

Tragedy

A glance at the title page of a complete volume of Shakespeare reveals that comedies are usually given general titles: *The Comedy of Errors*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *All's Well That Ends Well*. One explanation for this phenomenon, put forward by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, is that comedy tends to focus on the group or community. In *As You Like It*, for example, an audience takes satisfaction not only in the happiness of Rosalind and Orlando but also in the wedding of Celia and Oliver and in the restored authority of Duke Senior. The titles of the tragedies, on the other hand, indicate a more limited emphasis: *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Richard II*; *Othello, the Moor of Venice*; *Antony and Cleopatra*. In these dramas the audience is invited to witness the misfortunes of charismatic and powerful individuals. *Tragedy* refers to a literary structure that moves toward an unhappy ending and thus implies an unfavorable assessment of human experience. Death is the tragic counterpart to the marriage that concludes comedy. Not only does the hero or heroine die, but others do also, often at the hands of the tragic figure. Tragedy ends in annihilation, misery, separation, loss. It is a pedagogical cliché that order is invariably restored at the end of Shakespearean tragedy, but this gesture hardly compensates for the death of a Hamlet or the unspeakable suffering of a King Lear. The emphasis is on failure, waste, disappointment, and self-destruction. The form of tragedy that Shakespeare helped to shape was developed from a variety of sources: from ancient tragedy, primarily Roman rather than Greek, and from medieval and early Tudor English tragedy, which stressed the moral benefit to be derived from watching the horrifying experiences of fallen princes. Sidney's description (see p. 99) reflects contemporary

thinking about the affective power of tragedy. In Shakespeare's particular treatment of the mode, the poignancy of the action derives from the dramatic irony: it is the tragic figure's talent that leads to destruction.

The tragic pattern is clearly visible in *Macbeth*. A heroic and patriotic nobleman, rewarded for extraordinary courage and service to his king, is made Thane of Cawdor and granted the favor of a royal visit. By the end of the play this noble figure has become a lonely and fearful monster, guilty not only of murdering the king his kinsman but even of infanticide and the pollution of his kingdom. The audience last sees Macbeth as a head on a pole when Malcolm is crowned King of Scotland. Tragedy promotes the impression that hope is futile, that the heroic figure, no matter how magnificent, can never escape the traps that await anyone who inhabits our imperfect and even vicious world. Nature seems to conspire against humans rather than cooperate with them — the benevolent sprites of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the unnamed providential forces that assist the characters in *The Comedy of Errors* or *Much Ado about Nothing* become the witches who tempt Macbeth or the distant and inscrutable gods of *King Lear*.

Like comedy, Shakespearean tragedy depends on a paradox. Although the curve of the action is negative and completes itself with the death of the hero — the occasion, Aristotle says, for pity and fear (see p. 101) — an undeniable effect of this action is to create admiration for the tragic protagonist. It would be irresponsible of us to conclude that the tragic figure is merely a victim of unfair circumstances or a vicious environment: the hero bears responsibility for the misery that ensues. Macbeth, demonic prophecies notwithstanding, is a murderer. But it is a curious paradox that audiences admire him anyway. Tragedy is sometimes defined as a great person suffering greatly, and the heroic reaction of the tragic figure to extreme suffering commands immense respect and sympathy. Ironically, that heroism also serves to console the spectator: the world may be a wicked place, the deck may be stacked against us, but the tragic action demonstrates that the human creature is capable of extraordinary heroism and endurance.

Our admiration for an Antigone or a King Lear is a function not only of their courage, but also of their own consciousness of the cause of their suffering. Lear's mad confession to the blind Gloucester discloses that awareness — his sense of his tragic error — and makes for one of the most poignant moments in the play:

... They flatter'd me like a dog, and told me I had the white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say "ay" and "no" to every thing that I said! "Ay," and "no" too, was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter, when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words: they told me I was every thing. 'Tis a lie, I am not ague-proof. (4.6.96-105)

The old king admits to a blind man his own blindness and mortality. Having inhabited the untrustworthy realm of the court and believed the flattery of his

wicked daughters, King Lear had regarded himself as different from ordinary men, immune to the infections of the world. Now he has come to recognize that he is only a man as other men are, that his saying something does not make it so, that the rain falls on him as it does on the beggar and the thief, that he is vulnerable, finally, to the fevers ("agues") that afflict us all. The experience of tragedy is the discovery of mortality, and this understanding deepens the tragic paradox visible in the experience of the hero: the ability to recognize one's weakness constitutes an enormous strength.

So the tragic playwright, like the writer of comedy, may encourage in the audience a range of possible responses. The emphasis may fall on the horrors of the human situation, or on the hero's inspiring reaction to those horrors. Just as comic characters may be simultaneously foolish and delightful, tragic figures may be both monstrous and admirable. And just as comedy is both ridiculous and reassuring, tragedy is dispiriting and uplifting at the same time.

Attention to the tragic protagonist should not lead us to neglect the political implications of tragedy. Recent critics particularly urge that we redirect our attention to the local and ideological resonances that plays such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* must have had in England at the turn of the seventeenth century. For contemporary audiences, tragedy was inevitably political, a representation of the actions of monarchs and a study — however guarded — of the problem of good government. Many of the crucial issues of Shakespeare's day were represented in the stories he elected to dramatize in his tragic phase between 1599 and 1608: succession and regicide (*Hamlet* and *Macbeth*), political division and monarchical irresponsibility (*King Lear*), pride and absolutism (*Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*), financial folly (*Timon of Athens*), political conspiracy (*Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*), the conflict of personal desire and political responsibility (*Antony and Cleopatra*). Such topically relevant issues have frequently been acknowledged, with critics arguing variously that the tragedies represented either barely veiled critiques of contemporary political practices (*Coriolanus*) or endorsements of contemporary orthodoxy (*Macbeth*).

Responses to *Macbeth* pointedly illustrate the course of recent political criticism. The play has long been regarded as a fictional defense of Jacobean ideology, especially given the notoriety of the Gunpowder Plot, an attempt to assassinate the king on a royal visit to open Parliament in November of 1605. At that time, the King's Men were performing frequently at court, James's preference for short plays was well known, and the Stuarts' legendary lineal connection to Banquo was a familiar tenet of royal mythology. But such an interpretation assumes authorial intention, and many poststructuralist critics have shifted from a focus on a playwright and his hero to a culturally founded understanding of dramatic writing. Materialist critics contend that the term *tragedy*, in the traditional sense, is an "honorific" means of mystifying Shakespeare's plays and promoting an old-fashioned conception of moral action and human freedom that ignores the ideological implications of all texts. Instead, these critics assert, plays like *Macbeth* should be read "dissidently," "against the grain," as exposures — whether intentional or not is incidental — of the apparatus of power in the Jacobean state. One of the best-known exponents of

the critical school known as cultural materialism, Alan Sinfield, offers a passionate statement of this view:

It is often said that *Macbeth* is about "evil," but we might draw a more careful distinction: between the violence the state considers legitimate and that which it does not. Macbeth, we may agree, is a dreadful murderer when he kills Duncan. But when he kills Macdonwald — "a rebel" (1.2.10) — he has Duncan's approval. . . .

Violence is good, in this view, when it is in the service of the prevailing dispositions of power; when it disrupts them, it is evil. A claim to a monopoly of legitimate violence is fundamental in the development of the modern state; when that claim is successful, most citizens learn to regard state violence as qualitatively different from other violence, and perhaps they don't think of state violence as violence at all (consider the actions of police, army, and judiciary as opposed to those of pickets, protesters, criminals, and terrorists). *Macbeth* focuses major strategies by which the state asserted its claim at one juncture. (95)

The focus of political criticism has also been redirected. Sinfield and other critics, particularly feminist writers such as Janet Adelman and Lynda Boose, read the tragedies as exposures of misogynist and racist ideology. *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* may be seen as critiques of the savagery and repression that constituted early modern constructions of masculinity, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra* as documents of the tendency of Western societies to distance and finally to destroy what they perceive as threats from blacks, women, and other such manifestations of the "other."

However we read the tragedies, as the stories of great individuals or critiques of social practice, two matters need clearing up — or at least bringing up, since they've proved resistant to repeated efforts to clarify and put them in perspective. The first is the doctrine of the *tragic flaw*, the second the effect known as *catharsis*, and both are part of the critical tradition descending from Aristotle's discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics*. As numerous scholars have pointed out, the notion of a flaw actually represents a mistranslation of the Greek *hamartia*, a term more properly understood as an error in action rather than as a fatal weakness of character. To think of the tragic hero as afflicted with a "fatal flaw" is to simplify and misunderstand the complex problem of the tragic protagonist and the society with which he or she is in conflict. (In fact, the very simplicity of the idea helps to account for its popularity.) To say that all tragic figures are flawed to a greater or lesser extent is not to make much progress in distinguishing them from other dramatic characters in tragedy and comedy, or in life for that matter. Defining the tragic figure mainly in terms of a flaw makes it too easy for us to pigeonhole the experience of a complicated character and thus insulates us from complicity in that character's responsibility or guilt. Once again, the appropriate word is *paradox*, a radical form of irony. Tragic drama presents its audience with a spectacle in which heroic men and women are destroyed by their own capable hands, victims of the very traits that set them apart from the rest of us.

the very world he has set out to oppose. Nor does the term *ambition* capture the complexity of tragic experience explored in *Macbeth*, although the relative simplicity and emotional directness of the Scottish play have led thousands of students to approach it in that way. Ambition is only one facet of Macbeth's persona, and it becomes comprehensible only when seen in relation to his other dominant characteristics, particularly his superhuman courage and his irrepressible moral sensitivity. That Shakespeare is not concerned chiefly with ambition is indicated by the placement of Duncan's murder: it occurs very early, at the beginning of the second act. The audience is invited to concentrate instead on the *consequences* of killing the king, on those horrible feelings and events that result from, or, as the etymology of *con-sequences* suggests, "follow with," the act of murder. *

The tragic flaw is a problem because it is misleading; the trouble with catharsis is that it is nebulous. According to Aristotle, tragedy "effects through pity and fear the purgation of these emotions." Things seem clear enough until we come to that last phrase, "the purgation of these emotions." Most audiences have no trouble feeling pity for the experience of a character like King Lear, and the spectacle of tragic waste and misery is a fearsome thing. But commentators on the *Poetics* have debated at length the question of purgation. A modern authority on the treatise, Stephen Halliwell, believes that Aristotle proposed the idea of catharsis as a defense of the theater, a counter-argument to the Platonic distrust of poetry and drama. Plato feared that the theatrical experience threatened the audience, and implicitly society at large, by stimulating and releasing in the spectator dangerous feelings that ought to be kept under control. Aristotle, on the other hand, saw tragedy as a channel for containing such emotions.

According to Halliwell, catharsis should be understood "as a powerful emotional experience which not only gives our natural feelings of pity and fear full play, but does so in a way which conduces to their rightful functioning as part of our understanding of, and response to, events in the human world" (90). Such an emotional experience entails the spectator's recognition that no one is exempt from the suffering represented in tragedy. In the Aristotelian view, "the heart of tragedy" resides "in the poetic demonstration of ways in which suffering is entangled in even the finest strivings of human action" (Halliwell 91-92), and the normal response to such a demonstration is pity and fear. This

conception of catharsis returns us, then, to the tragic paradox, in which the hero's gifts are also the cause of his or her fall. Both the idea of *hamartia* and the problem of catharsis are still much discussed in analysis of tragedy, probably too much so. It is worth pointing out that a philosopher's reflections on the emotional effect of Greek tragedy may be of limited relevance to a sixteenth-century English audience's experience of Shakespeare's efforts in that form, and also to our own.

The inevitable tendency to invoke Aristotelian theory probably reflects our desire to comprehend and define as precisely as possible the effect of tragedy, and probably we should resist that impulse. Such definitions are rarely satisfactory. Elizabethan literary critics conceived of tragedy in didactic terms, seeing it as a warning against the dangers of tyranny, usurpation, and political unrest. But Shakespeare, following the lead of his immediate predecessor Christopher Marlowe, extended the possibilities of the form far beyond those narrow limits. Most significantly, he complicated the psychological dimension of the central character and the audience's sense of relation to that character. Shakespeare encourages a simultaneous engagement and detachment that make every tragedy different from every other, every performance of *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* different from every other, and every spectator's response different from every other. Each performance impresses each spectator with varying degrees of sympathy, judgment, identification, distance, pity, and fear. Rather than seeking to make Shakespeare's practice conform to an ancient theory, we should devote our energies to clarifying and articulating our own mixed reactions.