it’s unlikely that Pepys would have noticed her tragic reaction. In the 1640s Abraham Wright (1611–90) was similarly cavalier, describing *Hamlet* as ‘but an indifferent play, the lines but meane: and in nothing like *Othello*’, though he did enjoy the gravedigger scene.⁹ Simon Forman, however, left a more revealing record of a performance of *Macbeth* on 20 April 1610:

The next night, beinge at supper with his noble men whom he had to bid to a feaste to the which also Banco should have com, he began to speake of Noble Banco, and to wish that he wer ther. And as he thus did, standing up to drincke a Carouse to him, the ghoste of Banco came and sate down in his cheier behind him. And he turninge About to sit down Again sawe the goste of Banco, which fronted him so, that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury, Utteringe many wordes about his murder, by which, when they hard that Banco was Muredred they Suspected Makbet. Then MackDove fled to

England to the kinges sonn, And soe they Raised an Army, And cam into Scotland, and at Dunston Anyse overthru Mackbet. In the meantyme while Macdovee was in England, Makbet slewe Mackdoves wife & children, and after in the battelle Mackdove slewe Makbet. Observe Also how Mackbetes quen did Rise in the night in her slepe, & walke and talked and confessed all, & the docter noted her wordes.¹⁰

Forman mainly records what we call plot rather than describing the emotions of the characters onstage or their effect on the audience. Nonetheless, he clearly brought notions of suspicion and guilt to his experience of tragedy: he thought about what the doctor infers from Lady Macbeth's madness and what the diners at the banquet scene think of Macbeth – about which there is very little evidence in the surviving text of the play. This could well indicate that educated members of Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences responded to plays in general and to tragedies in particular by thinking about how and what characters onstage knew. The processes of inference and conjecture that operated in Elizabethan courts of law, in which jurors would make conjectures about the conduct and motives of individuals, does seem to have influenced the ways plays were written and perhaps also how they were experienced.¹¹ That *is* a kind of psychological response to tragedy, although it differs profoundly from Bradley's conception of 'psychology' because it concentrates more on cognitive than emotional questions. Forman asks himself not 'what is Macbeth feeling now?' but 'who knows what about whom on the stage?'. That question may have been one which Shakespeare wanted his audience to ask, since it has suggestive parallels with Hamlet's attempt to use the play called *The Mousetrap* to probe Claudius's guilt: 'guilty creatures sitting at a play / . . . have proclaimed their malefactions' (2.2.542–5). Shakespearean tragedies after Bradley were often treated as dramas of emotion; for Elizabethans they may have been at least in part dramas of knowledge.

Northumberland in 2 *Henry IV* describes a messenger entering to bring the news that Hotspur his son is dead: 'Yea, this man's brow, like to a title-leaf, / Foretells the nature of a tragic volume' (1.1.60–1). Can we learn anything further about what Shakespearean tragedy was by looking at the way tragedies were presented to their early readers? The picture here is again complex. Of the thirty-five plays listed in the contents page of the 1623 First Folio edition of Shakespeare's dramatic works eleven fall under the section headed 'Tragedies'. Curiously enough only three of these are actually called 'tragedies' in the printed list (*The Tragedy of Coriolanus*, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and *The Tragedy of Hamlet*), while others are presented as just plain *Romeo and Juliet* or *Cymbeline King of Britain*. Several of the plays

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given these bald titles in the preliminaries, including *Titus Andronicus* and *King Lear*, are described as ‘tragedies’ on the running-titles at the top of each page of the play itself. Even here there seems to be little rhyme or reason to the titles: *Timon of Athens* is grouped with the tragedies, but remains just *Timon of Athens* even on the running-titles, except at the very start of the play when it’s called *The Life of Tymon of Athens*. The folio is a far from perfect guide to anything that went on in Shakespeare’s head, since it was published seven years after his death. It includes among the tragedies one play, which it variously calls *Cymbeline King of Britain* and *The Tragedie of Cymbeline*, which tends now to be described as a ‘romance’ or a ‘tragicomedy’. *Troilus and Cressida* (to which it is notoriously hard to assign a genre) sits anomalously at the end of the Histories and before the start of the Tragedies section of the folio, as though it doesn’t quite belong with either group. This was probably a result of disputes over the copyright for the play rather than a sign that a scrupulous printer worried about its genre, but there are good reasons to believe that even the publishers who were attempting to produce a volume called *Mr William Shakespeares Comedies Histories & Tragedies* did not feel secure about the generic boundaries between tragedies and other plays. In the smaller and cheaper quarto format editions in which a number of Shakespeare’s plays were published during his lifetime several plays classed as ‘histories’ in the First Folio were first called ‘tragedies’, notably *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second* (printed in 1597) and *The Tragedy of King Richard the third* (also printed in 1597). Meanwhile two plays that Bradley included among the ‘big four’ tragedies have in their quarto texts titles that make them sound as much like ‘histories’ (a word which can in this period mean little more than ‘story’ or ‘narrative’) as tragedies: *The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet Prince of Denmark* (1603) is at least ‘tragicall’, but the *True Chronicle History of the Life and Death of King Lear and his three Daughters* (1608) sounds like a history play.

So a play’s title leaf might foretell the nature of the tragic volume. Or it might not. The evidence of title pages suggests that the category ‘tragedy’ was very elastic in this period. That is of course borne out by the extraordinary fluency with which Shakespeare modulates between chronicle history, tragedy and moments of comedy throughout his oeuvre. Shakespeare himself used the words ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ in different ways at different times. In the history plays those words are generally used to heighten moments of fear, as when Northumberland anticipates the worst from the frowning messenger. By the very end of the sixteenth century, however, Shakespeare was tending to restrict the word ‘tragicall’ to contexts in which characters are rather stiltedly attempting

to raise their language beyond its normal social register, or which are actually comic. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1596) the rude mechanicals' play of Pyramus and Thisbe is described as 'very tragical mirth' (5.1.57). By the later 1590s 'tragical' seems to have dropped from Shakespeare's vocabulary entirely, with the telling exception of its use by the arch-pedant Polonius in *Hamlet* (c. 1600) when he describes the players who come to Elsinore as 'The best actors in the world, either for tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable or poem unlimited' (2.2.363–6). Polonius once played Julius Caesar, and his vocabulary here marks him as being at least a decade out of date in both his tastes and his critical language. Printers continued to use the word 'tragical' on title pages well into the seventeenth century, but for Shakespeare himself that word seems to have evoked the literary landscape of the 1560s and 1570s – in which the source for *Romeo and Juliet* was called *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*. For him 'tragical' came to connote unrelenting woe, and a slightly outmoded literary manner.

These aren't just lexical curiosities. The slippage between plays called 'histories' and plays called 'tragedies' indicates the extent to which readers, printers and Shakespeare himself identified tragedy with the fall of historical figures (particularly kings and Caesars) who were crushed by the grinding rotations of fortune's wheel. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400) gathered together 'tragedies' of this kind (as well as several which don't quite fit that model) in the 'Monk's Tale', and seems to have been the first English writer call this kind of story a 'tragedy'. 'The Fall of Princes' by Chaucer's follower John Lydgate (c. 1370–1449/50?) developed Chaucerian 'tragedy' into a form which could sharply address Lydgate's own Lancastrian political context.¹² The appetite for tragedies about the fall of princes, modelled loosely on Lydgate and on Boccaccio, remained unquenched through the sixteenth century. In *A Mirror For Magistrates*, which grew in regular editions from 1559 through to the next century, the ghosts of historical characters end their tales with warnings along the lines of 'Who reckles rules, right soone may hap to rue'.¹³ This vernacular model of tragedy established both a general moral framework for Elizabethan tragedy and a crude boundary to the social origins of people whose lives could be described as a 'tragedy'. A play called *The Tragedy of Bottom the Weaver* would be intrinsically comical, since a weaver is so clearly, even in his name, close to the bottom of the social ladder. Falling requires a measure of social elevation. Being part of a historical record implies a degree of prominence too.

But the most important single fact to bear in mind when thinking about any aspect of Shakespeare, or indeed about his contemporary dramatists, is

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that he worked in a relatively new and rapidly changing medium under a high degree of commercial pressure. If he did not do something new in each play then his audience would take their pennies down the road to the Swan or the Rose or one of the other rival playhouses. In this environment the ‘fall of princes’ was one of several tragic conventions which were not passively followed but continually transformed. Shakespeare did indeed write plays about the fall of kings and (Julius) Caesars, but the way he did so was usually slightly offbeat. *Richard II* (printed 1597) concentrates with operatic intensity on the fall of a king and the rhetorical arias with which he washes away his own balm. Most of the central characters of later tragedies tend to be just slightly out of place, or not quite as socially elevated as they want to think of themselves, or are even men on the make. Macbeth is not a king but a would-be king, whose desire to get on is accelerated by the prophecies of the witches. Hamlet is a prince who has lost the prospect of succession. Othello is a mercenary warrior whose own conception of his status is qualified by both his and the Venetians’ sense that his blackness makes him not quite belong. Even Coriolanus is an aristocratic anachronism in a period of Rome’s history in which power is shifting towards the plebeians, while Antony is left behind by the realpolitik of the rising emperor Octavian. When Shakespeare returned to a ‘fall of princes’ narrative in *King Lear* (c. 1603–6) he again did something odd with it: Lear wilfully divides his kingdom right at the start of the play as though he is determined to spin Fortune’s wheel right off its axle by his own efforts, while the Gloucester sub-plot relates the rise and fall of another socially marginal and aspiring character, Edmund. This preoccupation with upward social mobility suggests how profoundly the plays of Shakespeare’s contemporary Christopher Marlowe (1564–93) influenced his way of writing tragedies. Marlowe – who died just as Shakespeare’s career as a dramatist was taking off – tended to dramatize efforts by people on the edges of society – shepherds like Tamburlaine, Jews like Barabas, or scholars like Dr Faustus – to dominate the world and the stage. The foregrounding of such figures in Elizabethan tragedy also has some connection with the relatively low social origins of most playwrights in the period: Shakespeare, like Marlowe, could barely claim to belong to the middling sort of men by birth, but by writing for the popular stage he came to be wealthy and relatively well known. The tragedy of *Macbeth* is certainly not, as the more reductive kinds of Marxist criticism would have it, a fable about the rise and self-destruction of the bourgeoisie,¹⁴ but it is not surprising that a provincial glover’s son should have felt that stories about the falls of princes might not speak directly to an audience that consisted partly of London apprentices and artisans. Characters who,

like the semi-tragic socially aspirational steward Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, were not born great but who wanted to believe that they could achieve greatness were much closer to the aspirations of his audience.

The literary criticism of the period suggests some further answers to the question ‘what was a Shakespearean tragedy?’, although again the answers it provides are neither clear nor simple. For Sir Philip Sidney (1554–86), the most influential writer on poetics in Shakespeare’s lifetime, tragedy could shake the bodies of tyrants and assist the government of the state: the ‘high and excellent tragedy . . . openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded’.¹⁵ Sidney ends his sentence with a nod to the conventional view that tragedy represents the mutability of fortune and the fragility of high office, but he begins it with a real bite: tragedy is a genre that ‘maketh kings fear to be tyrants’ – in the present tense. That aim was a strong component in the *Mirror for Magistrates*, which began life under its Protestant editors in the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary as not just a series of plangent wailings by dead kings and councillors, but as such a biting critique of government that it was initially suppressed, and was not published until the reign of the Protestant Elizabeth.¹⁶ Shakespeare’s historical dramas (which include the plays set in ancient Britain, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline*), repeatedly establish nervy intersections between present events and past tyrannies, as Chapter 6 explores in detail. Whether or not Shakespeare’s *Richard II* was staged shortly before the ill-judged rebellion of the Earl of Essex against the Queen in 1601, and whether or not the Queen was referring to Shakespeare’s play when she famously declared ‘I am Richard II, know ye not that?’, the scene in which Shakespeare dramatized the deposition of the king was deemed too hot to print until the fourth quarto edition, which appeared five years after the death of Elizabeth.¹⁷ Shakespeare, like Sidney, certainly regarded tragedy as a form which could probe the wounds of the state.¹⁸

Sidney’s view of tragedy was restated in slightly muffled form by George Puttenham (1529–91) in his *Art of English Poesy* (1589). Puttenham locates the historical origins of tragedy in the (supposed) period in which tyrants had become things of the past. Again, the function of tragedy is both morally and politically reforming:

But after that some men among the more became mighty and famous in the world, sovereignty and dominion having learned them all manner of lusts

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and licentiousness of life, by which occasions also their high estates and felicities fell many times into most low and lamentable fortunes, whereas before in their great prosperities they were both feared and revered in the highest degree, after their deaths, when the posterity stood no more in dread of them, their infamous life and tyrannies were laid open to all the world, their wickedness reproached, their follies and extreme insolencies derided, and their miserable ends painted out in plays and pageants, to show the mutability of fortune, and the just punishment of God in revenge of a vicious and evil life.¹⁹

Puttenham's *Art*, however, did not simply present tragedy as form of political retrospect, which looks back to the tyrannical past to find lessons for the present. It was itself retrospective: although printed in 1589 it was probably written during the 1570s and 1580s. Sidney's *Apology* also appeared in print almost a decade after its author had died. The slight antiquity of both these works was offset by their social cachet, since both Sidney and Puttenham wrote, or said they wrote, for courtly poets and readers, and Puttenham in particular regarded poetry as one of the arts of self-presentation by which an aspirant courtier could win advancement.²⁰ The styles and manners of socially elite groups generally trickle down through time to less elevated members of a society. That trickle-down effect certainly shaped the poetic tastes of the sixteenth century, since courtly fashions in verse tended to hit the press, the market and a popular readership around a decade after their first dissemination. But we should not expect this process of cultural diffusion to have occurred in quite the same way in drama as it did in poetry. Sidney and Puttenham chiefly valued plays written for small elite groups at the Inns of Court or other small, closed venues. Neither of them had a clue about how to appeal to the popular audience who paid to see Shakespeare's plays. As a result we might expect Shakespeare to have read the theorists, to have thought about them (respectfully), but not necessarily to have been guided by them in his practice.

One particular element in Sidney's *Apology* might have influenced Shakespeare much more than it actually did. In the latter part of the *Apology* Sidney accuses contemporary dramatists of 'mingling kings and clowns' onstage, and of being 'faulty both in place and time', by which he means that they failed to obey what came to be called the unities of time and place.²¹ Sidney probably got his understanding of Aristotle's 'unities' not from the *Poetics* itself (of which a Latin translation appeared in 1498 and a Greek text in 1508, but which was not translated into English until the eighteenth century) but from Italian commentaries. Nevertheless he used 'Aristotelian' principles as a stick with which to bash the popular stage. Ben

Jonson ventriloquized this aspect of Sidney's criticism in the prologue to the Folio edition of *Every Man in his Humour* (1616), in which he scolded the writers of contemporary history plays, including Shakespeare, who 'with three rusty swords, / And help of some few foot-and-half foot words, / Fight over York and Lancaster's long jars / And in the tiring-house bring wounds to scars' (9–12). That was the moment when the prescriptive Aristotelian voice of Sidney spoke to Shakespeare as though from the grave.

But by the time it did so, probably around 1616, Shakespeare himself may have been in his grave too, although it is not known exactly when Jonson composed his prologue.²² If Shakespeare did live to hear Jonson's Sidneian attack on him there is no sign that it influenced the way he wrote tragedies, in which references to the passage of time are usually markers of mood and atmosphere rather than signs of the playwright's Aristotelian aspirations to unity. When the notoriously anachronistic clock chimes repeatedly in the background of *Julius Caesar* it serves as a reminder that this is the moment at which the conspirators must act, and that time is slipping away. *Macbeth* also contains bells, knockings and clocks, but time in that play is so elastic that it's almost impossible to track its literal passage: the witches offer Macbeth kingship at an unspecified period 'hereafter', but he labours to make their 'hereafter' happen now, or tomorrow. After the murder of Duncan time stretches on, spreading from the bank and shoal of the present through tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow to the very crack of doom. Theatrical time and place stretch and bend too: the scene shifts to England in Act 4 while Macduff and Malcolm slow down the pace of the play by their dialogue about kingship and tyranny. This kind of time-stretching, in which the anxious pause before an action can seem like an age, and the period after it extend to eternity, would have been incomprehensible, and perhaps deplorable, to Sidney. It was also very different from the treatment of time in Shakespeare's comedies, in which, despite Orlando's claim that 'there is no clock in the forest' (*As You Like It*, 3.3.254–5), time tends to be more 'classically' regulated than it is in the tragedies. The action of the early *Comedy of Errors* (1594) is restricted to a single place and day, while Shakespeare's last single-authored play *The Tempest* (1610–11) is punctuated with near clockwork regularity by allusions to the hour, which remind the audience that the play's action occupies not the Aristotelian twenty-four hours but a magically compressed three.

Shakespeare's comedies tended to be more 'regular' (in the neo-classical sense) in their treatment of time and place than most of his tragedies for one simple and highly significant reason. So far as most sixteenth-century English readers were concerned there was a far more developed and