What is a Shakespearean tragedy?

‘Double, double toil and trouble . . .’ (Mac. 4.1.10)

I

An eminent Shakespearean scholar famously remarked that there is no such thing as Shakespearean Tragedy: there are only Shakespearean tragedies. Attempts (he added) to find a formula which fits every one of Shakespeare’s tragedies and distinguishes them collectively from those of other dramatists invariably meet with little success. Yet when challenging one such attempt he noted its failure to observe what he termed ‘an essential part of the [Shakespearean] tragic pattern’;¹ which would seem to imply that these plays do have some shared characteristics peculiar to them.

Nevertheless, objections to comprehensive definitions of ‘Shakespearean Tragedy’ are well founded. Such definitions tend to ignore the uniqueness of each play and the way it has been structured and styled to fit the partic- ular source-narrative. More generally, they can obscure the fact that what distinguishes Shakespeare’s tragedies from everyone else’s and prompts us to consider them together are not so much common denominators but rather the power of Shakespeare’s language, his insight into character, and his dramaturgical inventiveness.²

Uneasiness with definitions of Shakespearean tragedy is of a kind with the uneasiness generated by definitions of tragedy itself; these often give a static impression of the genre and incline towards prescriptiveness, ignoring the fact that ‘genres are in a constant state of transmutation’.³ There is, how- ever, a simple argument to be made in defence of genre criticism, namely that full understanding and appreciation of any piece of literature requires knowledge of its contexts, literary as well as intellectual and socio-political: in its relation to the author and his work, context informs, assists, stimulates, provokes. Thus knowledge of generic context helps us recognize not only what authors inherit but also what they invent and intend. So, too, familiarity with Shakespeare’s tragedies as a whole enhances understanding of the meanings and the special nature of any one of them.

As practised in Renaissance England and in classical Greece and Rome, tragedy is an intense exploration of suffering and evil focused on the experience of an exceptional individual, distinguished by rank or character or both. Typically, it presents a steep fall from prosperity to misery and untimely death, a great change occasioned or accompanied by conflict between the tragic character and some superior power. It might be said, therefore, that conflict and change – the first intense if not violent, the second extreme – together constitute the essence of tragedy.
In his seminal account of the subject, Aristotle (fourth century bc) said that the success of a tragedy depends on its capacity to excite pity and fear, thereby effecting a catharsis of these emotions (The Poetics, chap. 6). Twentieth-century commentators have interpreted this as referring to the contrary responses of attraction and repulsion: pity draws us sympathetically to the protagonist, regretting his or her suffering as unjust or disproportionate; fear denotes an attitude to the protagonist of dissociation and judgement and acknowledges the rightness of what has happened. What Aristotle meant by catharsis has been the subject of much disagreement, but in contemporary usage the term usually implies a state of mind in which the powerful and conflicting emotions generated by the spectacle of great suffering are reconciled and transcended through artistic representation, so that a condition of exultant but grave understanding remains.

This rephrasing of Aristotle in conflictual terms may be ascribed to the fact that since the nineteenth century, when the nature of tragedy began to be studied as never before, the overriding emphasis has been on conflict, and the concomitant notions of contradiction, ambivalence, and paradox, as the genre’s major characteristic. It is an emphasis which has been due entirely to the philosophers G. W. Hegel (1770–1831) and F. Nietzsche (1844–1900). According to Hegel, the characteristic conflict in tragedy is not between ethical right and wrong but between the personal embodiments of a universal ethical power, both of whom push their rightful claim to the point where it encroaches on the other’s right and so becomes wrongful. The (usually violent) resolution of this conflict restores a condition of natural justice and confirms the existence of a just and divine world order. Nietzsche rejected the idea of such an order, but he too saw ‘contrariety at the center of the universe’ and tragedy as a process involving the conflict and reconciliation of opposites: for him, these opposites are Apollo and Dionysus, the first symbolizing reason, control, and art, the second, passionate destructive energy, orgiastic abandon, and the self-renewing force of life itself. Both thinkers were inspired by the pre-Socratic philosophers (sixth to fifth centuries bc) who held that the natural world is a system of ‘concordant discord’ animated by sympathetic and antipathetic forces personified as Love and Strife (War). Despite substantial differences between their theories of tragedy, both Hegel and Nietzsche were prompted by their attraction to pre-Socratic cosmology to locate tragic events in a natural dialectic of destruction and renewal, and so to emphasize an ultimately positive dimension to tragedy. Perhaps, however, because they were so obsessed with Greek tragedy and Greek culture generally, both philosophers failed to discover that the essentially paradoxical view of nature fathered by the pre-Socratics was embedded in all Shakespeare’s tragedies and was central to the intellectual inheritance of his contemporaries.

A. C. Bradley (1851–1935) rightly criticized Hegel for underestimating the action of moral evil and the final sense of waste evident in most tragedies, but he concurred with him by making conflict a major theme in his own hugely influential account of Shakespearean tragedy. He contended, however, that the distinguishing feature of Shakespearean tragedy is not conflict between the tragic hero and someone else, or even between contending groups, but rather conflict within the hero, who is a man divided against himself. Bradley also adapted Hegel’s dualist metaphysics, arguing that Shakespearean tragedy demonstrates the
existence of an ultimate power which reacts violently against evil but in the process
contradictorily and mysteriously destroys much that is good as well.8

In later versions of the conflict theory, tragedy (both Shakespearean and non-
Shakespearean) has been identified as a genre which projects mutually incompatible world
views or value systems;9 and then again as one which ex-
poses ‘the eternal contradiction
between man’s weakness and his courage, his stupidity and his magnificence, his frailty and
his strength’.10 Shakespeare’s tragedies have been seen as characterized by a disturbing
conjunction of the lofty and the comic–grotesque, something which emphasizes the
coaistence in the hero of nobility and pettiness and reinforces a largely pessimistic view of
the way in which nature produces and destroys greatness.11 The tragedies of both
Shakespeare and his contemporaries have also been read in the light of Marx’s materialist
Hegelianism as embodying the contradictions and incipient collapse of feudalism and
heralding the bourgeois revolution of the seventeenth century.12

II

The models of tragedy which influenced Shakespeare and his contemporaries were not
Greek (the great tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides) but Roman and late-
medieval: that is, the sensational and highly rhetorical plays of Seneca (apparently written
for recitation), and the narrative verse tragedies popularized in England by John Lydgate’s
fifteenth-century The Fall of Princes and by the sixteenth-century, multi-authored collection
known as The Mirror for Magistrates (1559). Written in the shadow of the emperor Nero,
Seneca’s tragedies are characterized by a preoccupation with horrific crimes and the
tyrannical abuse of power. His protagonists are driven to murder by inordinate passions such
as vengeful rage, lust, and sexual jealousy; most of them, too, unlike most of Shakespeare’s
heroes, are conscious wrong-
doers. But they are driven by passions which seem humanly
uncontrollable (ghosts, Furies, and meddlesome divinities spur them on) and are often
cursed by the consequences of evils rooted in the past; thus despite their energies and their
wilfulness they seem more the victims than the responsible agents of their fate. Another
common characteristic is their compellingly assertive sense of selfhood; this may exemplify
the Stoic notion of an indestructible personal identity (as in Hercules Oetaeus) but more
often it is a perversion of that ideal (as in Thyestes and Medea). Seneca’s tragic heroes and
heroines see their crimes as defiant expressions of self and unfold this impassioned selfhood
in long and rhetorically elaborate monologues and soliloquies. Like their victims, they
regularly hyperbolize their feelings by projecting them on to the ‘sympathetic universe’ and
by calling in rage, grief, or despair for nature to revolt against earth, for primal Chaos to
come again.13

The Fall of Princes narratives shared Seneca’s fascination with power and its abuse. Like
him too, but far more insistently, they emphasized the insecurity of high places and the rule
of fortune or mutability in worldly affairs: indeed, in these narratives the notion of tragedy
is almost reducible to that of catastrophic change. Moreover, fortune and its capricious turns
are now explained in Christian terms as a consequence of the Adamic Fall, which brought
change and misery into the world. Thus the treacheries of fortune are afflictions which
everyone is liable to, irrespective of his or her moral condition. The main concern of the
Mirror authors, however, was political as well as ethical: to show that fortune is an instrument of divine justice exacting retribution for the crimes of tyrannical rulers and over-ambitious or rebellious subjects.

Tragic theory in the sixteenth century consisted mainly of a set of prescriptive rules derived from Senecan and Fall of Princes practice. Critics such as Puttenham and Sidney emphasized that tragedy is ‘high and excellent’ in subject and style, does not meddle with base (i.e., domestic and plebeian) matters or mingle kings and clowns. It uncovers hidden corruption and shows the characteristic conduct and the deserved punishments of tyrants. Dealing with ‘the doleful falls of infortunate & afflicted Princes’, it ‘teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded’. It excites feelings of ‘admiration and commiseration’, wonder and pity.  

Shakespeare’s affinities with Senecan and Fall of Princes tragedy, and with sixteenth-century tragic theory, will be apparent as we proceed. But we must begin by emphasizing difference. Like almost all contemporary playwrights who wrote tragedies for the public stage, Shakespeare departed strikingly from classical practice and Elizabethan theory by his inclusion of comic elements and plebeian characters. This characteristic was due to the influence of the native dramatic tradition (the mysteries and the moralities), which habitually conjoined the sublime and the homely and made its devils and villains either ludicrous fools or mocking comedians. It seems unlikely, how-ever, that Shakespeare’s inclusion of the comic in his tragedies signifies a reluctant pandering to popular taste; although he never overtly justifies this practice, the self-reflexive aspects of his art show that early in his career he reflected deeply on the nature of tragedy and evolved a sound rationale for his mixed practice. A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Romeo and Juliet, written at approximately the same time, and strikingly similar in style and plot (young love rebelling against patriarchal control), insinuate that in real life the comic is always on the verge of the tragic, and vice versa, and that comedy and tragedy must acknowledge that fact by the controlled inclusion of their generic opposite. Theseus’s reaction to Bottom’s comical tragedy – ‘How shall we find the concord of this discord?’ (5.1.60) – draws attention to the extraordinarily mixed nature of A Midsummer Night’s Dream itself and implies by its phrasing that justification for the mixed mode will be found in the correspondence of the play’s art to nature – that unstable order of concordant discord (or discordant concord) constituted of opposites (the four elements, qualities, and humours) whose changing relationships are governed by Love and Strife. In Romeo and Juliet, what seems like a romantic comedy in the making suddenly hurtles towards tragedy with the violent death of the great jester, Mercutio; for this defiantly unclassical procedure Friar Lawrence’s discourse on the contrarious and paradoxical dynamics of nature offers a lengthy if indirect justification (2.2.1–30).

As well as serving to extend the scope of tragedy beyond anything attempted in Greece or Rome, Shakespeare’s comic element functions as a safety valve forestalling the kind of inappropriate laughter that scenes of great tension and high passion are likely to provoke. Comedy is woven into the fabric of the drama, too, being psychologically consistent with the satiric, mocking, or deranged aspects of the tragic and villainous characters, and
functioning always as thematic variation and ironic counterpoint in relation to the tragic narrative. It may even (as in *King Lear*) intensify the effect of heroic suffering.

A comic safety-valve was particularly desirable, for Shakespeare not only followed Senecan tradition by focusing on passion-driven protagonists but also departed from classical practice by presenting scenes of violent passion onstage instead of confining them to narrative report in the classical manner. Comic incident provided much needed relief from the kind of spectacular scenes in which his plays abound, scenes where rage and hatred, long fester-ing or suddenly erupting, explode in physical conflict and bloodshed. From the beginning (in *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Julius Caesar*), Shakespeare sought to present in the opening scene a state of conflict either between the protagonist and his community, or between two sections of the community (one associated with the protagonist, the other with his chief antagonist); and as Bradley intimated, these conflicts relate to a conflict of loyalties, values, or conscience within the protagonist himself.

Where Shakespearean tragedy seems most obviously related to the Fall of Princes tradition, and to Elizabethan theorizing on the genre, is in the intensity with which it focuses on the phenomenon of change. But change here is not just one of worldly fortunes; it is above all else interpersonal, moral, and psychological change. An essential part of the hero’s experience is the horrified discovery that the world he knows and values, the people he loves and trusts, are changing or have changed utterly. He feels cheated and betrayed ‘to the very heart of loss’.

Hamlet expresses his sense of overwhelming change in eloquently cosmic terms: ‘[T]his goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy, the air, look you . . . this majestic roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours’ (2.2.282–6). Based on the four elements, the imagistic pattern here shows that Hamlet construes change in terms of the premodern model of contrarious nature; in consequence, he tends to see change antithetically, from one extreme to the other. And this mode of thinking is entirely characteristic of the tragedies. The great storm passages in *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, where ‘the conflicting elements’ (*Tim*. 4.3.231) are thrown into wild disorder, function as central symbols for a pervasive sense of violent change and confusion, a technique reinforced by sustained use of elemental imagery elsewhere in each play. Whereas Seneca’s tragedies invoked a general correspondence between disorder in the human and the natural world, in Shakespeare’s tragedies the instabilities, ambiguities, and contradictions (as well as the fruitful harmonies) of human nature and history are precisely coextensive with those of nature.¹⁶

The extent to which the principle of polarized transformation affects Shakespeare’s tragedies can be gauged if we consider the link and parallels between his first and his last tragedy. In *Titus Andronicus* (4.4.62–8) a comparison is made with the historical hero of *Coriolanus*, and for obvious reasons. In each case Rome suddenly becomes so hateful to its great champion that he joins forces with its enemies. Identified during the Renaissance as the archetypal city of order and civility, and associated specifically with law and oratory, Rome becomes in *Titus* a ‘wilderness of tigers’ where justice is mocked and the pleading
tongue ignored or brutally silenced; and this decline into barbarism is symbolized by the marriage of the Roman emperor to Tamora, queen of the Goths. As in Coriolanus, too, it is apparent that the disaster which befalls Rome stems from the fact that its respect for the humane qualities which underpin its civility is no greater than – is in fact dependent on – its famed regard for martial valour. Each play depicts the collapse of an order in which these ethical opposites have hitherto been kept in balance; in the elemental terms used throughout Coriolanus, fire, signifying martial rage, eclipses water, signifying pity: ‘I tell you, he doth sit in gold, his eye / Red as ’twould burn Rome’ (5.1.64–5).

Transformation of the community and its representative hero are intimately and causally connected. But the overriding emphasis is on that of the hero: it is the primary source of that ‘woe and wonder’ which Shakespeare acknowledges at the close of Hamlet to be the characteristic emotional effect of tragedy. In play after play, the extreme and unexpected nature of the change which overtakes the hero is underlined by the bewildered comments of those who know him best. And even the unreflective Coriolanus identifies this personal transformation as a universal propensity in nature. In a world of ‘slippery turns’, he muses, ‘Friends now fast sworn, / Whose double bosoms seem to wear one heart...break out/To bitterest enmity’, while ‘fellest foes...by some chance,/Some trick not worth an egg, shall grow dear friends’:

So with me. My birthplace hate I, and my love’s upon This enemy town. (4.4.12–24)

Because the transformed hero is driven to act with the utmost brutality against one or more of those to whom he is bound by the closest ties, some are inclined nowadays to conclude that his alleged nobility is being exposed as superficial or in some sense inauthentic. Such a conclusion implies that the pity, wonder, and fear which the plays provoke in performance are symptoms of sentimental misapprehension on the part of the audience; it rules out the possibility of seeing the fall of the hero as genuinely tragic.

Behind Shakespeare’s delineation of the hero’s moral fall lies a conviction that ‘In men as in a rough-grown grove remain/Cave-keeping evils that obscurely sleep’ (Luc. 1249–50). One might regard this conviction as an essentialist evasion of such questions as historical contingency and the effects of cultural conditioning on character. Othello’s murder of Desdemona, for example, might be explained solely in terms of his own particular make-up and unusual situation: a proud, middle-aged African warrior, married to a beautiful young Venetian lady, socially and sexually insecure, and terrified by the humiliating thought of cuckoldry. But there is quiet play in Othello on the relation between the words ‘general’ and ‘particular’, and it has the effect of hinting that ‘the General’ is not just a uniquely flawed stranger (‘an erring barbarian’) but a representative human being as well; such hints are reinforced by Iago’s reminder that ‘there’s many a beast in a populous city, / And many a civil monster’ (4.1.61–2). When the mad Ophelia says, ‘We know what we are, but know not what we may be’ (4.5.44), she is recalling not only the baker’s daughter who became an owl but also the refined prince of noble mind who killed her father and contemptuously lugged his guts into the neighbour room; and who himself had reminded her father that ‘it was a brute part’ (Ham. 3.2.101) of the ‘gentle Brutus’ (JC 1.2.71) that killed his friend in
the Capitol. The notion of cave-keeping evils in every human being was one which Shakespeare clearly took for granted.

And the cave-keeping evil can emerge with shocking abruptness. The sheer speed with which Othello’s love and nobility are turned to hatred and base-ness is sometimes taken as incontrovertible proof that both (if genuine at all) were exceptionally fragile. But with Shakespeare the speed of the hero’s transformation is a theatrical device emphasizing both the extremity of the change and the vulnerable nature of all love and all nobility, indeed of all human worth. France observes in amazement that Lear’s affection for his favourite daughter turns by way of ‘the dragon . . . wrath’ to black hatred in a ‘trice of time’ (Lear 1.1.116, 210); and concerning Coriolanus, suddenly ‘grown from man to dragon’, Sicinius asks: ‘Is’t possible that so short a time can alter the condition of a man?’ (Cor. 5.4.7–8).

III

Shakespearean tragedy is centrally concerned with the destruction of human greatness embodied in individuals endowed with ‘sovereignty of nature’ (Cor. 4.7.35): men who are instinctively referred to as ‘noble’ (in the moral or characterological sense) by those who know them, even their enemies. However, what constitutes true nobility in action invariably proves problematic for the hero, especially when he becomes entangled in the ethical contradictions associated with the notion of ‘honour’. Shakespeare habitually exposes to ironic critique a conception of nobility – and so of honour – which is based exclusively on individualist self-assertion and warlike val-our; nobility so conceived is implicitly equated with potential barbarism, a denaturing of the self. The tragedies encode an ideal of true nobility that was entirely familiar to his audience. Its origins lie in the humanist notion of an educated aristocracy as delineated in Sir Thomas Elyot’s The Governor (1531) and Baldassare Castiglione’s The Courtier (1528); in the chivalric ideal of the knight – especially as interpreted by Chaucer in The Knight’s Tale – as both valorous and compassionate; and in the classical ideal of the soldier–statesman, everywhere implicit as a standard of judgement in Plutarch’s Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes (trans. North, 1579) and embodied in his characterization of Pericles. The common factor in this long and mutating tradition is the assumption that although the nobility as a class are soldiers by profession, the complete nobleman is one who excels in the arts of both war and peace: he is skilful with sword and tongue and unites in his character the qualities we designate as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Shakespeare articulates this ideal in both 1 Henry VI (describing the Duke of Bedford)–‘A braver soldier never couche’d lance;/A gentler heart did never sway in court’ (3.6.20–1) – and Richard II (describing Richard’s father) – ‘In war was never lion raged more fierce, / In peace was never gentle lamb more mild / Than was that young and princely gentleman’ (2.1.173–5). Like Chaucer in The Knight’s Tale, Shakespeare sometimes associates the dual nature of the aristocratic hero with the myth of Mars and Venus; and he does so because of that myth’s well-known interpretation as an allegory of nature’s concordant discord. Like Chaucer, too, he likes to play on the social and behavioural meanings of the word ‘gentle’ as a reminder that a fiery spirit is only half of what is expected in a princely gentleman.
The villain–hero of *Richard III* is by his own admission a man only ‘half made up’, framed by nature for ‘Grim-visaged war’ and not for love (1.1.9–21); the other tragic protagonists have passionate natures capable not only of heroic wrath and striving ambition but also of great love, and consequently of intense suffering: symptomatically, the first of them (Titus) is a grieving father who ‘hath more scars of sorrow in his heart / Than foeman’s marks upon his battered shield’ (*Tit.* 4.1.126–7). The hero’s fall involves a self-betrayal or loss of identity which constitutes a breakdown in the balance of a richly endowed nature, one in which feeling is so powerful that it is never far from the point of destructive excess. It is this nature which gives rise to the notion that what makes the tragic protagonists great is also what destroys them; ‘strengths by strengths do fail’, says Aufidius, struggling to understand Caius Martius Coriolanus (*Cor.* 4.7.55), the man who has the god of war and wrath inscribed in his name. Others may give these characters prudent advice on how to avoid impending disaster, but Romeo’s answer to such advice is telling: ‘Thou canst not speak of what thou dost not feel’ (3.3.64).

Loosely speaking, then, anger and ambition (including pride, a sense of honour, and the desire for glory) and, on the other hand, love and grief, are the passions whose overflow brings disaster; and it should be stressed that the first pair are to be seen initially in as positive a light as the second. Following the Stoic philosophers of old, Elizabethan moralists defined anger as a brief madness; but the ‘noble anger’ which Lear invokes (2.4.269) is a traditional feature of the hero, being symptomatic of courage and a sense of both justice and personal worth. The concept of noble anger also points to the affinity between tragic and epic or heroic literature: ‘the wrath of Achilles’ is the subject of Homer’s *Iliad*, it drives the action of Seneca’s *Troas* in the person of Achilles’s avenging son Pyrrhus, and Pyrrhus is a character with whom Hamlet consciously identifies; indeed Reuben Brower has claimed that ‘all tragic heroes in European literature are measured against Achilles’. As for ambition, the dangers to society which its unbridled forms constituted was a familiar subject in Shakespeare’s England; but equally commonplace was the notion that ‘ambition [is] the soldier’s virtue’ (*Ant.* 3.1.22–3; cf. *Oth.* 3.3.355).

In these attitudes to passion we are confronted with a mindset, characteristic of the period and well fitted to tragedy, which greatly admires and greatly fears excess: where a soldier can be praised because ‘his captain’s heart... burst[s] the buckles on his breast’ (*Ant.* 1.1.6–8) and condemned because he ‘cannot / Buckle his distempered cause within the belt of rule’ (*Mac.* 5.2.15); where lovers who defy society are indicted of blind folly and honoured as ‘pure gold’ because they show that love of its very nature transcends limit (*Rom.* 2.1.175–7, 5.3.298). Othello’s claim that he was vulnerable to Iago and his message of hatred because he ‘loved not wisely but too well’ has been viewed with disdain by many critics. If it merits disdain, however, so too does the claim of Timon, the great philanthropist whose boundless kindness undoes him and turns his love of his fellow-men into a raging hatred: ‘unwisely, not ignobly, have I given’. But a cynical response to Timon’s claim is precluded by the compassionate exclamation which his change inspires in his long-suffering steward: ‘Poor honest lord, brought low by his own heart, / Undone by goodness!’ (4.2.37–8).

Along with extreme feeling comes extreme action. The violent acts of Shakespeare’s noble heroes can be linked generically to the monstrous crimes of ancient myth rendered familiar
in the Renaissance through the tragedies of Seneca and the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. They may therefore have seemed rather less astonishing to a contemporary than they do to a present-day audience. However, beginning with Titus, the noble Roman who kills his son and daughter, Shakespeare seems to invite the charge of implausibility by stressing the shocking nature of these violent deeds. Othello’s suffocation of Desdemona in her bridal bed is hardly more terrible than the way Brutus – ‘the noblest Roman of them all’ – bathes his hands exultantly in the blood of the friend he has stabbed to death. And yet Shakespeare will always reemphasize the fallen hero’s nobility, his greatness of heart. Sometimes the contradiction located in such characters is expressed in boldly paradoxical terms: ‘You have deserved nobly of your country, and you have not deserved nobly’ (*Cor.* 2.3.78–9; cf. *Ant.* 5.1.30); but the more typical emphasis, implicit or explicit, and one which helps to make such behaviour credible, is on the inherent frailty of all humans, including the finest: ‘a noble nature / May catch a wrench’ (*Tim.* 2.2.204–5; cf. *Ant.* 5.1.31–3).

Shakespeare seeks to render the brutal actions of the noble hero plausible and potentially forgivable in other ways. First of all, there is the continuous reminder of an intrinsically unstable natural order in which things can rapidly ‘decline’ to their ‘confounding contraries’ (*Tim.* 4.1.19). More obviously, the fatal act is often unpremeditated and rash, the product of an unbearable access of passion, or of temporary madness or something close to madness. Or the hero may be the victim of some self-deception which enables him in his own mind to accommodate the fatal act to his moral sense, so that what he does seems to him both just and necessary, even a ritual sacrifice performed for the good of the community. Or he has the pure misfortune of being faced with the one challenge that his nature and experience do not equip him to deal with.

He may also be the victim of one or more artful manipulators who know him better than he knows himself: close associates or seeming ‘friends / Who can bring noblest minds to basest ends’ (*Tim.* 4.3.465–6). The figure of the manipulator in Shakespeare’s tragedies is descended by way of the morality Vice from the devil of Christian mythos, the tempter who deploys the arts of the orator and the actor in making evil seem good to his deluded victim. The manipulator is granted heroic status in the devilish protagonist of *Richard III* (‘the wonder at a capacity greater than one would expect is the feeling most often inspired by the heroic’); but his characteristic role is the secondary one of an *agent provocateur* who operates on the passions of the hero and also, it may be, on others whose susceptibility to his wiles confirms the hero’s representative nature. The manipulator sets about changing the hero in full consciousness of what he or she is doing and may even observe the ongoing process with scientific detachment: ‘Work on./My medicine work!’ (*Oth.* 4.1.42–3; cf. *JC* 1.2.308–10). In Seneca’s tragedies there is usually a companion figure who warns the protagonist against the dangers of succumbing to passion; the Chorus too sometimes moralizes on the Stoic ideal of emotional detachment and control. Some of the protagonists’ victims, and in the case of Hercules, the protagonist himself, meet death with an equanimity which exemplifies the Stoic ideal of constancy in the face of the worst that fortune or tyranny can offer. Partly because of Seneca, but partly too because it was deeply embedded in Christian thought and Renaissance culture, Stoicism impinges on the passionate world of Shakespearean tragedy in a number of ways. There are counsellor figures such as Friar Lawrence, John of Gaunt, and Menenius, who plead for patience and restraint (Iago
appropriates this role with demonic skill). And there is the figure of Horatio, more an antique Roman than a Dane in his attitude to suicide and in the impression he gives of being one who ‘in suffering all, suffers nothing’.

The hero’s attempts at self-control are often evidence of his pre-tragic self: Romeo as ‘a virtuous and well-governed youth’, Hamlet as ‘the soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword’, Othello as the imperturbable leader in the thunder of battle. These attempts serve also to emphasize by contrast the explosive power of the emotions which have begun to rack him. He may oscillate between moments of Stoic calm and passionate rage and grief; or his rages may hover uncertainly between the kind of rational, heroic anger approved by the Stoics and blind, vengeful fury. Hamlet dwells repeatedly on the conflicting values of impassioned, ‘honourable’ action on the one hand and rational control and Stoic resignation on the other (critics disagree on whether this dialectic is resolved in the end or not). Blending Stoic and Christian virtue, Lear proclaims that he will ‘be the pattern of all patience and say nothing’ in response to the cruelty of his daughters; but he has to pass through madness before the great rage subsides in him, and even then the calm is shortlived. The Lear world is one whose ‘strange mutations’ repeatedly shatter the armour of patience.

Shakespeare unquestionably admired much of the Stoic inheritance, but he also exposed the inadequacy of its more extreme attitudes to emotion. Thus Brutus’s Stoic apatheia makes it possible for him to suppress his natural tenderness and murder his friend. Hamlet hints at a profoundly subversive point made by the Duchess of Gloucester in Richard II when Gaunt tells her they must wait patiently for God to exact justice on Richard: ‘Call it not patience, Gaunt, it is despair’ (1.2.29). Anger and lust tear the nation and its two leading families apart in King Lear, yet the posture of Stoic detachment self-consciously adopted by the grievously wronged Edgar is quickly rendered irrelevant by a recognition that the human heart, with its capacity for both love and hate, pity and rage, is the source of all that is best as well as all that is worst in human nature; thus the detached Edgar in the end enters the lists (both literally and metaphorically) and demonstrates his fitness for rule by virtue of his just anger and his compassionate love. It is not Coriolanus’ ability to subject his notorious wrath to the claims of reason that saves Rome and redeems (and destroys) him, but an access of that natural gentleness which his mother’s extreme version of Roman culture precluded. The symbolic geography of Antony and Cleopatra emphasizes a cultural clash between control and passion, Stoic and Epicurean. At one level, Rome and what it stands for triumphs over Egypt; but at another level the clash is resolved in a synthesis which proclaims the partiality of each set of values: that synthesis being the suicidal marriage of the Roman general and the Egyptian queen.

IV

The combination of truthfulness and formal perfection with which the spectacle of suffering and evil is presented in great tragedy is one reason why we derive both pleasure and satisfaction from what should in theory depress us. Another reason is the fact that most great tragedies, and Shakespeare’s in particular, concur with the maxim that ‘there is some soul of goodness in things evil, / Would men observingly distil it out’ (H5 4.1.4–5). The ending of Antony and Cleopatra, with its note of triumph and exultation, is an extreme
example of this aspect of Shakespeare’s tragic practice. Varying greatly in degree of importance from one play to another, the positive aspect of tragic events manifests itself in several ways. Most obviously, there is the restoration of social order, with an emphasis on reunification and reconciliation. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the feud that divides the city and destroys the lovers is visibly ended with the mutual embrace of their remorseful fathers. In *Hamlet*, the enemy of the state becomes its saviour; in *Lear*, Albany changes sides and helps install the virtuous Edgar as king; in *Macbeth*, the alienated nobility are reunited with their ruler, who gives ‘thanks to all at once, and to each one’ (5.9.41). In *Timon of Athens*, Alcibiades makes peace with the Athenians whom both he and ‘transforme’d Timon’ grew to hate, declaring, ‘I will use the olive with my sword / Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each / Prescribe to other as each other’s leech’ (5.5.19, 87–9). In the major Roman tragedies, the enemy of the dead hero is magnanimous in victory and acknowledges his nobility; a kind of reconciliation.

More important altogether are the reunions and reconciliations achieved by the protagonists themselves. Like Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet are bonded in death, triumphing over those forces within and without which threatened to divide them. Hamlet exchanges forgiveness with Laertes and dies at one with his mother; the repentant Lear and Gloucester are forgiven by their wronged children; Othello begs and receives forgiveness from his wronged friend, Cassio, and dies ‘on a kiss’ beside Desdemona; Coriolanus takes his mother’s hand and so forgives and is forgiven by Rome. Timon, however, dies solitary and unforgiving, making

his everlasting mansion Upon the beache’d verge of the salt flood, Who once a day with his embosse’d froth

The turbulent surge shall cover. (5.2.100–3)

Yet Alcibiades suggests that nature forgives Timon, and he signals for others to do likewise when he looks at the dead hero: ‘rich conceit / Taught thee to make vast Neptune weep for aye / On thy low grave, on faults forgiven. Dead is / Noble Timon’ (5.5.80–5). The reconciling process entails confirmation of the hero’s nobility as well as forgiveness for his rash and ignoble acts.

The most important distillation from the experience of things evil is understanding, or what in Aristotelian terminology is called ‘recognition’. The journey of Lear and Gloucester from blindness to visionforegrounds a spiritual process which affects most of Shakespeare’s tragic characters in some degree; it includes even Macbeth, who realizes that the crown which he coveted cannot compare in value with love and friendship lasting into ripe old age. Perhaps we should feel uneasy about Hamlet’s insistence that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are not near his conscience, and his public assertion (contradicting what he said in private to his mother) that it was not he but his madness that killed Polonius. Is he in this respect somewhat like Brutus, who dies failing to perceive that the killing of his friend for the crime that he might commit was profoundly wrong? We may be on surer ground when we note Hamlet’s recognition in Act 5 (based on a new-found belief in Divine Providence) that it is not for him to choose the time for justice; a recognition which ultimately allows him to die at peace with himself. Othello’s recognition of error and guilt is so great that he refuses
divine mercy and commits suicide in the conviction that he merits the torments of Hell. Some have accused him, however, of essential blindness at the end, noting his failure to see that even if Desdemona were guilty of adultery it would still have been wicked to kill her. However valid in itself, the point is of doubtful dramatic relevance; to argue thus is to introduce a kind of mundane calculus which seems out of place in a tragedy of titanic emotion. On the other hand, the failure of the tragic hero to achieve complete recognition need not constitute a limitation in the play itself; the understanding which matters is that which the playwright enables the audience to achieve. But such understanding characteristically involves an awareness that there is no univocal answer to some of the questions – moral or metaphysical – raised by the tragic action.

By far the most positive aspect of Shakespearean tragedy is the final restoration of the protagonist’s nobility, shown by the manner in which he meets death. The quality usually involved here is that of constancy, which signifies truth to self and one’s values: a spiritual triumph over the forces of change. Exemplified in the deaths of Senecan characters such as Hercules and Polyxena, and in that of the historical Cato (Brutus’s father-in-law), constancy was the supreme virtue in Stoic and neo-Stoic thought. But religious persecution gave it a special significance in the sixteenth century, as both the Protestant and Catholic martyrlogies of the time vividly indicate. A notion of great importance in the long tradition of the noble death is that of dying ‘like oneself’; and ‘like a man’ as distinct from a beast, upright and unflinching, with the kind of self-conscious decorum imputed to the first Thane of Cawdor: ‘Nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving it’ (JC 5.4.25; Mac. 1.4.7–8).

In its most extreme form, constancy involves suicide, signifying a calm refusal to submit to a superior force and live in misery, dishonour, or disgrace. Brutus and Cassius are obvious examples, but the cases of Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra are more truly Shakespearean, since they locate personal identity in the human bond and emphasize the dual nature of the self. Hearing of Juliet’s death, Romeo stoically defies the stars and decides to join her; his conduct here contrasts vividly with the adolescent and indeed bestial frenzy of his first reaction to bad news, and marks his attainment of manhood. And Juliet, having already overcome her terrors of isolation in the tomb in order to be true to Romeo, is no less ‘manly’ and decisive than Rome in taking her life beside him. Hinted at here is an idea which is fully developed in the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra, each of whom learns from and imitates the other in death; suicide thus symbolizes a union of opposites by means of which the full potential of the noble self is disclosed. Othello’s hell is that he is eternally separated from Desdemona; yet his dying on a kiss carries the suggestion of an ‘atonement’ (see 4.1.230) coextensive with the reintegration of self achieved by acknowledging and punishing the erring barbarian that he had become.

The theatricality of all these suicides, especially Othello’s, is part of the Stoic style and can be matched in Seneca by, for example, the spectacular deaths of Astyanax and Polyxena, the second of which actually takes place in an open theatre where ‘every heart / Was struck with terror, wonderment, and pity’. Claims that we should take the theatricality of Shakespeare’s suicides as self-deceiving egotism ignore not only the Stoic tradition in pagan literature but, more importantly, the Christianized Stoicism exemplified in the political
executions, martyrdoms, and martyrrologies of the sixteenth century. As their accompanying woodcuts vividly indicate, the narratives of execution in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* are as theatrical in conception as anything in Seneca; so too was the carefully studied manner in which Mary Queen of Scots and many other persons of high rank met their end on the scaffold in Tudor England. It was an age which gave substance to the observation, ‘More are men’s ends marked than their lives before’ (*R2* 2.1.11).

V

Far more important than the composed ending in Shakespearean tragedy, however, is the central experience of suffering and distress. ‘Is there no pity sitting in the clouds / That sees into the bottom of my grief?’ asks Juliet in despair (*Rom*. 3.5.196–7). As early as *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare gave much attention to scenes where the protagonist cries out in anguish to human or divine witnesses of his or her misery, emblematizing thus the relationship between the play itself and the audience whom the dramatist seeks to fill with woe and wonder. Shakespeare conceives of his tragic characters as individuals to be remembered less for their errors and misdeeds than for the sufferings and griefs they endure in consequence. Prompted in this by Seneca’s rhetorical bravura, but vastly surpassing it in dramatic intensity, Shakespeare’s eloquence expends itself with astonishing bounty and ever-increasing poignancy on the lament of the lacerated heart. Even Macbeth, the relentlessly clear-eyed murderer, utters cries of unassuageable pain which ensure our compassion: ‘Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, / Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow . . . ?’ (5.3.41–2).

The causes of suffering in Shakespeare’s tragedies are diffuse and seem to involve large abstract forces as well as human error, weakness, and malice. His characters frequently invoke fortune in such a way as to grant her the status of a mysterious supernatural being with a cruelly unpredictable personality. In addition, his plots are sometimes informed by a principle of ironic circularity which seems to testify to the presence of the capricious goddess and her famous wheel. Unlike the authors of the Fall of Princes narratives, however, Shakespeare usually intimates that the changes which are imputed to treacherous fortune are of human origin, and more precisely that her inconstancy corresponds with that of mutable human nature. The case of Richard II is exemplary: his fall from power (symbolized by his voluntary descent to ‘the base court’) is preceded by a scene in which he swings up and down repeatedly between wild optimism and total despair.

Accident – Richard’s delayed return to England, the mistimed encounters in *Romeo and Juliet*, Emilia’s discovery of the handkerchief – may contribute to the advancement of the tragic plot, but it would not have the malign impact it does without the characters being what they are. In that sense, character is fate: one’s own character interacting with that of others.

Fate, in the sense of a predetermined order of events, is less frequently invoked but sometimes powerfully suggested. In *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, an impression of impending disaster is established by ominous occurrences which provoke fearful speculation in the *dramatis personae*. What is most notable about such speculation, however, is that it initiates
a continuing process of inquiry and interpretation focused mainly on the uncertain significance of what certain individuals mean or intend. Even as Cassius intimates to Casca that disorders in the natural and the supernatural world prefigure what Caesar will do to Rome, thoughtful spectators will respond to his ‘But if you would consider the true cause...Why all these things change from their ordinance...To monstrous quality’ (1.3.62–8) by answering that he himself is in process of effecting such a change in Rome and Romans. In Macbeth ‘the weird sisters’ who contrive the hero’s downfall merely point him in the way he was already inclined to go (like the ‘fatal’ dagger); more-over, their treacherous double-talk matches the doubleness in his own and in all nature: ‘Double, double toil and trouble’.

And yet there is a very important sense in which circumstances conspire to produce a situation in which disaster seems inevitable. Hamlet is trapped in a situation where to do nothing is to encourage the spread of evil and to act is to become part of it: ‘O curse’d spite/That ever I was born to set it right’ (1.5.189–90). In Othello, chance contributes uncannily to the fulfilment of a doom adumbrated in a series of ominous or ironic observations at the start of the play; but the most cursed spite of all is that the trusting Othello should have as his confidant a man like Iago, without whom the tragedy is inconceivable. Hamlet offers what looks like Shakespeare’s explanation for the fall of all the tragic heroes when he speaks of noble and gifted men who are born with some vicious mole of nature (‘wherein they are not guilty’(1.4.25)) that brings ruin upon them; but more often it is arguably their good qualities which, in the given circumstances, prove fatal and become or engender defects. What Iago says of his plan to exploit ‘the inclining Desdemona’ is applicable also to his attack on the nobly trusting (‘free and open’) Othello: ‘out of her own goodness [I will] make the net / That shall enmesh them all’ (1.3.381, 2.3.328–9). Friar Lawrence comes nearer than Hamlet to the causal centre of Shakespearean tragedy when he observes – while philosophizing on the paradoxes of nature – that ‘virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied’ (2.2.21).

In the pagan universe of King Lear the gods are continually invoked as participants in the tragedy. Their existence, however, is implicitly called in question by the fact that the good and bad events imputed to them are shown by the immediate dramatic context to be of very human origin. Significantly, the deity who is invoked most solemnly and characterized most fully is Nature, a figure whose generosity and ferocity, kindness and cruelty, ac-counts for everything that happens in Lear’s kingdom. The habit of finding causes for human misery outside the realm of nature is shown here to be part of the confusion in which most of the characters live. Lear points in the right direction when he speaks to the warring elements and asks: ‘Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard-hearts?’ (3.6.34–5).

In Christian theology, Divine Providence signifies God’s ordering of a world rendered imperfect by the Fall, a mode of government which uses all acts and happenings, both good and bad, for an ultimately just and benevolent purpose. In Shakespeare’s tragedies and tragical histories with a Christian setting, Divine Providence is invoked with varying degrees of emphasis and conviction. At the end of Romeo and Juliet the Friar says that ‘[a] greater power than we can contradict’ has thwarted his plan to use the marriage of the lovers as a means of reconciling the two families; presumably he would agree with the Prince, who adds that Heaven has, instead, used the deaths of the lovers both to punish the feuding
families and to end their discords. But the Friar has shown himself to be a natural philosopher rather than a theologian, and a more satisfactory explanation for the tragedy and its outcome can be found in his disquisition on nature’s dialectical order, where medicines can prove poisonous and poisons medicinal.

Although saturated with doubt and uncertainty, *Hamlet* comes close to a firm providentialism; puzzlingly so. Horatio believes that ‘Heaven will direct’ his ‘country’s fate’ (1.4.68) and Hamlet in the last act begins to see the controlling hand of Providence in his rash and bloody deeds. There can be little doubt that many in Shakespeare’s audience would have internalized the Hamlet–Horatio understanding of the tragedy (they have been told by the hero and his friend ‘what the show means’); but we can be sure that others would have found it strange that after all Hamlet’s sufferings and scruples Divine Providence has arranged for Denmark to be ruled by a violent opportunist with no respect for international law or human life. Moreover, the ghost is the most palpable sign of the supernatural realm; and not only is it entirely ambiguous (‘from heaven or from hell’), it is driven by distinctly human passions and recruits Hamlet to its cause by invoking two conceptions of nature, one associated with ‘foul crimes’, the other with filial love. Here, as in the incantations and ‘natural magic’ (3.2.243–8) of the player Lucianus, whose divinity is witchcraft’s Hecate, the supernatural points us back to the unpredictable forces in nature; when light comes, Hamlet’s ‘erring spirit’ returns to its habitation ‘in sea or fire, in earth or air’ (1.1.134). So whatever significance is attached in the tragedies to fortune, fate, the gods, and God, the crucial fact is that these always function in complete consistency with, and can easily be construed as projections of, the workings of nature in the actions of men and women.

Despite its inherent thrust towards violent confusion, nature is implicitly understood as an order; and that order is seen primarily in terms of Time. If it is possible to answer Bradley’s question, What is the ultimate power in Shakespeare’s tragic world?, the most reasonable answer would seem to be nature in its temporal dimension. In premodern cosmology, time is the measured movement of the elemental world and, like it, discloses a cyclic pattern of binary and quadruple opposites: day and night, spring and autumn, summer and winter. Accordingly, the confusion of night and day is a characteristic feature of Shakespeare’s tragic world. Violent action being often nocturnal either in conception or execution, night is conceived as a time of rest and peace violated and as a symptom of chaos: the imagery of *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* involves the mythical identification of Night and Hell (Erebus) as the children of Chaos. More importantly, the deeds which generate the tragic action are untimely or mistimed in the sense that they are dilatory or (much more often) either rash or cunningly swift.

Tragic catastrophes, too, reveal the corrective action of time. It is corrective first of all in the sense that it is retributive: untimely acts, whether tardy or rash, are punished in kind. Richard II ‘wasted time’ and then took from Hereford and ‘from Time / His charters and his customary rights’; and ‘now doth time waste’ him (2.1.196–7, 5.5.49). Cassius kills Caesar ‘in the shell’ (before his presumptive crime is committed) and then has to kill himself on his own birthday: ‘Time is come round, / And where I did begin, there shall I end . . . Caesar thou art revenged’ (2.1.34, 5.3.23–5, 44–5). There is a comparable sense of symmetrical justice in Macbeth’s recognition, ‘Time, thou anticipatest my dread exploits’ (4.1.143).
Variously accented, the pattern of Time’s justice can be detected in most of the tragedies. However, this is not to imply that there is a neat overall distribution of justice in most of the tragedies. The villains get their deserts, but it cannot be said that the tragic characters are always responsible for what befalls them, nor even that the issue of responsibility is a primary concern. It can be argued indeed that the disproportion in Shakespearean tragedy between culpable error (where there is any) and consequent suffering, and between the sufferings of the noble and the wicked, is so great as to preclude any idea of justice and rationality. But that is surely too simple, however much it might coincide with how we ourselves would interpret the same events. It would be more appropriate to say that Time—much like Bradley’s undefined ‘ultimate power’—acts retributively through a convulsive action which sweeps away all but the most fortunate and the most astute.

Time’s action is corrective also in the sense that it is restorative, a force for renewal. The cyclic and dialectical order of nature entails that the positive undertone in Shakespeare’s tragic endings is a necessary and logical counterpart to the negative undertone in his comic endings. Nevertheless, the overall impression in the tragedies is of a world where Time is put disastrously out of joint with terrifying ease, and can only be set right again at huge cost. George Chapman’s aphorism, *The use of time is fate*, is very apt in relation to Shakespearean tragedy, especially if we stress the ominous note in the phrasing.

VI

Over the centuries, Ben Jonson’s claim that Shakespeare is not of an age but for all time has been continuously endorsed in different ways. Jonson, however, was not denying that Shakespeare addressed the specific concerns of his audience in ways they understood. Historically minded critics rightly remind us that his plays were inevitably shaped to a very considerable extent by the particular experiences, institutions, and ideas of the age in which he lived. One of the many advantages in approaching the plays from the perspective of Tudor–Jacobean politics and ideology is that we begin to perceive just why tragedy flourished to such an extraordinary degree in the period; for at every level, it was an age characterized by conflict and change: intense, heroic, painful, bitter, and violent.

The splitting of Christianity into two hotly antagonistic sects during the sixteenth century had a profound effect on England. The nation was torn between Catholic and Protestant claims to religio-political supremacy, a division which fuelled three rebellions, three attempted invasions, and several assassination attempts on Elizabeth. Moreover, the religio-political division split families and friends, gave rise to cruel personal betrayals, resulted in numerous executions for treason (seven hundred ‘at one fell swoop’ in 1570), and left men like John Donne uneasy in conscience after their pragmatic shift from one faith to the other: ‘O to vex me, contraries meet in one.’

Interconnected with the Reformation was the decline of feudalism, the rise of authoritarian monarchy, and the waning power of the old aristocracy. It has been plausibly argued therefore that Shakespeare’s tragedies reflect ‘a tragic view of the decline of feudalism’ and that his heroes ‘are all living in a new world and are smashed by it’. Insecure as well as authoritarian, and creating unity by coercion and persecution, the Tudor regime severely
reduced the freedoms of all its subjects; it thus created an environment in which the inherited tragic themes of tyranny, injustice, revenge, and the outraged revolt of the alienated individual had special resonance.

If the Reformation brought about an intensification of religious faith for many, the spectacle of two kindred theologies diabolizing each other necessarily generated an overwhelming sense of religious doubt in the minds of others. Moreover, the ‘wars of truth’ extended into philosophy, political theory, and science, where Montaigne, Machiavelli, and Copernicus boldly attacked ancient convictions. Sir Thomas Browne was surely in tune with the time when in 1635 or thereabouts he recalled that the wisest thinkers ‘prove at last, almost all Scepticks, and stand like Janus [the double-faced deity] in the field of knowledge’. Looking back on the period, he saw it as a time of violent and tragic disunity. And like Shakespeare, he appealed to the contrarious model of nature as one way of making some sense of it all: ‘this world is raised upon a mass of antipathies’ and man himself is ‘another world of contrarieties’.23

It is certainly true that we will never approach a full understanding of Shakespeare’s tragedies if we ignore their historically specific filiations. The fact remains, however, that the greatness of these plays has been acknowledged for centuries by audiences and readers in diverse cultures who have relatively little knowledge of that kind. And they do so for the simple reason – I conclude by recalling the obvious – that Shakespeare not only engaged with but went through and beyond the contemporary to capture in brilliantly realized characters and deeply moving scenes some of the most persistent aspects of human nature and experience: the strength and the vulnerability, the goodness and the wickedness, of men and women; the desolation and courage of the individual at odds with society; the cruel injustices and the terrifying uncertainty of life itself.

NOTES


16. See my *Shakespeare’s Tragic Cosmos*, chap. 1.


Revenge and ambition had meanings in Shakespeare’s world significantly different from what they mean now. Yet we can still easily recognize them in Shakespeare’s plays, allowing us both an emotional connection to the human past, and an intellectual perspective on it.

Shakespeare’s brilliant contemporary, Francis Bacon, called revenge ‘a kind of wild justice’ and it must have been an important supplement to official justice in an era of very limited police powers and severely enforced social hierarchy. The Tudor monarchies made some progress in controlling lawlessness, but there must have been some basis for the persistent jokes about incompetent constables and watches in Elizabethan comedy. With so many crimes unsolved, so many criminals immune to punishment, and so many outrages (against women, the poor, and ethnic and religious minorities) not even considered crimes, it is hardly surprising that the public developed an appetite for revenge stories. A prime example is Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587?), which showed Hieronimo cleverly feigning madness in order to uncover and punish the secret murder of his son by his social superiors. The huge commercial success of that story led to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and dozens of other revenge plays in the period.

Ambition, too, was a particularly alluring and dangerous sin in Shakespeare’s society, where radical economic, technological, and theological changes had unsettled people from hereditary roles that dated back to medieval feudalism. For the many who migrated to urban centres, there was neither a safety-net to prevent starvation nor a glass ceiling to prevent social climbing – only a scramble for money, status, and favours from the powerful. While the subtle refashioning of inward identity provoked soliloquies, the rapid refashioning of outward identity provoked civil authorities – desperate to preserve traditional order – to punish upstarts and innovators (even high-ranking ones such as Essex and Norfolk). The conservative tendency of human culture must have been similarly punitive, in less official but more pervasive ways: in unsettled times, people reflexively conspire to ridicule new styles and penalize opportunists, and Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies (especially those of Ben Jonson) showed people doing so. Furthermore, in a society where status was so unstable, ambition often led to violent revenge, as duels over honour became an epidemic among the aristocratic elite.

In a broader sense, this period seems to have invented a new and inexhaustible kind of ambition – and defined it as fundamental to human nature. Against a classical and medieval notion of desire as finite, seeking its own end in satisfaction, Renaissance culture came to advocate a Romantic and modern notion of desire as an infinite regress, willing to invent
further goals in order perpetually to forestall its own demise in stasis. Christopher Marlowe’s great overreachers, such as Tamburlaine and Faustus, explored the tragic implications of this discrepancy between what the aspiring mind could imagine and what the mortal body could accomplish. A similarly relentless desire propels Shakespeare’s Macbeth into crime after crime, tomorrow and tomorrow, and unfulfilled into death.

Yet, important as understanding the immediate social and philosophical context may be, Shakespeare’s tragedies of revenge and ambition have applications and resonances far beyond the historical circumstances of his culture. Impulses like the ones fuelling these tragedies are visible from the earliest recorded human histories to the most recent. Indeed, these impulses are easily visible in many non-human animals, as they punish those who have hurt or insulted them, and compete for dominance over the others of their species and gender. If it waddles and quacks like a vengeful or ambitious duck, perhaps it is a vengeful or ambitious duck. While much can be learned about Shakespeare’s tragedies by learning the history of Shakespeare’s society, and vice versa, these plays seem almost supernaturally capable of speaking to issues that transcend local circumstances and reach to fundamental questions of life, and of death. Neither the partisans of essentialism (the idea that there are universal truths and categories immune to cultural difference) nor those of constructivism (the idea that all human reality is produced by local ideological conditions) allow Shakespeare’s tragedies their full stature and intricacy.

Unlike even the best of the other tragedians of revenge and ambition in this period – from the strong Elizabethan roots in Marlowe to the decaying Jacobean blossoms in John Webster – Shakespeare looks inside not only the psychological workings of his characters, but also the transactional complexities of revenge and ambition as moral problems. He offers, not merely the grand cautionary spectacle of falling greatness, not merely the gruesome cautionary spectacle of escalating vengeance, but insight into the ways different human individuals shape, and are shaped by, some fundamental impulses. By staging human stories, Shakespeare can provide an indispensable acknowledgement of moral complexity, and thereby a means of understanding and forgiving, that law itself cannot provide, and that not even such subtle and powerful philosophers as Kant (with his detailed argument for making punishments fit crimes) and Hegel (with his abstract argument for punishment as negating a negation of the moral order) have been able to generate.

Shakespeare’s philosophy of revenge and ambition

Characteristically, Shakespeare’s observation of human behaviour enables him to trace patterns for which science would provide a rationale and a vocabulary centuries later. Shakespeare watches politics so closely that he can also see the evolutionary biology which drives it. He can therefore answer a question that troubles readers of history, not just of history plays: what is so desirable about becoming king that it explains a man’s willingness to destroy the peace of both his land and his mind in order to achieve it? This is a theological question as well as a political and psychological one: ‘What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?’ (Matthew 16:26). In the case of Macbeth, the implicit answer lies in an innate craving for dominion and progeny that the ambitious man himself cannot fully understand, that drives him even against his own better
reason – per-haps because his genes (as modern science would explain it) are designed to replicate themselves, indifferent to the self-interest of the transient creatures they build to serve their own appetite for survival and reproduction. The irony is that Macbeth, in pursuing that goal so desperately, in a selfishly mechanical rather than co-operatively humane way, destroys his own chances for a place in the human future. Seemingly driven by instincts from an evolutionary phase when only the dominant male had reproductive privileges, reading both Scottish history and the survival of the fittest too crudely, in too narrow a sense, Macbeth overlooks the complex, collective aspect of species survival.

No less characteristically, Shakespeare takes very ordinary human situations and human impulses, magnifies them to the highest dramatic scale, looks for their deepest implications, and offers no simple moral. The plays reflect a persistent myth of ambition, a myth that entails a tragic paradox. The desire to transcend oneself, to become something greater than one was born to be, is a natural and seemingly noble human tendency; yet it becomes a means of self-destruction, a betrayal of nature and origins that invites pri-mal punishment. Even where – as for Leontes in The Winter’s Tale – the aspirations (towards purity and timelessness) are noble, and some of the resulting losses miraculously repaid, the tragic potential of ambition and the vengeful potential of nature remain painfully obvious.

One version of Shakespeare’s philosophical myth looks pragmatic and political: his history plays insist that anyone who takes the throne without inheriting it will always be vulnerable to new usurpers, and will have trouble passing it on to his own offspring, but can never safely relinquish that throne, either. Another, parallel version of this myth seems Freudian (which is not really an anachronism, since Sigmund Freud derived it from reading classical and Shakespearean tragedy): as the psychoanalytic theories about oedipal complexes and castration anxiety would suggest, the son attempts to outdo the father, perhaps attempts (like Coriolanus) to reconceive and recreate himself through a symbolic courtship of a maternal figure. Ambition takes the form of a desire to be reborn in some chosen ideal form, autonomous and powerful, unlimited by inherited identity or social taboo. The father (or some trace of him) punishes the son, specifically by destroying (a kind of castration) the son’s procreative powers. Shakespeare’s ambitious men rarely succeed in generating heirs, perhaps as a poetically just punishment for disdaining the condition of their own births; and they exist in a perpetual state of anxiety and self-alienation, able neither to make their achieved identity perfect and permanent, nor to retreat safely back to their humbler natural condition. The effort to expand the self often ends up dividing it.

Beyond these frustrating reactions of the political and psychological systems, there remains the fact that changes made by force of individual human will and action do not stand up very well in geological time, which allows nature to erode all efforts back to ground level, by something like the laws of entropy. In a culture already strained by the long view back to the re-discovered classical past – Hamlet traces ‘the noble dust of Alexander, till a find it stopping a bunghole’ (5.1.172–3) – Shakespeare offers glimpses of an even longer view: Macbeth gazes towards infinite tomorrows that will reabsorb the strongest castle into the eternal forest (5.5.19–51). Tragedies of ambition, then, often become stories in which the natural or social order, aided by the divided human psyche, becomes the avenger.
The awkward dual mandate of this chapter thus has some compensating explanatory value. These two types of tragedy are reciprocal: one depicting the will to superior power, the other depicting an unwillingness to be over-powered. Tragedies of ambition depend on the protagonist’s illusion that an exception can endure, that no mindless or jealous reflex in nature or heaven will produce a reaction equal and opposite to the heroic action, recapturing exertion as merely lost heat. Tragedies of revenge depend instead on the protagonist’s illusion that things can and must be made even (an eye for an eye, a humiliation for a humiliation). The plays suggest that Shakespeare often thought of ambition as a doomed effort to rise above a position of equality, and of revenge as a doomed effort to restore equality. Aristotle thought of tragedy itself in a similar way: as a cathartic treatment designed to restore equilibrium. This does not mean, however, that Shakespeare’s tragedies of ambition and revenge are inherently reactionary. Their superficial endorsement of a final return to normality co-exists – in a typical Shakespearean paradox – with a deep acknowledgement of the loss of human greatness, and the betrayal of an implied human essence, in the protagonist’s inevitable fall from ambitious heights.

One dynamic definition of tragedy, derived from Hegel, describes it as a dramatic story in which the protagonist receives imperative but contradictory instructions from two superior forces, and is therefore doomed to destruction by whichever one he or she disobeys. These forces need not be deities, as they often are in classical literature; they can reflect the inconsistencies of a mixed culture. Both the local Anglo-Saxon warrior tradition and the recovered traditions of classical antiquity (except in Platonic and Stoic philosophy) endorsed instinctive desires to repay injuries, and to seek power and status over our fellow creatures. Yet the Christian ethos at the core of Renaissance culture praised pity, love, humility, and turning the other cheek, exalting as the greatest hero a sacrificial lamb who chose to abdicate his heavenly palace to suffer among the lowliest.

Tragic contradictions were everywhere in Shakespeare’s London, provoking exalted ambitions and then taking revenge on those who pursued such ambitions. Protestant theology – the most obviously pressing cultural innovation – at once told Christians to aspire to direct communication with God, and told them to despair of ever knowing anything about Him; told them to focus obsessively on their prospects for eternal salvation, and to recognize that those prospects were beyond their power to control or even comprehend; to seek desperately, and yet to mistrust utterly, an inner conviction of divine favour. The terrifying instability of the new urban capitalist economic system – whose essence was to encourage but also punish ambition – was matched by the terrifying instability of this new belief system, which left many true believers vacillating wildly between a faith that God’s love would exalt them beyond all comprehension, and a fear that God’s just anger at such presumptuous sinners would damn them beyond any redemption. Nor were Catholics spared from the painful dialectic of ambition and revenge. Protestant spokesmen portrayed Catholicism (to which many of the English continued to subscribe) as allegiance to ambitious foreign political powers, justifying violent official retribution; and as an overweening attempt to control God and earn heaven, deserving punishment here in anticipation of punishment hereafter. Especially in the emerging urban settings of which Shakespeare’s London was a prime example, old tribal systems of shame control ceased to function, and no fair and efficient system of official policing had yet arisen to take its place.
only a tacit and hugely complicated system of power radiating downwards from a court that must, to most, have seemed no less mysterious, inaccessible, and arbitrary than the Reformation God.

Under all these circumstances, both ambition and revenge were extraordinarily tempting and difficult – perfect material for tragedy. Plays on those topics would have been deeply ambivalent experiences for Shakespeare’s audience, whose loyalty would have remained divided between old and new models of heroism: warrior vs. sufferer, knowing one’s place vs. overreaching, believing vs. inquiring, the norm vs. the exception. Even the nascent conquest of nature by empirical science (including astrology and alchemy, as well as more modern-looking navigational and medical technologies) could look at one moment like glorious achievement, at the next like foolish or evil presumption, and at the next like mere fraud (the magic of Marlowe’s Faustus sometimes seems to be all three at once). And the persistent bad sea-sons of flood and plague and famine in Shakespeare’s England were not only harsh implicit rebukes to the promise that science would allow humanity to comprehend and rule the created world, but widely and explicitly preached as divine punishment of that ambition.

The remainder of this chapter will explore the relationships between classical and Renaissance tragedy, and the range of Shakespearean tragedies of revenge and ambition, before turning to two famous examples – Macbeth and Hamlet – to show how a culture’s ambivalence about these topics can grow into tragic agony, and how Shakespeare combines the historical and trans-historical aspects of the vengeful and ambitious impulses.

The functions of tragedy and Shakespeare’s development

Cultures exist largely to channel the infinite possibilities of the creative and self-conscious human mind into safely limited and shared channels, so that individuals can sustain sanity and communities can sustain co-operation. This is work better suited to myth-makers than law-makers; and when cultures cannot manage to resolve, or even afford to acknowledge, their internal inconsistencies, they delegate those tasks to tragedians. Art – a seemingly self-contained ritual form in which nothing material such as money or power is obviously at stake – provides a relatively safe territory for negotiating the contradictions. Indeed, this may explain why the only period of great tragic drama comparable to Elizabethan and Jacobean England was classical Greece, which was comparably beset by ‘a growing discontinuity between forms of social mobility . . . and the precarious consequences of that mobility which can result in destruction’.4 Greece was also, like England, a naval power, and therefore regularly exposed to the disease of pluralism.

Classical stories of ambition were generally tragedies of revenge, in which the gods (or their reflections in nature) took vengeance on hubris, on the excessive pride of protagonists from Arachne to Oedipus to Pentheus. Under Christianity, this transaction reappears as the Fall, in which God punishes the presumption of humanity, both as individuals and as a species. In the Renaissance, tragedies of revenge often partake of ambition, since the avenger – from Kyd’s Hieronimo to Middleton’s Vindice to Webster’s Bosola – is often seeking to overcome his powerlessness against a higher-ranking miscreant.
The chief classical literary source for Shakespeare’s revenge tragedies lies in Seneca’s ten tragedies, written during the first century a.d., and translated into English around the time of Shakespeare’s boyhood. These were passionate, violent stories, full of high rhetoric, in which the furious indignation of the revenger—often provoked (as in *Hamlet*) by a ghost or vision of a beloved victim—took aim not only at the perpetrator but at his entire extended family. This vengeance (again as in *Hamlet*) often required elaborate deception by the revenger, and finally provided some kind of poetic as well as practical justice.

Because Seneca wrote his plays to be read rather than staged, he could describe sensationally gruesome acts of violence without worrying about how they could be performed by actors or endured by spectators. His Elizabethan imitators went blithely ahead putting the same kind of violence into visible action. The resulting horrors are nowhere more obvious than in Shakespeare’s earliest surviving tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*. The play is neglected enough, and the story remarkable enough, to merit a brief retelling here. Titus is a great Roman military hero of old-fashioned patriotic values who, to appease the spirits of his many sons killed battling the Goths, ritually executes a Gothic prince. The prince’s younger brothers then ambush Titus’s virtuous daughter Lavinia, slay her husband, toss his body into a pit, then rape her, cutting off her tongue and both her hands so that she can neither speak or write to accuse her attackers. When her brothers go looking for her, they fall into the pit with the corpse and, discovered there, are accused of being its murderer. A villainous Moor named Aaron tells Titus that he can save these sons only by cutting off one of his hands and sending it to the emperor, as a gesture of good faith, but the hand is promptly returned to him along with the heads of his sons. So he sadly carries one head offstage in his remaining hand, while his mutilated daughter carries off the severed hand in her teeth.

This all provides satisfactory revenge for Tamora, the queen of the Goths, but it provokes a massive counter-revenge in which Titus finally traps the rapist princes and slices their throats while his daughter holds a bowl with her stump arms to catch the blood, which he then mixes with a paste of their bones and (in a zany disguise as a chef) serves (in an echo of the classical Philomel myth) as a stew to their mother and imperial stepfather at a glorious banquet where Titus fatally stabs his daughter and Tamora, and is fatally stabbed in turn by the emperor, who is in turn fatally stabbed by Titus’s surviving son, Lucius, who blurs the talionic formula:

> Can the son’s eye behold his father bleed? There’s meed for meed, death for a deadly deed! (5.3.64–5)

The sheer amplification of violence in *Titus Andronicus* tends to preclude subtle modulations of voice, or of moral thought. Letting the good guys do what the bad guys did is an easy source of emotional gratification, but a peculiar way to celebrate ethical distinctions. Much of Shakespeare’s subsequent career was shaped by his efforts to solve that problem—a problem especially tricky for a dramatist whose renowned ability to see all sides of a situation with equal clarity precluded the partisan distortions that conveniently disguise the amoral mirroring function of so many feuds. By turning the competing accusations into mere echoes of each other, Shakespeare (like a modern sound engineer)
arranged for these justifications to cancel each other out, to make audible the cries of pain behind them.

In his first group of history plays, Shakespeare seems already to feel the limitations of revenge as a symmetrical, political practice. One does not even need to know the context to recognize the transaction:

queen margaret: Thou hadst a Richard, till a Richard killed him.

duchess: I had a Richard too and thou didst kill him;
I had a Rutland too, thou holp’st to kill him.
...
queen margaret: Bear with me. I am hungry for revenge, And now I cloy me with beholding it.

Thy Edward he is dead that killed my Edward;
The other Edward dead to quit my Edward; (R3 4.4.42–64)

This is obviously a bad social system, and not so good as drama or poetry either (there is much more of this kind of forced parallelism in this scene). Even in *Romeo and Juliet* a few years later, the older-fashioned speakers and situations produce this kind of revenge-rhyme:

lady capulet: I beg for justice, which thou, Prince, must give:

Romeo slew Tybalt, Romeo must not live.

prince: Romeo slew him, he slew Mercutio; Who now the price of his dear blood doth owe?

lord capulet: Not Romeo, Prince, he was Mercutio’s friend; His fault concludes but what the law should end . . . (3.1.180–5)

In this same play, however, we can feel Shakespeare searching for more complex motives and a more complex rhetoric to express them. He rehearses that rhetoric in the voice of Juliet, as she tries to find a way out of a potentially unstoppable cycle of talionic violence, seeking somehow to replace it – as the play itself flirts with an escape from tragedy into comedy – with a rhetoric of love and forgiveness.

The diplomatic delicacy of this change is exquisitely delineated just after Romeo departs into exile. Juliet shows her wit by choosing words that simultaneously satisfy her mother’s expectation that she would want to murder Romeo, for killing her cousin Tybalt, and her own need to express a different sort of desire for him. She tells Lady Capulet,

juliet: God pardon him, I do, with all my heart: And yet no man like he doth grieve my heart.

lady capulet: That is because the traitor murderer lives. juliet: Ay, madam, from the reach of these my hands.
Would none but I might venge my cousin’s death!

When her mother promises to satisfy what she assumes is Juliet’s desire for ‘vengeance’ by having Romeo poisoned, Juliet answers,

Indeed I never shall be satisfied
With Romeo, till I behold him – dead –
Is my poor heart, so for a kinsman vex’d. Madam, if you could find out but a man
To bear a poison, I would temper it,
That Romeo should upon receipt thereof Soon sleep in quiet. O, how my heart abhors To hear him named, and cannot come to him To wreak the love I bore my cousin
Upon his body that hath slaughtered him!

(3.5.82–102)

This breathtaking piece of verbal tightrope-walking is possible only because the line between death-wishing and love-desire – between unrequited wrongs and unrequited love – is so blurred by this play’s passions. Love does not simply negate revenge here; it steers the energies of revenge into the thinly veiled violence of sexual desire. Juliet will convert the poisonous humours that elicit death into the fluids that love-making elicits, leading to sleep, and to another kind of bearing and feeding.

Shakespeare himself perfects this ambivalence, and provides closure to this topic, near the end of his career, by writing The Tempest, which appears to be a revenge tragedy that renounces its own genre. The hero Prospero decides not to enforce punishment on the traitors he has finally captured: ‘At this hour / Lies at my mercy all mine enemies’, he announces at the end of Act 4 (4.1.264–5). Yet, at the start of Act 5, in conversation with the spirit Ariel, Prospero declares, ‘The rarer action is in virtue, than in vengeance. They being penitent, / The sole drift of my purpose doth extend / Not a frown further’ (5.1.27–9). He moves the story from tragedy to comedy, from a story of death to a story of marriage, focusing on matching his daughter Miranda joyfully with Ferdinand, a project hardly compatible with taking brutal revenge on Ferdinand’s father. In a sense, Prospero achieves what Romeo and Juliet died attempting: the conversion of vendetta – the merciless Italian morality of revenge – into wedding, into a morality of forgiveness and community. He is able to ‘requite’ Ferdinand’s father for the restoration of his dukedom with new life, instead of for the usurpation of that kingdom with enforced death (5.1.169). (Revenge is notably forsworn in other late plays also: in The Winter’s Tale, King Leontes’s falsely accused wife and friend, Hermione and Polixenes, have good cause for vengeance and good positions from which to impose it, but finally allow the king’s penitence to take the place of punishment.)

From the first plays to the last, then, revenge as a motive is everywhere in Shakespeare. Even in his comedies, characters such as Shylock in The Merchant of Venice, Oliver de Boys in As You Like It, and Malvolio in Twelfth Night, are ambitious and vengeful figures against whom some combination of virtue and nature takes a poetically just counter-revenge, imposing humiliation. This counter-revenge is often engineered by a female character, such as Portia in The Merchant of Venice, Maria in Twelfth Night, even Mistress Ford in The Merry Wives of Windsor – which may suggest the way women in
Shakespearean comedy are associated with the restoration of commonsensical norms. In Shakespearean tragedy, revenge often seems merely a rationalization by an already malign spirit, such as Aaron in *Titus*, Iago in *Othello*, or Cornwall in *King Lear*. These villains – who are gener- ally at least superficially ambitious – set out to punish what we are asked to see as goodness; sometimes they do so precisely because they too see it as goodness, as an innocence they cannot match, and can therefore only destroy.

An important sub-category of revenge tragedy is the malcontent plot – made famous by Shakespeare’s contemporaries such as Marston and Webster, but clearly shaping Shakespeare’s high-tragic villains Iago and Edmund – in which someone unappreciated by the royal court, someone with frustrated ambitions, decides to show the world his abilities in a destructive mode instead. Hamlet arguably flirts with this role; Macbeth plays it; Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* is a minimalist caricature of it. The ambitions of Shakespeare’s Richard III reflect some of this same resentment, a resentment which turns his political career into an act of vengeance against a world that cannot love him, and – in a psychological turn typical of Shakespearean drama – against a deformed self he himself cannot love.

Indeed, heroes can be vengeful as well, though rarely at their best moments. Henry IV and Henry V both skilfully disguise their political desires as causes of honourable vengeance. In *Julius Caesar*, Antony is certainly an avenger, with Caesar’s ghost as his guiding and aiding spirit. Romeo becomes one, briefly but disastrously, in killing Tybalt. King Lear seeks revenge against his bad daughters, Timon against his fair-weather friends, Coriolanus against his Roman banishers, Othello mistakenly and effectually against his wife and then legitimately but futilely against Iago for causing that mistake. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare provides us with his most explicit and extended exploration of heroic revenge; indeed, the most self-conscious and morally intricate revenge tragedy in the long, lively history of the genre.

The history of *Hamlet* and the functions of revenge

*Hamlet* has long stood as the most famous revenge tragedy in Western civil- ization. The entire history of that fame is a lesson in the tension between locality and universality in the reading of Shakespeare. The play’s opening words – ‘Who’s there?’ (1.1.1–2) – make a claim on every audience that or- ders this ghostly play to ‘Stand, and unfold yourself.’ Hamlet the character says that the purpose of drama is to hold ‘the mirror up to nature’. *Hamlet* the drama holds a mirror up to us, in which even the most sophisticated crit- ics have trouble seeing beyond their own reflections. So *Hamlet* is universal, in that each individual or historical period tends to see it as the story of all humanity; but local, in that each individual or historical period thereby defines that story in its own terms.

The reception of *Hamlet* thus provides a kind of core sample of cultural history. Shakespeare biographers read *Hamlet* as Shakespeare’s metaphorical autobiography: after all, Shakespeare liked to stage revealing plays, reportedly played the ghost of Hamlet’s father, had recently lost his own father, and had a son named Hamnet who died young. Zealous Christians detect a Christian parable. Theatre historians think the play must be
understood as an artifact of the historical theatre, and modernizing directors insist it is incomprehensible unless converted into an entirely modern work. German authors see the play as quintessentially German, while French authors deem it French. When the legendary Sarah Bernhardt played Hamlet, she told an interviewer that Hamlet must have been a woman. The play functions as a projection, and an optical illusion, whether or not the ‘illusion’ called a ghost does (1.1.127).

The Romantics who commented on Shakespeare in the early nineteenth century were often morbidly sensitive intellectuals (such as Coleridge and Hazlitt in England, Goethe and Schlegel in Germany) trapped in the world of brutal action: poet–philosophers with too much brain-power and emotional delicacy for their own good. They perceived Hamlet as much the same, with Claudius’s usurpation standing in for the French Revolution in particular and the Industrial Revolution in general. The problem with revenge, from this perspective, is that it does not withstand careful consideration. Hamlet repeatedly condemns himself for getting caught up in analysing revenge instead of performing it:

Now, whether it be Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple Of thinking too precisely on th’ event –

A thought which quartered hath but one part wisdom, And ever three parts coward – I do not know Why yet I live to say, ‘This thing’s to do,’
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means To do it. (4.4.39–46; cf. 2.2.550–86)

Yet Hamlet may well have been right to hesitate. How can anyone rouse the moral certainty to commit murder, however compelling the cause may appear, if he suspects that ‘nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so’ (2.2.239–40) – let alone if he suspects that a number of innocent people, including his own school-friends, sweetheart, and mother, will be likely to be killed also in the process?

Furthermore, Shakespeare provides us with perspective – almost a scientific control group – by including two other sons also seeking to avenge their fathers’ slayings. Fortinbras (whose father was killed by Hamlet’s father in single combat) seems too cold, sending ‘twenty thousand men’ to death in fighting an otherwise pointless cause (4.4.60–5). Laertes (whose father was killed by Hamlet himself) seems too hot to notice that his honour is being destroyed by the effort to preserve it. Warfare itself – killing provoked by a sense of duty to ghosts of our fathers in armour – is brought into moral question, along with all the smaller-scale forms of revenge. Macbeth raises similar questions by showing that the same kind of brutal violence which makes Macbeth the greatest of heroes in the play’s opening scene makes him the worst of villains a few scenes later. Is revenge any better an excuse for killing than ambition is, or vice versa? What excuse is good enough?

When another German cultural wave washed over England and America a century after Romanticism – Freudian psychoanalysis – it again stared into the Hamlet mirror and saw itself. In his unsophisticated but influential book Hamlet and Oedipus, Ernest Jones – a student of Freud’s – argued that Shakespeare and Sophocles were drawing on the same sources and patterns of psychic energy. Hamlet cannot kill Claudius because he identifies with him too much. All Claudius has done is fulfil precisely Hamlet’s own oedipal fantasies: his guilt-ridden, subconscious desire to murder his father and then marry his mother. The
problem with revenge is thus that it is inextricable from suicide, as the ‘To be or not to be’
soliloquy suggests; the avenger now sees himself in the mirror. It is worth noting, however,
that this most famous question in literature may not mean (as most people assume it does),
‘Should I commit suicide?’, but rather the question Hamlet goes on to consider: ‘Should I
survive by stoically accepting wrongs, or die performing revenge?’

Now, another century later, Hamlet again seems to mirror the latest cultural revolution, and
becomes a study of information systems at their limits, of the problems of communicating
data and perfecting equations amid realities that may never be more than virtual. The
biggest theoretical questions currently haunting literary critics and historians and
psychotherapists and Web-surfers cluster around the multiplicity and instability of truth. In
an age obsessed with moral relativism and recovered-memory syndromes and
distraction and deconstruction and multiculturalism, how do we know each other, or our-
selves, or reality – especially through language, which programmes us in ways we can never get outside of?

Now the problem with revenge is that – as the play keeps reminding us – we cannot
understand ourselves, recognize our enemies, calibrate our actions, define morality, or intuit
divine purposes surely and precisely enough to trust that our revenge will actually constitute
justice.

Hamlet’s task of revenge appears fairly neat: his target is high but not out of reach, he has
multiple kinds of evidence convicting Claudius, and his own plausible claim to the throne
gives his efforts legitimacy as well as a supplementary motive of ambition. But, as so often
in Renaissance drama, revenge tends to overflow, inflicting collateral damage on by-
standers, ruin- ing the logic of redressed grievance and the aesthetic of restored symmetry.
Long before he finally strikes down ‘that murderous, that adulterate beast’ (1.5.42), Hamlet
has turned bitterly vengeful against several other people:

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not just his mother (briefly) for her supposed complicity, but against several members of his
own generation who he feels have become disloyal to him, allowing themselves to be
manipulated by the powerful elders. He there-
fore turns his fatal anger against the lovelorn
Ophelia, against the ambitious Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and against the proud Laertes.
That anger also nearly becomes deadly against himself; before he can even undertake
violence against Claudius, his speech and actions are markedly suicidal.

Drawing on a strong scholarly tradition that associated revenge with impi-
ety, excess, and
madness in Renaissance culture,\(^8\) one critic argues vigorously that Shakespeare would not
have approved of Hamlet’s extreme vengeful- ness, even against Claudius, and would not
have assumed approval from the audience. Against the long tradition of Hamlet criticism
that wonders why he is so hesitant to take revenge, this argument suggests he should (by all
recorded Elizabethan norms) have been even more hesitant, leaving vengeance to God and
never seeking to damn another human soul.\(^9\)
In fact, the divine injunctions against human retaliation (‘Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord’ in the Old Testament, ‘turn the other cheek’ in the New) were widely quoted – and even more widely ignored. Hamlet expresses concern that God has forbidden suicide, but not that God has forbidden revenge. In any case, Hamlet’s situation is ambiguous, since he pursues not only a personal vendetta on behalf of his family, which Elizabethan commentators condemned, but also official justice as a prince of the state, which they tended to approve. Shakespeare employs such ambiguities to prevent the audience from seizing on a simplistic moral view of the protagonist’s dilemma, which must be irresolvable if it is to be fully tragic. Something similar occurs with the laws of succession in Macbeth, where Macbeth’s ambition may or may not be legitimate, since Shakespeare carefully avoids specifying whether Duncan’s son has any presumptive claim on the throne, or whether (as a kinsman and leading general of the king) Macbeth deserved a chance at the ‘election’.

The platitudinous father Polonius advises Laertes, ‘to thine own self be true’ (1.3.78). That advice only highlights what a strange new world Shakespeare – and Hamlet, and Macbeth – actually inhabited. The legacy of paternal identity was often rendered irrelevant by socio-economic changes that drove people into cities where they had to make a living or make a name for themselves, rather than simply inheriting both. The revenge of Hamlet, by which he seeks to claim his father’s legacy, thus becomes an especially interesting case. Since the emphatic public discourses of Church and state alike condemned it, the practice of revenge seems to mark a moment of individual and/or instinctual resistance to official influence – perhaps an exception to theories (currently popular among scholars) that claim the self is entirely constructed by social authority, and that individuality and instinct are delusive myths when applied to human beings who are in the encompassing grip of their historical moment with its ideologies and epistemes. If we combine that observation with the tendency (also strong in recent scholarship) to credit this play with the invention of modern inwardness, of unique personal subjectivity, we find Hamlet breaking both Renaissance orthodoxy and modern academic orthodoxy about that Renaissance orthodoxy. We find ourselves again focused on the character’s unprecedented autonomy – his freedom of agency, his ability to explore inwardly. And yet, when called upon to act, he feels himself very far from free. Revenge is tragic because (like ambition) it divides the protagonist against himself, casting him in incompatible roles, and because it is philosophically as well as practically difficult; the drama of moral choice complicates and deepens the drama of active suspense.

While the task of blood-revenge was discouraged by Elizabethan authorities, it may have been stimulated by Elizabethan theology, less directly but no less forcefully, because vengeance was suddenly about the only thing mourners could do on behalf of the dead. The Catholic tradition of praying and paying to redeem loved ones from purgatory was outlawed and ridiculed by the Reformation (which got its start at Wittenberg, where Shakespeare tells us Hamlet has been educated); and promptly the Elizabethan stage began depicting characters using worldly revenge (as in The Spanish Tragedy as well as Hamlet) to redeem tormented ghosts. Laertes’s vengeful fury is amplified by his resentment that neither Polonius nor Ophelia can be buried with the full traditional rites. If prayers for the dead were discouraged in churches, then revenge on behalf of a ghost would be performed in
theatres; diplomacy with God would give way to war on human villains, who became the satisfyingly localized and assailable scapegoats for the crime of mortality. Beneath the surface horror of Renaissance revenge tragedy (and modern detective fiction) lies the reassuring implication that death is a contingent event – the strange result of crime rather than the normal result of time – and the consoling idea that death can in some sense be refuted by destroying its immediate cause. This version of homeopathic medicine, by which death cures death, partly explains the renewed appeal of the classical drama of blood-revenge.

It may also explain why blood-revenge often becomes almost comically extreme in Jacobean tragedy, as avengers seek a dosage adequate to achieve the desired cure; and why audiences tend to side with such avengers despite all the official admonitions to the contrary. It doesn’t take a murdered beloved, only a dead one, to make us share the sense of betrayal and futility that generates dramatic avengers. As in Shakespeare’s great cluster of tragedies of 1605–8 – *King Lear, Macbeth, Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* – what looks like a tragedy about a particular political crime at a particular historical moment proves to be also a tragedy about the painful contradictions of ordinary human life, full of high aspirations, but subservient to nature, and limited by mortality.

Coriolanus provides a revealing instance: a character whose huge ambitions manifest themselves in vengefulness against both his own common bodily needs and the commoners of his body politic, which conspire to resist his claim to be the perfect embodiment of Rome’s martial ideal. Shakespeare here stages a historical incident, closely based on Plutarch, with clear links to the history of Shakespeare’s own time: the rebellion of the ambitious Essex, the Midlands grain uprisings of 1606–7, the emerging anxieties about representative government. But the play takes on a mythical rather than a historical aura. The factual background and political analysis coexist synergistically here with an archetypal study of the costs and limits of ambition itself. Clearly the revenge taken against Coriolanus is at once that of a social underclass against aristocratic arrogance, and that of fundamental elements of his birth against the superhuman soldier he aspired to become. The mob finally destroys him on behalf of slain kinsmen (‘He kill’d my son! – My daughter! – He kill’d cousin Marcus – he kill’d my father!’ (5.6.121–2)), but also on behalf of the common nature he insisted on transcending: Coriolanus is executed for crimes against his own human kindness. Taking his mother and his son each by a hand, hearing the honorary name he achieved reduced back to his patronymic, Coriolanus is fatally obliged to acknowledge his identity as merely one link in a chain of mortal generations. In this, Coriolanus’s tragedy most clearly resembles Macbeth’s: a story of nature and its norms taking revenge on ambition.12

**Macbeth and nature’s revenge on human ambition**

Fundamentally, *Macbeth* tells the story of a man whose ambitions (abetted and personified by his wife) lead him into ‘unnatural’ deeds, deeds for which nature, society, and the psyche all take a vivid and systematic revenge. At the beginning of the story, Macbeth understands that ambitious violations invite retribution:
... we but teach Bloody instructions, which being taught, return To plague th’ inventor. This even-handed justice

Commends th’ ingredience of our poisoned chalice To our own lips. (1.7.8–12)

When the murderous couple get a taste of their own bitter medicine, they discover that its side-effects are more pervasive than the dangerous precedent a king-killer sets for his own kingship. Ambition – rebelling against the nation’s divinely given hierarchy – entails a series of violations of natural order, all of which return to haunt Macbeth as relentlessly as Banquo’s ghost does. Macbeth embodies normal human competitiveness, but he does so in a situation which converts that impulse into a terrible and irredeemable reality, and in a universe that takes massive, ineluctable revenge on those who overstep the natural and traditional boundaries.

Shakespeare goes to considerable trouble, not only to make the crimes vividly brutal, but also to show that Macbeth gets just what he deserves – what, in fact, he asks for. Macbeth’s crime is his punishment. He forfeits precisely the regenerative functions that he violated in murdering Duncan. To seize the throne, Macbeth must violate the healthy, orderly cycles of nature, and in each case he discovers that he cannot survive without the aspects of nature his ambitions obliged him to shatter. Having murdered sleep, he and his Lady endure an endless night of insomnia. Having tried to rob the next human generation of life and inheritance, they die prematurely and childless. Having blighted the agricultural health of their nation by murdering its life-giving figurehead, Macbeth finds his castle walls swarmed by an instantly resurgent forest – the same forest human ambitions had presumably cleared from that place to build the castle so long ago. The real avenger here appears to be nature itself, with the biological heir Malcolm as merely its stalking-horse.

The immediate result of yielding to ambition, of forcibly disturbing the hereditary order, of making himself into something he was not born to be, is that Macbeth becomes disastrously divided against himself. His manhood erases his humanity; his senses contradict each other; his hand and eye, face and heart, become deceptively discrepant. Ambition provokes an inward as well as an outward civil war. The boundary between self and other blurs nightmarishly; his ‘single state of man’ loses its ‘better part of man’ (1.3.140, 5.8.18); and ‘all that is within him does condemn/Itself for being there’ (5.2.24–5). A similar syndrome of disorder and division pulls down his ambitious wife.

Macbeth’s decision to indulge the ambitious appetite reads like an allegory of Freud’s division of the self into three parts. Macbeth is the ego, held in check by the super-ego – the rules ingrained in our conscience to make social existence possible. Macbeth’s soliloquy (in 1.7) catalogues those rules: protect your sleeping guests, your benefactors, and your kindred; never make the question of hierarchy into a bloody free-for-all; listen to the angels, who will reward your virtues and expose and punish your crimes.

At the end of the soliloquy, he recognizes that he has no valid reason to proceed, ‘Only vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself/And falls on th’ other’; Macbeth mocks himself as a man leaping proudly up on to horse-back, only to discover that his momentum carries him inevitably towards a painful and humiliating fall off the other side. Ambition is as
impractical as it is immoral, provoking a revenge as certain as gravity. Lady Macbeth refutes this conscientious argument in the voice of the conscienceless id, the individual appetite, coaxing the super-ego into dropping its defences. She makes fun of him for ‘Letting “I dare not” wait upon “I would” ’ (1.7.44); she then proves that a little wine and sexual provocation can wash away conscientious resistance.

In this sense, the portrayal of Macbeth’s fate as poetic justice falls far short of tragic complexity. He is not caught between conflicting imperatives: all he has to do is ignore some obviously sinister advice and he will be able to settle into the sociable contented old age he envisions (5.3.24–6). The preceding summary of the primary moral argument of the play does virtually nothing to explain why people find Macbeth any more haunting than, say, the manipulative ‘Goofus and Gallant’ cartoons that have run for decades in Highlights for Children magazine, where the binary choice between good and bad is utterly simple, and pervades every aspect of conduct and appearance. This play has remained compelling because (as so often in Shakespeare’s work) it also harbours a contrary morality, a revisionist fairy tale which turns into a horror movie, because the face of dear old Mother Nature melts into a blur and reshapes itself as an ugly witch who promised us glory, but in fact always had us trapped in a deterministic labyrinth. Virtue triumphs at the expense of homo sapiens and homo faber: our ability to imagine something better and plan towards it, our practical need for tools and clothing and housing.

That may be one reason why this play puts so much symbolic weight on weapons and garments and castles. The individualistic philosophy infiltrating England from Renaissance Italy, as prominently articulated by Petrarch and Pico della Mirandola, argued that human beings were authorized to alter their given world, and to aspire above their given place in that world, by the fact that they were created without claws or fur or exoskeletons, and so needed artificial equivalents in order to survive. Anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and art historians – who agree on little else – agree that the human species defines itself by the way it distances itself from nature. ‘Human nature’ is an oxymoron, a contradiction full of tragic potential. Hamlet says, ‘What is a man, / If the chief good and market of his time / Be but to sleep and feed? A beast, no more’ (4.4.34). King Lear registers a similar complaint: ‘Allow not nature more than nature needs / Man’s life is cheap as beast’s’ (2.4.267). The advancing Birnam Wood evokes, in a dramatically accelerated form, the mindless relentless organic processes that eventually will swallow up everything human pride – or the human genome – has pro- voked us to build. Akira Kurosawa’s superb Japanese film adaptation of Macbeth, Throne of Blood, emphasizes exactly this demoralizing moral.

There are certainly other ways to slant the moral of this story. If it had been told by an ordinary Elizabethan author, susceptible to conventional thought and eager to please the government, it would have been a simple celebration of benevolent power triumphing over diabolical ambition. Told by a more openly rebellious and Promethean spirit such as Christopher Marlowe or George Chapman, this might have been the story of a great soul’s repression by a narrow and mechanical physical world. Shakespeare, as usual, tells it both ways at once, leaving us to decide whether we want to excavate a human tragedy out of a moralistic and didactic tale about the rise and fall of two evil-doers. Underneath the story of
nature’s vivid revenge against ambition lies a story of entropy’s ponderous nullification of human enterprise.

*Macbeth* is thus broadly philosophical and psychological in its treatment of ambition and revenge. It suggests that, in a conservative universe – one where God or a reactionary society or the stubbornness of intentionless physics limits human freedom – ambitious desires invite a tragic confrontation with what Freud calls the reality-principle, which demands ‘the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure’.\(^\text{15}\) *Macbeth* is a tragedy of ambitions which override that principle, choosing short-term, selfish satisfactions over the compromises which sustain collective human life. That collectivity then exacts revenge.

*Macbeth* is also insistently historical. Even if we take the ‘weird sisters’ more as allegory than as a commentary on Renaissance witchcraft, we can still see them either as agents of *wyrd* – fate – or more locally as an embodiment of contradictions in the organization of a Renaissance English society that repeatedly aroused high aspirations and then took vengeance on those who pursued them. The changes in Shakespeare’s world, like the witches in Macbeth’s, generated a foggy, confusing moral landscape, and then destroyed people for not finding the same old path through them. They tempted people to ambitious activity with glorious prophecies – rule the world, know the universe – and then brutally punished them for not passively accepting their given conditions. The glorious aspirations of humanism, even the ordinary aspirations of humans, are hard to reconcile with Christian (and monarchical) principles that demanded not only humility, but even unquestioning acceptance of the will and the world of God and Kings.

With the official voices offering such mixed messages, people often turn to nature as an arbiter; but the definition of what is natural is itself inflected by local ideology. The world did not need Shakespeare to suggest that ambition was a wrongful and dangerous violation of some benevolent and divinely ordained order which conveniently included the established hierarchies. Elizabethan moralists were only too willing to send that message, and Elizabethan authorities (who had the most to lose in any breakdown of established hierarchies) made sure that was the message which appeared in print and echoed through churches.

*Macbeth* appears to participate in that process of ideological control, but may also offer a critique of it. As in much government propaganda about the value of accepting subjugation (by race, class, and gender) and of following conventional practices (in sexuality, work, and belief), the traditional is here equated with the natural, and hence with justice and divine intention.\(^\text{16}\) We see a wise and powerful force, comprising God and nature and political legitimacy, taking poetically just revenge on Macbeth for his crimes against the pious and natural and political orders. Shakespeare also reminds us, though, that those orders rarely stay so perfectly aligned except in propaganda. Coded into that moralistic story is a story of moral ambiguity, less obvious but no less powerful, one sympathetic to the paradoxes entangling human beings generally and Shakespeare’s contemporaries in particular. Here again, Shakespeare voices a human problem that stretches across the range of civilizations
in time and space, but is amplified and inflected by circumstances local to Shakespeare and his audience.

Renaissance artists, scientists, and explorers heard a temptress’s voice, a witch’s voice, a Lady Macbeth voice, telling them that conquest and glory were within their reach, if they were only bold and manly enough to grasp them. Those same aspirations were then smothered by Protestant doctrines that insisted on humanity’s helpless depravity, and by the stubborn limitations of ignorance, traditionalism, and finally mortality. Versions of Macbeth’s temptresses – equivocal forces that provoked and then betrayed ambition, that ‘palter with us in a double sense’ (5.8.20) – were constantly being conjured by the rapidly shifting economic, scientific, and theological conditions of the people for whom Shakespeare was writing his plays. Like Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, Shakespeare’s Macbeth often looks like an old-fashioned story about the olden days, a story of sinful ambition and holy revenge. But, even more craftily than Faustus, Shakespeare’s great tragedy of extraordinary ambition comports a warning, even a mourning, about the ethical contradictions produced by ordinary living in the emerging modern world.

NOTES

1. This is the opening sentence of Bacon’s ‘Of Revenge’, in his Essayes (London, 1625).


5. The law of the talion is the principle of symmetrical repayment: an eye for an eye. And another eye for that one: Rene’ Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), argues that breaking such cycles of mimetic violence is an essential function of tragedy.

6. Even here, Shakespeare arguably introduces some complexity by allowing Lord Capulet to speak on behalf of the young Montague, Romeo. Most editors, however, including the New Cambridge, accept the traditional (but by no means necessary) emendation of q 4 that puts this defence in the mouth of Lord Montague instead, trapping Shakespeare back in the world of predictable vindictiveness that he may have been trying to escape.

7. Lady Macbeth will attempt the opposite transformation, turning her milk to gall, and the milk of her husband’s humankindness into bloody murder (1.5.48, 17).

8. Many classic works on English Renaissance drama have acknowledged a powerful Elizabethan orthodoxy against private vengeance; see Lily Bess Campbell, Shakespeare’s


11. The latter term, meaning the vocabularies of possible knowledge at different historical moments, is developed by Michel Foucault in Les Mots et les choses (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).


13. Cf. Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 13, which explores ‘states in which the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain or in which they are actually drawn incorrectly. There are cases in which parts of a person’s body, even portions of his own mental life...appear alien to him...’.


The genres of Shakespeare’s plays

Presenting the dramatic works of Shakespeare in the Folio of 1623, John Heminges and Henry Condell categorized them in the table of contents under ‘Comedies’, ‘Histories’, and ‘Tragedies’. What may strike us now as a conventional grouping was not so at the time: in the most obvious precedent for such a collection, the 1616 Works of Ben Jonson, the plays were arranged chronologically. The organizational principle they chose, which is featured as well in the title of the collection – *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* – invites readers of Shakespeare’s plays to read in the light of genre, apprehending family resemblances within each group as well as individual distinctions.

For that matter, the individual nature of any work of art is hard to grasp without some sense of the genre to which it belongs – its ‘kind’, in the language of Shakespeare’s day. The genres or kinds can be seen, in Rosalie Colie’s words, ‘as tiny subcultures with their own habits, habitats, and structures of ideas as well as their own forms’. In recognizing such habits as clowns and wordplay for comedy, and such habitats as royal courts and battlefields for histories and tragedy, we construct a notion of a play’s *modus operandi* that in turn conditions our reactions as dialogue and action unfold. A sense of the norms of genre guides us through that unfolding: prompting sympathy or detachment, highlighting the significance of what we witness, and raising expectations about what is to come. The author may also at times invoke generic codes in order to play against them, refusing to fulfil the expectations he has aroused and thus pointing us in a marked new direction. This contra-use of genre may be overt, as when Shakespeare at the end of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* denies, or at least postpones, the traditional comic ending of multiple marriages and has one of the thwarted bridegrooms complain, ‘Our wooing doth not end like an old play’ (*L.L.L.* 5.2.851). It may be more subtle and pervasive, as when *The Tempest* reshapes the makings of revenge tragedy into reconciliation or *Romeo and Juliet* abruptly derails promises of a comedic conclusion with the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt and destroys young lovers and all in the subsequent wreck.

Of the three Folio genres, two – comedy and tragedy – were part of traditions stretching back to classical times, traditions which in England encompassed native elements as well. The history play, though its place alongside the other two was established by the early seventeenth century, had come forth much more recently, in the English popular theatre of the late 1580s and 1590s. One effect of the three-genre grouping chosen by Heminges and Condell for their late colleague’s plays was perhaps to remind readers of the central role played by Shakespeare himself in developing, or even originating, the Elizabethan history play.
However long familiar, the genres of comedy and tragedy were usually theorized during this period in a reductive, schematic way. While Aristotle’s thoughts on tragedy received extensive Renaissance commentary, especially on the Continent, the dominant influences on dramatic genre theory were not the *Poetics* but certain later codifications of generic difference: ‘De tragoedia etcomoedia’, made up of two late fourth-century essays by the grammarians Donatus and Evanthis and widely circulated in editions of the plays of Terence used in Renaissance schools and universities, and a similar treatise by another early grammarian, Diomedes. Conflating their several pronouncements produces a series of rudimentary oppositions between the comic and the tragic. Comedies take their plots from fiction, tragedies from history. Comedy involves men of middling estate; its perils are small-scale, its outcomes peaceful. In tragedy, ‘omnia contra’, the persons and issues are exalted and they end unhappily. Comedy, beginning in turmoil but ending in harmony, celebrates life; but tragedy’s course from prosperity to calamity expresses rejection of life.3 English Renaissance writers when addressing dramatic genre repeat these schematic oppositions again and again without doing much to advance or refine them. The notion of drama, particularly comedy, as ethical instructor was especially useful to writers trying to defend the English stage against the persistent attacks of moralists (for example Thomas Lodge in his *Reply to Gosson* and Thomas Heywood in *An Apology for Actors*), and to Sir Philip Sidney defending imaginative literature in general in *An Apology for Poetry*.

Sidney advances in support of comedy the definition then ascribed to Cicero: by imitating ‘the common errors of our life’ and inviting reactions of scorn and ridicule, comedy teaches us what not to do.4 In fact, this works better as a debating point than as a gloss on actual comedies of the 1580s when Sidney was writing, or on those Shakespeare wrote in the following two decades. Indeed, by deploiring the recalcitrance of ‘naughty play-makers and stage-keepers’ even while praising comedy’s proper social aim, Sidney himself tacitly recognizes a large gap between theory and practice. Farces and romantic fantasies hardly mirrored everyday life, and the driving impulse of most comedies was not to punish error but to entertain. Nor is there any evidence supporting Sidney’s parallel didactic claim for tragedy, that watching the downfall of unjust rulers made kings fear to be tyrants. Other aspects of the grammarians’ generic paradigms, however, can in spite of their limitations be more usefully pursued in the actual dramatic practice of those Elizabethan plays that have survived (many were never printed, or no copy now exists), which in turn may fill out those laconic formulas and uncover their implications.

What is implied by the most basic distinction of all, that comedy ends happily and tragedy unhappily? Since all plots involve threats and dangers, the assumption is that while in tragedies these threats are fulfilled, in comedies they may be evaded. Evanthis characterizes the dangers of comedy as small in scale compared to those of tragedy, but Shakespeare’s comic protagonists regularly face alienation, abandonment, and death. What makes the difference is not less serious perils but the operation of a kind of ‘evitability’ principle whereby shifts and stratagems and sheer good luck break the chain of causality that seemed headed for certain catastrophe. Portia finds a hole in Venetian law through which Antonio may escape without paying his pound of flesh (*The Merchant of Venice*);
Dogberry’s watchmen accidentally uncover the villainy of Don John and deliver Hero from disgrace and death (*Much Ado about Nothing*). Reality itself, seemingly fixed, turns out in the comic world to be both mutable and malleable. In *As You Like It* a chance meeting with a hermit results in the sudden conversion of the tyrant Duke Frederick, who then easily gives back the throne he usurped from his brother; Oberon’s magic redirects Demetrius’ love from Hermia to Helena so that the lovers of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* may be tidily paired. In tragedy, on the other hand, the causal chain unwinds inexorably towards destruction, cutting off alternative possibilities of escape or potential new beginnings. In *King Lear* the army led by Cordelia that seemed to promise deliverance is defeated; and in a final shocking blow even the refounded relationship of father and daughter is cut off by Cordelia’s murder. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony is cornered in Egypt, loses his last battle, and can find himself again only by dying.

Even though Shakespeare occasionally drew a tragic plot from fiction, the premise that tragedies are based on the givens of history or established legend and comedies on fictional events the writer can mould as he wishes has its own internal logic. The chain of cause and consequence is more usual in lived experience than magical transformation. Actual lives, no matter how rich in power and achievement, always end in the final defeat of death, and tragedies, whether they end in death or not (Shakespeare’s always do), have the same fated quality of what has already happened and cannot be changed or evaded. In its unerring movement towards that inevitable conclusion, tragedy enacts the cadential rhythm of every human existence, even while it protests against that inevitable end in its countermovement of expanding heroic self-realization.

The insistence of tragic formulas on events of great magnitude and persons of exalted estate accords with life thus felt from the inside, the unique self and its never-to-be-repeated life. (Shakespeare’s Othello, Antony, and Titus Andronicus are indispensable military commanders, Julius Caesar and the men who kill him are central to the leadership of Rome; even Romeo and Juliet are the focal points of a social division that threatens to destroy a whole city.) But life may also be apprehended, by different minds or by the same minds in different circumstances, in a more social way: as something common and ongoing, the community weathering upheavals and vicissitudes by finding new ways to adapt and regroup. The clever devices that untie comic knots enact this real sense of continuity and new opportunity even while they remould hard facts into the image of our wish. Comedy’s more ordinary characters, who evade death and disgrace and move on to marry and procreate, assert against the personal orientation of tragedy a sense of life as an endless stream in which we participate but are not the whole story.

From an intertextual perspective, Elizabethan tragedy grows, like any other form, out of roots in earlier literature. Classical drama provided one source, although the work of the great Greek tragedians in Shakespeare’s time was known, if at all, mainly to the learned in the occasional Latin translation. Euripides was more admired than Aeschylus or Sophocles, and also more available in Latin versions; individual plays of his have been claimed as models for the rhythm of *Titus Andronicus*, ‘suffering to an intolerable pitch, followed by the relief of aggressive action’ and for the pervasive disillusionment of *Troilus and Cressida* with its self-divided characters and unstable values. Better known and more revered than
any Greek was the Roman tragedian Seneca. The models his plays provided for high passionate rhetoric, structured by repetition and opposition, probably assisted Renaissance writers, including Shakespeare, on their way to mature tragic verse. On the other hand, Seneca may have been credited with too much influence in other areas: the comic dramatist Terence is the more likely model for five-act structure, and the complaining ghost was already omnipresent in the narrative tragedies generally labelled *de casibus* after Boccaccio’s archetypal collection detailing the falls of the mighty, *De casibus virorum illustrium*. Boccaccio’s work was translated at one remove by Lydgate in his fifteenth-century *Falls of Princes* and later imitated in a popular compilation, *The Mirror for Magistrates*, which was first issued in 1574 and republished several times, with substantial additions, through 1610. In the *Mirror*, figures from English and Roman history narrate in the first person their greatness and fall, providing numerous models for individual tragedies – Richard II, Duke Humphrey of Gloucester, Locrine, Julius Caesar, and so on – and cumulatively a sense of the instability of worldly greatness. That sense also pervades Seneca’s dramas and, from a different perspective, the equally well-known narratives of mutability in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Another cumulative effect of the *Mirror* narratives has potential relevance for the sense of blurred responsibility in most of Shakespeare’s tragedies, where personal failings and external circumstances operate in a mysterious conjunction to bring down the hero. The *Mirror* collection as a whole creates a similar ambiguity, with some figures attributing their falls to personal flaws and crimes while others blame fortune, the instability of this fallen world.

The native medieval drama offered no direct model for tragedy, but certain features of it point towards the tragic: especially the Passion of Christ in the mystery plays, a single life and death freighted with significance; and in the morality plays the deployment of personified virtues and vices to explore internal conflict. After the Reformation, a new theological emphasis on reprobation made tragic shaping a possibility in Protestant moralities such as *Enough is as Good as a Feast* (1560s) and *The Conflict of Conscience* (1570s). At the same time a few early attempts at tragedy began appearing. Some were classical in orientation, such as Sackville and Norton’s *Gorboduc* (1562) and Gascoigne’s *Jocaste* (1566), performed at the universities and Inns of Court, and some more popular, such as *Horestes* (1567) and *Cambises* (1569/70), which mingled high and low estates and leavened the tragic events with a large dose of comedy. These plays, although variously wooden, flat, and incoherent, nevertheless gesture towards a serious secular drama. Norman Rabkin has found promise of the more golden future in the very confusions that make *Gorboduc* and *Cambises* individually unsatisfactory as works of art: the ambivalences that cloud any clear moral message in them thus open the way to tragic complexities as some neat causality inside a single moral system could not. In any case, the golden future was not long in coming. The 1580s saw the beginnings of true tragic shape and style in two successful dramas of the commercial stage: *The Spanish Tragedy* (?1587) and *Tamburlaine* (1587–8). In the first, by Thomas Kyd, the central premise of revenge is complicated by questions about the relation of such individual justice to social and divine law. *The Spanish Tragedy* also keeps blurring the line between theatricality and life, so that events presented as plays become all too real, and courses of action apparently individually willed are shown to be a fated script. The second, by Christopher Marlowe, opened up new horizons with its
soaring verse and grand heroic vision. Both plays eschew the reductive moralizing that had short-circuited any tragic effect in earlier proto-tragic poems and dramas, Tamburlaine instead celebrating heroic virtù and The Spanish Tragedy underlining its ironies of concept and perspective. The next notable developer of tragic possibility was Shakespeare himself, in the 1590s and the early 1600s.

No single formula informs Shakespeare’s tragedies. The decisive tragic act may be variously placed, as early as the first scene in the case of King Lear, which then traces out in the rest of the action the ramifications of Lear’s giving up power and dividing the kingdom, or as late as the last scene in the case of Othello, where the emphasis is rather on the complicated internal and external forces that push the Moor to murder the wife he loves. In the tragedies of the 1590s Shakespeare’s focus shifts from heroic suffering in Titus Andronicus to social and generational tension in Romeo and Juliet to the clash between personal integrity and political imperative in Julius Caesar. When he later returns to some of these areas of tragic conflict – the dialectic of personal and political in Coriolanus, generational dynamics and monumental suffering in King Lear – the result in each case is a different tragic vision. If they are linked by any distinctive feature, it is the structuring of events to mark the limits of the hero’s power by moving him from his sphere of established mastery into a situation demanding another, perhaps diametrically opposed, kind of effectiveness. Othello and Coriolanus must leave the straightforward hostilities of war for the covert rivalries of peace-time society; Brutus and Hamlet, the amplitude of uncommitted speculation for a realm of action that calls for decisive deeds. More voluntarily, Macbeth goes from an honourable subordination to a royal power he cannot wield righteously, and Lear in the other direction, from supreme authority to dependence.

In 1598, Francis Meres in his Palladis Tamia noted the pre-eminence ‘among the Latins’ of Plautus for comedy and Seneca for tragedy, and praised Shakespeare as ‘among the English the most excellent in both kinds’. That Meres lists along with Titus Andronicus and Romeo and Juliet as examples of Shakespeare’s tragedies four plays later classed in the Folio as histories – not only the tragically shaped Richard II and Richard III but King John and Henry IV as well – suggests the instability of generic labelling at the time and the fluid mingling of kinds. Meres may also have had some difficulty in getting his total of Shakespearian tragedies up to six in order to balance the six comedies he has just listed: The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Comedy of Errors, Love’s Labour’s Lost, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, The Merchant of Venice, and the problematic Love’s Labour’s Won, which refers either to a lost play or to one now known under another name. While Shakespeare’s great tragic period, the decade from 1599 to 1607 or 1608, was still to come, Meres had no trouble finding successful come-dies to list. Indeed, if modern chronologies are correct, he could have added others: The Taming of the Shrew, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Much Ado About Nothing. After something like ten years writing for the public stage, Shakespeare’s credentials in comedy were well established.

The tradition of comedy that Shakespeare inherited and developed was as mixed as that of tragedy but considerably richer in examples. The classical models were Plautus, as Meres notes, and Terence, whose influence on structure and character in Elizabethan comedies is more observable than that of Seneca in the early tragedies. The plots of Plautus and Terence
work out of tight spots through deceptions and mistakings to a gratifying conclusion in recovery of lost children, exposure of impostors, and removal of impediments to youthful male desire. But English comedy also had deep roots in popular festivals, characterized variously by song and dance, disguising, ritual abuse, and the mocking or up-ending of authority under the chaotic rule of temporary kings or queens. Tied as they were to the round of the agricultural year, the festivals celebrated fertility through individual sexual coupling as well as communal rites. In both their elaborate pretences involving disguise and their usual conclusion in the mating of the young, festive practices merged easily with the classical comedy plot. The clowning spirit infiltrated serious medieval drama, to enliven the Flood story with Noah’s shrewish wife and even the Nativity with the chicanery of Mak the sheep-stealer, and to leaven the moralities’ action of fateful moral choice with the antics of the Vice. Like tragedy, comedy was fed from non-dramatic sources as well, ballads and romance narratives such as Amadis de Gaule and Heliodorus’ Aethiopian History, that presented strenuous quests and much-tried loves in a climate of wonders. Romance, classical structure, and festive elements had already begun to come together in drama when Shakespeare began writing, in such school and university plays as Ralph Roister Doister (1552) and Gammer Gurton’s Needle (1553) and later in John Lyly’s fantasies written for the boys’ companies and comedies of the adult popular theatre by George Peele and Robert Greene (1580s and 1590s). While the school plays feature clowning, romance elements come into their own with such comedies as The Old Wife’s Tale (Peele) and Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay (Greene).

Courtship is the staple activity in the comic drama of Shakespeare and his Elizabethan contemporaries, driving the main plot or, less often, a subplot (as when Antipholus of Syracuse woos Luciana around the edges of a welter of mistaken identities in The Comedy of Errors). While these plays pursue love whole-heartedly, they are equally energetic in negating death. Like their carnivalesque antecedents marked by burlesque funerals and resurrections, they invoke the end of life only to avoid it, undo it, distance it, laugh it off. Only the most minor characters in them actually die. Quite a few, like Hero in Much Ado About Nothing, are believed to be dead, only to reappear in due course among the living in a triumph of ‘evitability’ and wish-fulfilment. The same bent to reshape reality can be seen in the many controller-figures who haunt these comedies, working their transformations through magic, like Friar Bacon (Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay, John of Bordeaux) and Oberon (A Midsummer Night’s Dream), or through their own ingenuity like Petruchio (The Taming of A Shrew/The Shrew). The frequent disguisers and deceivers belong with this group in that they manipulate others through their superior knowledge. Their stratagems, indispensable for the dramatic structure, generate both complications and resolutions. While such manipulators are typically male, like the hero of Mucedorus and the suitors in Fair Em, Shakespeare fostered his own tradition of women who control events in their plays – sometimes aided by disguise in the manner of Portia in The Merchant of Venice or Rosalind in As You Like It, sometimes relying on sheer force of wit and wisdom, as do the ladies in Love’s Labour’s Lost and the wives in The Merry Wives of Windsor. Not all his comedies work this way, and in a few, such as The Two Gentlemen of Verona and Twelfth Night, male disguise confers on the heroine only knowledge, without the power to alter events. Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s ‘women on top’ speciality has its own relevance to the
comic mode, which rejoices, like the seasonal festivals that animate it, in temporarily placing servants over masters and women over men, dislocating the hierarchies sanctioned by its society only to reassert them at the play’s end.

Another decided preference is for the plural. Plotting is typically multiple, including frames and inductions as well as subsidiary actions, and tone often varies accordingly. Refined love-longings are set off by the more physical preoccupations of servants and clowns, intent like the slaves of Roman comedy on getting dinner and avoiding danger. The resulting suggestion of alternative realities was most fully developed by Shakespeare in his repeated comic device of contrasting worlds: court and forest in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It*, Venice and Belmont in *The Merchant of Venice*. The point is not to choose fluidity and anarchy over strict social and hierarchical codes, or the law of love over the law of property, but to include both, adjusting one to the other in a new, productive balance. Comic inclusiveness thus reinforces ‘evitability’, achieving a broader view that sees around the impasse. In encouraging alternative meanings, it also underlies the verbal play for which comedy always has room. Fools and lovers alike bandy words with delight, derailing or ignoring the forward thrust of the action for the local pleasures of pun and clever insult. In such verbal acrobatics, and in larger complications of action, the principle of ‘dilation’ expounded by Patricia Parker finds its place in comic structure – to a great degree generates that structure. Its devices, derived from rhetoric, of repetition, doubling, preposterous reversal, amplification, and multiplication of words and errors structure comedy’s dramatic time from beginning to conclusion, indeed function largely to defer that conclusion.7

From a different point of view, Alexander Leggatt also sees comic inclusiveness as antithetical to closure, pointing out that since comedy regularly contradicts itself by incorporating opposite perspectives – for example mocking marriage while working to bring marriages about – it naturally mocks itself as well, undermining its own practices.8 ‘Our wooing doth not end like an old play’ is part of the very convention it flouts.

The history play lacks such clear generic markers. The 1623 Folio lists Shakespeare’s histories between the comedies and the tragedies, ordered by historical chronology: *King John*, *Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V* come before the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, which were written earlier, with *Henry VIII* coming last. Even in Shakespeare’s time, it was easier to recognize the history play than to define it. In the anonymous play *A Warning for Fair Women*, which brings on stage all three genres personified, tragedy is associated with high passion and violent deaths and comedy with wit and the lesser passions of lovers, but the only clue to history’s nature is her drum and ensign, suggesting war. Some years later, in his defence of the theatre, Heywood proposes that the deeds of worthies constitute the core of the history play, held up for emulation and, in the case of the English histories, patriotic pride.9 These pointers are relevant as far as they go, implying concentration on public affairs as characteristic of the history play, battle as a central action, and a nationalist flavour to the proceedings.

The dramatic practice of Shakespeare and his fellow playwrights suggests a more specific focus in the dynastic politics of recent English history, the later Plantagenets and, after the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, the Tudors. Shakespeare’s Plantagenet plays and his later
Henry VIII were accompanied by others in the same areas such as the anonymous Troublesome Reign of King John and Woodstock, Marlowe’s Edward II, Heywood’s I and 2 Edward IV, the anonymous True Tragedy of Richard III, and the later Sir Thomas Wyatt by Dekker and Webster and If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody, by Heywood. If a basis in recent national events was felt to define the genre, we can understand why Heminges and Condell would exclude from their middle category Shakespeare’s plays based on Britain’s remote/legendary past (King Lear, Cymbeline), as well as those based on Roman history. Plays in the latter group, such as Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra, have in common with the English histories a pervasive concern with tensions between public and private values, a preoccupation with power and its conflicted passage from one ruler to another, and (except for Antony) a marginalizing of the sexual relations so central to some tragedies and almost all comedies. What they lack is Englishness, and in making that definitive for their history category, Heminges and Condell imply a particular relationship between these plays and their English readers.

That relationship, the special meaning of the English past for the English present, was both general and specific. The history play arose at a time when the sense of nationhood was crystallizing in England as in other European states, part of a heightened interest in earlier times that took in chronicles, ballads, and pamphlets as well. Elizabethans looked to events and figures from those times – not only kings and their battles but country squires, folk heroes, and common soldiers with their different activities and perspectives – to anchor the corporate English identity they were newly defining. In a more focused way, playwrights might dramatize through the Plantagenets current political forces both conservative and radical. Certainly some issues of the history plays were current concerns as well: religious factionalism threatened Elizabethan society as well as that of the Wars of the Roses, powerful nobles still challenged central monarchic rule, and conflicts over the succession to the throne had particular resonance in a land ruled by an ageing childless queen.

Conceived and valued in these terms, the history play was tied more closely than the other two genres to what actually happened, or was understood to have happened, and accepted artificial structuring less readily than the more openly fictive comedy and tragedy. Formally it inclines towards the episodic, and its endings, though frequently signalled by the death of the eponymous king, nevertheless offer more provisional closure than the other genres, with a new ruler succeeding and the life of the nation continuing. Perhaps because of this open-ended, in medias res quality, critics of the histories have sought a larger framework in which to comprehend them. Such formulations of an overarching structure owe something to the ‘Tudor myth’ perceived by E. M. W. Tillyard in Plantagenet history: innocence lost with the deposition of Richard II, rebellion and unrest culminating in military losses abroad and increasingly savage fighting at home until Richard III gathers all wickedness into himself and is cast out by the redemptive figure of Henry Tudor. The lost ideal order is usually located in the reign of Edward III; or, looking only at Shakespeare’s histories and bearing in mind the composition of the Henry VI–Richard III group before the historically earlier Richard II–Henry V group, one may with Phyllis Rackin see Henry V himself as the ‘lost heroic presence that the entire historical project is designed to recover’ – gone and mourned in the first tetralogy, not even fully present in much of the second, often absent or play-acting, and even in his own play ambiguously presented. In any case,
behind the various versions of mythic loss and renewal is the ur-myth that structured human history on the medieval stage, the fall and redemption of man. Even this perspective, however, cannot completely enclose history’s open-endedness in full recovery, for history still goes on: the loss of Eden is an accomplished fact, but final redemption, on the individual level at least, is only a hope for the future.

If elements in the history play kept it from full adherence to the conventional organizations of either tragedy or comedy, it nevertheless drew freely on both genres for devices large and small. The common pattern tracing the reign of a king, who rises to and wields great power and then loses all in defeat and death, accommodated easily to tragic shaping, all the more so since so many of the major figures of the history plays had already undergone such treatment in the Mirror narratives. Single-figure trajectories determine structure in such Shakespearian histories as Richard II and Richard III, and strongly condition it in others, such as Henry VI. In these Henry VI plays, however, the falls of Talbot, Humphrey of Gloucester, and Richard of York are single elements in more various designs, which include also the bizarre career of Joan of Arc, the Duchess of Gloucester’s dabbling in sorcery, the love affair of Margaret and Suffolk, and the waxing and waning fortunes of the pathetic Henry. Already sharing with comedy its concern with a whole society, the history play in such instances borrows comic practices as well, the multiplying of actions and even in some cases the actions themselves – the duchess’s spirit-raising, Suffolk’s winning Margaret for himself instead of his master, the king going incognito among common folk, as Henry V later does on the eve of Agincourt – all were familiar from the comic drama, especially what Anne Barton has called the ‘comical history’, which deploys historical person- ages such as James IV and William the Conqueror in romance actions.12 The Henry IV plays are perhaps structurally closest to comedy, with plots based in different social and ideological worlds commenting on one another by contrast and ironic analogy rather than feeding into one line of action. If there is a struc- ture peculiar to the political play, not shared by tragedy or comedy, it may be that described by Geoffrey Bullough in the Henry VI plays, which also characterizes the political tragedy Julius Caesar: ‘a wavelike motion’ as figures become significant power-players, then are challenged and downed by others who in turn are overthrown.13 The sense of ongoing motion implicit in successive waves suggests how the histories also differ from the comedies and tragedies in their apprehension of time and their mode of closure. Tragic time is relentlessly linear, irreversible, all too short. Death is the end towards which Renaissance tragedies move, an end rendered all the more final for the individual when the Reformation swept away the doctrine of purgatory and the practice of intercession for the dead. The real impending defeat facing the hero in secular drama, however, is not damnation but what Michael Neill has called ‘the horror of indistinction’, which is paradoxically ‘the supreme occasion for exhibitions of individual distinction’, the stance that we recognize as heroic.14 Comic time is elastic, even reversible. The right person arrives on the scene just in time to ward off catastrophe: Valentine to rescue Sylvia in Two Gentlemen, the missing twins in both Comedy of Errors and Twelfth Night to save Egeon and Viola. Death itself is not final. In their conclu- sions comedies invoke a new phase of life rather than the absolute end, but the solution of the comic dilemma, accompanied by comeuppances for the obstructive figures and multiple pairings-off for the marriageable, gives a sense of closure
nevertheless. Projections beyond the immediate comic stasis are rare. The histories, however, habitually look before and after. *1 Henry VI*, for example, begins by mourning for the dead Henry V and celebrating his deeds, and ends with the projected marriage of Henry VI to Margaret not yet achieved and her adulterous affair with Suffolk already prepared for. Even the hero–king’s triumphs in *Henry V* are dimmed by the epilogue’s forward look to Henry’s early death and the contested rule of his successor that would lead to loss of territories in France and civil war in England. Whether the provisional closure is ominous like this one, or problematic, as at the end of *Richard II* when the new Henry IV vows to lead a crusade to the Holy Land to do penance for his part in the murder of his predecessor, or hopeful, as in *Henry VIII* when Cranmer prophesies over the infant Elizabeth the greatness of her future reign, the history play moves not towards completion but into ongoing time.

While the plays overall confirm the generic divisions laid out by the Folio table of contents, it is clear even from my brief review that there was considerable commerce between those subcultures of comedy, history, and tragedy. For one thing, the stories audiences liked, romances in particular, did not necessarily accord neatly with tragic or comic paradigms. For another, viewers liked variety in their theatrical entertainment. The mixture of kings and clowns, hornpipes and funerals, that Sidney deplored in his *Apology* went back to the medieval drama and would continue long after Sidney’s death. Several of the Folio designations are problematic. May we not consider *Richard II* and *Richard III* as tragedies, labelled as such in their quarto publications and the latter even in its Folio heading, praised as such by Meres, and certainly akin to the other tragedies in their single-figure, rise-and-fall structure? Do the Roman plays, especially *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, not have as much in common with the histories’ preoccupation with struggles for power and issues of state as with the tragedies’ more personal emphasis? Source material seems to have determined placement in both these instances, English as opposed to Roman history. Does source material also account for a more notable anomaly, *Cymbeline* listed among the tragedies? Comedic in structure and concluding in happy reconciliation rather than death, *Cymbeline* is nevertheless based on the same body of legendary British history that lies behind Fletcher’s *Tragedy of Bonduca* and Shakespeare’s own *King Lear*. *Troilus and Cressida*, which Heminges and Condell placed with the tragedies but earlier was promoted as a comedy in the printer’s advertisement to the 1609 quarto, presents another generic puzzle, compounded for readers of the Folio because the copy was apparently cleared for publication so late in the printing process that the play is placed ambiguously between the histories and tragedies, with a separate set of signatures unconnected to either sequence, and is omitted entirely from the table of contents. Should we see it as a tragedy (so designated in its Folio heading and running titles) because, like *Cymbeline*, it is based on legendary history? And indeed, unlike *Cymbeline*, has a heroic war as its framework and ends with the death of a major warrior? Or should we accept the 1609 label of comedy because the play systematically deflates those towering figures and debunks their idealized causes? The question is still with us three centuries later: in the first two generations after World War II, editions of Shakespeare’s complete works that organize the plays generically usually place *Troilus* with the tragedies, but recently it appears more often among the comedies.
Both *Troilus* and *Cymbeline* are best seen as generic experiments, in the context of changes in theatrical fashion as the seventeenth century began. The history play in its later manifestations (*Edward IV, Jane Shore*) was veering into romance and folk comedy. In comedy, the new prominence of the boys’ companies fostered a taste for modes that made use of the child actors’ wit and quickness but made fewer demands on them in the way of emotional depth: the satiric comedy in which Jonson and Marston led the way and the city comedy exemplified by Middleton – its scene bourgeois, competitive, money-driven London, its staple action trickery. Shakespeare did not pursue the citizen comedy line – *The Merry Wives of Windsor* has an English setting and middle-class characters who perpetrate various deceptions but money is hardly central and the play is too genially romantic to foreshadow the harsher tone of Middleton and the ‘Ho’ plays. *Troilus*, however, in its pervasive spirit of detached parody, is somewhat akin to the ‘comical satires’ written for the boy actors.

More recent critics, whether viewing *Troilus* as ironic tragedy or as satiric comedy, have largely followed the lead of the late nineteenth-century critic F. S. Boas in grouping it with two other Shakespeare plays of the early 1600s, *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well That Ends Well*.16 These ‘problem plays’ (Boas’s label gestured at social-issue drama in the manner of Ibsen while reformulating the problems in ethical terms) share a grittiness not apparent in Shakespeare’s earlier comedy, addressing deep-rooted perversions in both individuals and societies resistant to the magico-metamorphic strategies that heretofore had produced satisfying comic conclusions. The harsh imperatives of class division and rampant sexual appetite invoked by these experimental plays push uneasily against the fairy-tale devices that move their plots forward and supposedly resolve them.

As for *Cymbeline*, though this crowded play incorporates some tragic features, it has deeper affinities with two other late plays, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*, and with another not included in the First Folio but usually ascribed at least in part to Shakespeare, *Pericles*. The plays in this mode were responding in some degree to recent developments on the theatre scene, the popularity of masques at court and the availability of a new indoor acting space at Blackfriars, more intimate than the Globe. Often designated as romances – another nineteenth-century category, this one devised by Edward Dowden17 – they may be thought of either as a subset of comedy in that they achieve a final harmony, or as a merger of tragedy and comedy in that this reconciliatory phase comes only after prolonged evil and suffering. If they are part of the same generic adventure that produced *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well that Ends Well*, Shakespeare now finds a way of holding in solution the diversity of tone and action whose clash made those earlier Jacobean comedies problematic, returning to the roman- tic narratives he had drawn on in some earlier comedies but with additional emphasis on the peculiar features of the romance mode. His plots in these late plays are episodic in structure and vastly extended in time and space. The larger view that results generates a perception of time different from that in earlier comedy as well as that in the histories and the tragedies: whether or not actually personified as in *The Winter’s Tale*, time is shown as shaped and patterned, its past disorder made meaningful by present retributions or fulfilments. This evolving larger vision creates a certain distance between audience and stage action which is increased by the conscious fictionality of that action, its improbabilities and miraculous turns of event, including manifestations of the divine, and by
the recurrent narrator figures like Gower in *Pericles* and Time in *The Winter’s Tale* who ‘tell’ the drama at key points.\(^{18}\) In terms of Marianne Moore’s celebrated definition of poetry,\(^ {19}\) Shakespeare in the romances accentuates the imaginary quality of his gardens in order to contain very real toads. It is in that realness, that grounding of extreme emotions and actions in a comprehensible internal psychology, that Shakespeare’s last plays diverge most markedly from the contemporary tragicomedies of Beaumont and Fletcher which they resemble in surface characteristics.

Generic traditions in Shakespeare’s time, often blending and always evolving, nevertheless served as guides: to playwrights in developing their material, to audiences and readers in understanding the plays they produced. In addition to the internal genre indicators discussed in this chapter, spectators at the theatres were directed in their reactions by the look of the stage itself, hung with black for a tragedy and perhaps with some other colour for non-tragic drama.\(^ {20}\) In Shakespeare’s hands, genre conventions provided shape rather than limitation, in musical terms a kind of ground on which – and sometimes against which – he played the individual descant of each play.

**Notes**


18. On distancing, fictionality, and narrativity in the last plays, see Barbara A. Mowat, The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare’s Romances (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), chs. 2 and 3.


20. For black hangings marking tragedy, see the opening line of 1 Henry VI and A Warning for Fair Women, Induction, a3. The New Cambridge Shakespeare editor Michael Hattaway speculates that another colour may have indicated comedy: The First Part of King Henry the Sixth (Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 24.

Reading list


Danson, Lawrence, Shakespeare’s Dramatic Genres (Oxford University Press, 2000). Doran, Madeleine, Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama (Madison: