

TRAGEDY AND POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

This book examines tragedy and tragic philosophy from the Greeks through Shakespeare to the present day. Using postcolonial literature, it explores key themes in the links between suffering and ethics. Under the singular and fertile rubric of tragedy, Ato Quayson reconceives how we think of world literature. He draws from many key works – *Oedipus Rex*, *Philoctetes*, *Medea*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* – to establish the main contours of tragedy. Quayson uses Shakespeare's *Othello*, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Tayeb Salih, Arundhati Roy, Toni Morrison, Samuel Beckett, and J. M. Coetzee to qualify and expand the purview and terms by which Western tragedy has long been understood. Drawing on texts such as the *Poetics* and *The Nicomachean Ethics*, and augmenting them with Frantz Fanon and the Akan concept of *musuo* (taboo), Quayson formulates a supple, insightful new theory of ethical choice and the impediments against it. This is a major book from a leading critic in literary studies.

ATO QUAYSON is the Jean G. and Morris M. Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies in the Department of English at Stanford University. He has previously taught at the University of Cambridge, the University of Toronto, and New York University, and has held fellowships at Oxford, Harvard, Berkeley, Australian National University, and Wellesley College, among others. He is a Fellow of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Royal Society of Canada, and the British Academy.

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*To the memory of my family's dearly departed:
Maa Rosie, Maman Angeline, Agya Emmanuel, Tonton
Paul, Tantine Emilie, and Esi*

Contents

<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
1 Introduction: Tragedy and the Maze of Moments	1
2 Ethical Cosmopolitanism and Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i>	44
3 History and the Conscription to Colonial Modernity in Chinua Achebe's Rural Novels	83
4 Ritual Dramaturgy and the Social Imaginary in Wole Soyinka's Tragic Theatre	124
5 Archetypes, Self-Authorship, and Melancholia: Tayeb Salih's <i>Seasons of Migration to the North</i>	156
6 Form, Freedom, and Ethical Choice in Toni Morrison's <i>Beloved</i>	186
7 On Moral Residue and the Affliction of Second Thoughts: J. M. Coetzee's <i>Waiting for the Barbarians</i>	213
8 Enigmatic Variations, Language Games, and the Arrested Bildungsroman: Arundhati Roy's <i>The God of Small Things</i>	238
9 Distressed Embodiment and the Burdens of Boredom: Samuel Beckett's Postcolonialism	264
10 Conclusion: Postcolonial Tragedy and the Question of Method	298
<i>Bibliography</i>	310
<i>Index</i>	327

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The genesis of my interest in tragedy started in a somewhat indirect way during my undergraduate studies at the University of Ghana. Mr. Aloysius Denkabe (fondly called Alo by all) delivered classes on Practical Criticism and the History and Theory of Literary Criticism. It was in the second class that he first introduced us to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Alo spoke very slowly and softly and you had to listen really hard to learn from him. It was listening to him that first ignited my curiosity about the formal aspects of literary criticism but especially about how literary form might respond to sustained philosophical investigation. The tragedies we were exposed to at university were mainly of the Shakespearean variety. Of these there was no shortage, since the West African Examinations Council made sure that we had substantial doses of Shakespeare for both our Ordinary and Advanced Levels examinations. This was to continue at university but with the added attraction of a small sample of Greek tragedies, *Oedipus Rex* being the most memorable. On applying to Cambridge for my doctoral studies I wrote what must have struck the Faculty of English's graduate admissions committee as a somewhat peculiar reading of *Things Fall Apart* through Aristotle's *Poetics*. They let me in!

But it was only after completing my PhD and returning to join the English Faculty at Cambridge after a year as Junior Research Fellow at Wolfson College in Oxford that my full immersion in tragedy was to take place. I place this turn in my intellectual life squarely at the feet of Mr. Colin Wilcockson. Colin was then Director of Studies in English at Pembroke College and he called me in shortly after my arrival at the college to ask if I would mind sharing the supervision (tutorial) of the tragedy paper with him. I agreed enthusiastically without quite understanding what I was letting myself into. It was a complete and unmitigated nightmare! I recognized too late that what turned out to be my scanty grasp of Shakespeare and a few Greek texts was not enough to teach final-year students anything serious about tragedy. What I did have were the skills of

slow and steady patience in the study of literary texts that I had gathered from Alo. And so began a desperate attempt to try and remain at least three pages ahead of my students each week and to listen to them very closely to see what I could learn about this capacious genre that encompassed not only literary texts, but also philosophy, religion, theology, anthropology, art, film, and much else. The ten years that I spent teaching tragedy at Cambridge were the most intellectually stimulating of my life. Their effect was to tinge my consciousness permanently with vague perceptions of tragedy everywhere. In fact, all of the books I wrote after my first – *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing* – were about tragedy, without, however, consciously acknowledging them as such.

I was also, at the same time, developing as an Africanist postcolonial scholar, with my supervisor Mr. Tim Cribb insisting that to be an African was as much a choice and a vocation as was my identity as a Ghanaian. We had many, many long and meandering conversations about African literature and the state of Western theory on which we frequently disagreed. He did not much like theory, so any theory that I sought to apply in my dissertation (and I was wedded to the damned thing) had to be robustly argued at all times. But how better to think about the efficaciousness of theory than through the prism of tragedy and where better to see the workings of tragic ideas than through postcolonial writing? This book represents twenty-five years of worrying the point.

My mother taught me about tragedy long before I encountered the forms of its expression. She was a very religious person and had the gifts of healing and prophecy. Her prayers before meals struck us children as pointlessly lengthy disquisitions on all the small things that were bothering her, which we each often listened to with at least one eye open and lots of knowing winks and suppressed giggles. The formula of her prayers was always the same: heaps of praises on God's holy name, plaintive requests for our safety, then complaints about some bad behavior of the people she traded with at the market, and a few times with prayers for the safety of some major political figures, such as Nelson Mandela when he was in jail. There was always a note of suppressed and plaintive anxiety in her prayers, as if she wanted God to see that she really was trying, but that in spite of all her prayers and gift offerings He was not fully attentive to all our needs. It took me many years to figure out that what I thought was a cry to God came from a much deeper and complicated source. It came from the very depths of her soul for having walked out of a bad marriage and leaving us behind with my father when we were much younger. This was extremely bold and unusual for a woman of her generation, and she spent many years

Preface and Acknowledgments

xi

in acts of atonement that I could not really understand until I had had children of my own. The point of my mother's anxious prayers was what they expressed of the intractable ethical contradictions of making choices in a world that was far from ideal. And yet she undertook all things from a deeply held belief that her unbounded faith would ultimately vanquish all the ills that confronted us. She died in the year I started my job at Cambridge and before I could gather the tools by which to fully make sense of her predicament and to talk to her about what it must have felt like bringing up children who were blissfully oblivious to her deepest sorrow.

This book has benefited over the years from conversations with more interlocutors than I can possibly remember. Some of the most stimulating conversations had little or nothing to do with tragedy. I want to thank especially the much-missed Tejumola Olaniyan and Abiola Irele, as well as Adeleke Adeeko, Anjali Prabhu, Moradewun Adejunmobi, Neil ten Kortenaar, Ankhi Mukkherjee, Adwoa Opoku-Agyeman, Aloysius Denkabe, Colin Wilcockson, Tim Cribb, Karin Barber, Uzo Ensowanne, John Kerrigan, Kenneth Mills, and former students Christopher Warnes, Julian Murphet, Joanne Leow, Esther de Bruijn, Heba Jamana, and Noor Naga, among the many others I have had long and continuing conversations with.

The English Department at New York University provided the very receptive intellectual environment in which I began to write the book in the fall of 2017. It was there that I had the privilege of getting to know Richard Halpern, with whom I had lively conversations on his own fine book on tragedy and with whom I shared my own ideas. Tom Augst was a tireless advocate, while Wendy Lee and Elaine Freedgood were always on hand with wry insights about the exhilarating but sometimes fruitless work we did as laborers in the academic vineyard. I want to also thank Jini Kim Watson and Emily Apter for the diverse conversations I had with them on a variety of topics both personal and professional; Robert Young for his long-time friendship; and Lytle Shaw for giving me and my wife a magnificent tour of New York when we first arrived. Manthia Diawara provided invaluable advice and comradeship, while Frankie Edozien was always solicitous about our welfare. Stanford offered its own support for the completion of the manuscript. To Lanier Anderson, Alex Woloch, Blakey Vermuele, Margaret Cohen, Gavin Jones, Patricia Parker, Tom Owens, Mark Greif, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, John Bender, Roland Greene, Richard Roberts, James Ferguson, Liisa Malkki, Joel Cabrita, Paula Moya,

Ramon Salvidar, and Maritza Colon a very special thanks for welcoming us so warmly and also for the patient exposition of the intricate workings of Stanford.

I want to express very special thanks also to Noor Naga for being such a patient and altogether assiduous early copy editor, to Emma Sullivan for her more professional overview of the manuscript, and to Ray Ryan for his consistent support and encouragement throughout the writing of this book. To the anonymous readers of Cambridge University Press, warm gratitude for both seeing the value of my argument and also pressing me to improve it in various directions.

Grace Toleque has been my whispering companion from start to finish and has had to put up with more unprovoked disquisitions on tragedy at all times of day and night than any human being should ever be exposed to. I raise a full glass to her patience, her quiet capacity to discern what I am trying to get at even when I haven't got it myself, and to her gentle and abiding love. Noah and Kamau bore witness to the madness that afflicted me at different stages of the writing, and to them I also want to say many thanks for at least politely pretending that I was also a sane man among men.

To my dearly departed mother and to all those who have helped on this long and transformative journey, *medaase*, which means “thank you” in Akan but translates literally as “I prostrate myself before you.”

The flaws in this book are, tragically, all mine.