

“A rarity most beloved”: Shakespeare and the Idea of Tragedy

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All words are pockets into which now this, now that is put, and sometimes many things at once.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and his Shadow*

It is upon the pillars of the great tragedies – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*¹ – that Shakespeare’s reputation most securely rests, and indeed it is the tragic plays in general that seem most robustly to confirm Shakespeare’s greatness. The tragedies arguably test the emotional resources of their readers and audiences more strenuously than the comedies or histories, confirming a generic bias that Shakespeare’s own age often expressed. In the Induction to *A Warning for Fair Women* (1599), Tragedy, with whip in one hand and a knife in the other, appears on stage to insist upon her supremacy in the repertory: Comedy is but “slight & childish,” designed merely “To tickle shallow iniudiciall eares,” but Tragedy is made of sterner stuff. Its claim to “raigne as Queene / In great Apollos name and all the Muses” (Ind., 75–6) rests upon its ability to present

passions that must moue the soule,
Make the heart heaue and throb within the bosome,
Extorting teares out of the strictest eyes,
To racke a thought and straine it to his forme,
Untill I rap the sences from their course.
This is my office. (Induction, 44–8)

And although Comedy aggressively contests Tragedy’s claim to generic preeminence, asserting the stultifying predictability of its plots (“some damnd tyrant to obtaine a crowne, / Stabs, hangs, impoysons, smoothers, cutteth throats”; 49–50), many would assent to Tragedy’s aesthetic superiority, like Kyd’s Heironomo, finding Comedy easy and self-indulgent, only “fit for common wits” (*The Spanish Tragedy*, 4.1.157).

Nonetheless, for all her critical praise, even Tragedy must admit that too often she “is scorned of the multitude,” while Comedy and History hold the stage and are “Painted in playbills upon every post” (*A Warning*, Ind., 73). What we know about the repertory of Elizabethan theatre companies, mainly derived from Henslowe’s account books (and a caveat must be that there is no reason to assume that every acting company followed the patterns of Henslowe’s; his diary, however, is the only such document we have), confirms Tragedy’s plaint. In the theatrical season of 1592–3, Lord Strange’s men performed twenty-seven plays, only three of which – *The Spanish Tragedy*, *The Massacre at Paris*, and *The Jew of Malta* – were obviously tragedies; the following year, Lord Sussex’s company performed twelve plays, only two of which were tragedies – *Titus Andronicus* and *The Jew of Malta*. What records we have confirm that comedies and histories made up the largest part of the acting companies’ offerings; tragedies were significantly less often played, although nonetheless they were, as Roslyn L. Knutson has shown, “rare and valuable commodities.”²

In Shakespeare’s company, however, tragedies may well have been somewhat less rare, although no less valuable, than in the repertory of the Admiral’s men, if only by virtue of Shakespeare’s own playwrighting. As early as 1598 Francis Meres recognized Shakespeare as being “the most excellent” of all contemporary playwrights in both comedy and tragedy; and, although his list of six plays offered as evidence of Shakespeare’s excellence in tragedy includes four (*King John*, *Richard II*, *Richard III*, and *1 Henry IV*) that would later be viewed as histories,³ the classification suggests only how much more amorphous (and thus expansive) the early modern definition of tragedy was than our own.

By 1623 the Folio would neatly organize the thirty-five plays listed in the catalog (thirty-six plays are in the volume, but problems over the rights to *Troilus and Cressida* prevented it from making the table of contents) into the three familiar dramatic genres: “COMEDIES, HISTORIES and TRAGEDIES.” The fourteen comedies are clearly linked by a conventional understanding of that genre: plays, mainly about love, which begin in emotional and social confusion and end in harmony. The ten histories are defined by their common dependence upon narrative accounts of English history and are arranged according to the chronology of their subject matter. With the eleven plays that make up the section of “TRAGEDIES,” however, it is less easy to characterize the principle of organization.

Indeed, beyond the commonplace generic principle that tragedies should end in suffering and defeat (and *Cymbeline*’s notorious presence among the Folio’s tragedies confounds even this seemingly inescapable principle), too little else obviously joins these plays together or separates them from a number of the histories, as Meres had already seen in 1598. Comedy and tragedy could be easily differentiated, usually on the simple contrasting principle, as Byron would later phrase it, that “all tragedies are finish’d by a death; / All comedies are ended by a marriage” (*Don Juan*, 3.9). Tragedy and history, however, were harder to distinguish, at least until the organization of the Folio itself began to fix the definition of the history play as a drama uniquely dependent upon the history of post-conquest England. The title pages of the

early quartos of both *Richard II* and *Richard III* confidently label those plays tragedies: *The Tragedie of King Richard the second* and *The Tragedy of King Richard the third* (and each is called a “tragedie” in its entrance in the Stationers’ Register, the first on August 29, 1597, the second on October 20 of that year). In 1615 the fifth edition of *Richard II* was published, still identifying the play as *The Tragedie of King Richard the Second*; and even as late as 1634, *Richard III* could once again be reissued as *The Tragedie of King Richard the Third*. Even the Folio seemed somewhat uncertain about this play, for, while the catalog lists it among the histories and titles it *The Life and Death of Richard the Third*, the head title (though not the running title) calls it *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* (sig. q5r).

But even if the publication of the 1623 Folio could be said more or less firmly to establish the history play as a separate genre,⁴ the tragedies themselves as defined by the categorization of the Folio make up a not much less diverse set than Meres’s earlier mixed grouping. Though the death of the titular character might seem to unify the Folio’s tragic plays, they display remarkable differences in how that death is experienced: in *Julius Caesar* that death comes in the middle of the play, and indeed Caesar arguably is not the play’s hero at all; in *Macbeth* the title character of course dies, but his death does not easily produce the same sense of loss we normally associate with tragedy, as his death seems neither unjust nor undesirable; in *Antony and Cleopatra* the deaths of the title characters are, at least in their own imaginations, fully compensated by the victory they celebrate in their worldly defeat; and although *Timon of Athens* traces the disintegration of its hero, it stops before the character’s death. Even more disruptive is the appearance of *Cymbeline* at the end of the Folio’s section of tragedies. Here too the title character does not die, but the action is that of wondrous renewal rather than decline. The play’s location among the tragedies is justified perhaps only by the fact that in not driving toward a marriage it is in that sense no comedy and in not being about the post-conquest English political past, it is not a history play. *Cymbeline*’s presence in the section, then, suggests that Tragedy is the catch-all category. Even if the play’s appearance among the tragedies is an editorial mistake (and certainly the play’s marvelous conclusion defies any conventional understanding of tragedy), its location in the Folio merely confirms how insecure the very category of tragedy is.

It is no doubt unwise to put too much pressure upon the Folio’s generic distinctions. The organization is almost certainly not Shakespeare’s own. Most likely it represents the organizing impulses of the volume’s two editors, his friends and fellow actors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, and it is probably pointless to work backwards from the Folio categorizations in search of Shakespeare’s own generic understandings. Indeed, Shakespeare seems to have been genially suspicious of genre theory; Polonius’s ludicrous inventory of dramatic kinds (*Hamlet*, 2.2.397–401) alone must warn us of the hazards and limited benefits of literary taxonomy. Certainly no concept of genre can be exclusive or precise, since the resemblances that we recognize in texts are not necessarily the only ones that exist, nor are our classifications the only ones that are possible. Still, if it matters little what we call these plays (“What’s the use

of them having names,” sensibly asks the Gnat in *Through the Looking Glass*, “if they won’t answer to them?”), some idea of genre underpins both the creation and the understanding of all literature; every act of reading and writing “originates” in a provisional idea of the text’s genre.⁵

Tragedy, of course, had a rich critical history by the time Shakespeare wrote.⁶ Aristotle’s definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* (6.49b24–8) as the imitation of the fall of a noble man through some flaw or error (*hamartia*) which arouses and purges (through *catharsis*) pity and fear is well known now, if still imperfectly understood. Unquestionably, following Lorenzo Valla’s translation of the *Poetics* into Latin in 1498, Aristotle’s literary influence was increasingly felt in Renaissance Europe.⁷ But Aristotle is largely a red herring in regard to Shakespeare. Aristotle’s definition of the “best” kind of tragedy was not intended to be normative, and, in any case, there is no evidence that Shakespeare ever read the *Poetics* (or anything else by Aristotle). Indeed, Shakespeare’s only two references to Aristotle (Hector’s anachronism in *Troilus and Cressida* at 2.2.166, and Tranio’s allusion in *The Taming of the Shrew* at 1.1.32) both seem to suggest that for the English dramatist Aristotle was no more than a usefully recognizable name for an ancient moral philosopher.

Shakespeare seems to have been unaware of (or willing to ignore) Aristotle’s theorization or even of any of the many Renaissance commentaries on the *Poetics*. For Shakespeare, as for most of his contemporary dramatists, tragedy as a literary term simply named a particular plot structure, though his own use of the word suggests an even more imprecise sense of its meaning (not unlike what many teachers bewail today when “tragedy” is allowed to define some disastrous event – which might include anything from a natural catastrophe to the defeat of a favorite football team – rather than a literary genre). At the end of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* he invokes a relatively confident generic sense of comedy, as Berowne admits: “our wooing doth not end like an old play: / Jack hath not Jill. These ladies’ courtesy / Might well have made our sport a comedy” (5.2.870–2). “Tragedy,” however, is rarely used with even this level of generic specificity. *Henry V*’s reference to “Edward the Black Prince, / Who on the French ground played a tragedy” (1.2.105–6) means only that the English Edward wreaked devastation upon the French (at Crécy). In *Titus Andronicus* Tamora refers to the “complot of this timeless tragedy” (2.2.265) but, although the language is explicitly literary, the Queen of the Goths means no more by it than the “conspiracy that brought about the untimely calamity” of Bassanius’ death. Even the play’s later reference to “the tragic tale of Philomel” (4.1.47) carries little of the generic specificity of Berowne’s use of “comedy.” If this does explicitly recognize tragedy as a literary mode, it does little more than mark it as some lamentable action. In general, Shakespeare’s use of “tragedy” or any of its cognates works similarly. At the end of *Othello* “the tragic loading of this bed” (5.2.365) could conceivably invoke generic norms or possibilities, but it means little more – though poignantly nothing less – than “devastating” or “appalling.”

If any theoretical pressures existed to shape Shakespeare’s understanding of tragedy they came more from medieval articulations of the genre than classical ones. Chaucer

was seemingly the first to use the English word “tragedy,” in a gloss in his translation (ca. 1380) of Boethius’s *De Consolatione Philosophiae*: “Tragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme that endeth in wrecchidnesse.”⁸ The felt need for a gloss suggests that tragedy was then an unfamiliar concept in English, but quickly the idea of tragedy as the fall from prosperity to wretchedness became commonplace. Chaucer’s definition is perhaps so limited as to seem obvious and unhelpful, especially in our hypertheoretical age, but in its very simplicity it calls attention to tragedy’s power, marking it as universal and inexplicable. It defines the inescapable trajectory of the tragic action but not its cause, and in its reticence about who or what is responsible for the dire change of fortune it speaks tragedy’s fearful incomprehensibility.

Although a number of literary models intervene between Chaucer’s definition and Shakespeare’s plays – e.g., Chaucer’s own *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *de casibus* tragedies of *A Mirror for Magistrates*, and the early tragic plays of Kyd and Marlowe – Chaucer’s definitional reserve finds its most powerful analogue in the agonizing silences of Shakespeare’s tragedies. “Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?” (5.8.307–8), King Lear cries, holding his broken child. No answer is forthcoming, though it lies in the incalculable murderousness of the world. And directly questioning that world produces no more satisfying responses. “Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?” (3.6.74–5).

These are the unanswered (perhaps unanswerable) questions of the tragic world. Are there reasons for the intolerable suffering? Is the tragic motor human error or capricious fate? Is the catastrophe a just, if appalling, retribution, or an arbitrary destiny reflecting the indifference, or, worse, the malignity of the heavens? A textual variant in *Hamlet* may uncannily focus the choice. At the end of both Q2 and Folio *Hamlet*, Horatio offers to tell “How these things came about” (5.2.385). “So shall you hear,” he tells Fortinbras, “of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts, / Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters, / Of deaths put on by cunning . . .” In Q2 (1604–5) he then adds: “and for no cause” (sig. O2r). In the Folio (1623) Horatio says differently; there it is “and forc’d cause” (TLN 3878). For “no cause” or for “forc’d cause.” Are the dreadful events horrible accidents or fearful necessities?

For Shakespeare, anyhow, the uncertainty is the point. Characters may commit themselves to a confident sense of the tragic world they inhabit; but the plays inevitably render that preliminary understanding inadequate, and the characters struggle unsuccessfully to reconstruct a coherent worldview from the ruins of the old. And it is the emotional truth of the struggle rather than the metaphysical truth of the worldview that is at the center of these plays. Shakespeare’s tragedies provoke the questions about the cause of the pain and loss the plays so agonizingly portray, and in the refusal of any answers starkly prevent any confident attribution of meaning or value to human suffering.

Perhaps here we can begin to discover the logic of Shakespeare’s tragic practice. Kenneth Muir’s oft-quoted comment that “There is no such thing as Shakespearian tragedy: there are only Shakespearian tragedies”⁹ merely begs the question of how “Shakespearian” modifies “tragedy,” either as an individual exemplar or a group. If

Muir is only saying that Shakespeare does not seem to have written tragedy driven by a fully developed theoretical conception of the genre we can easily assent, but a coherent and powerfully compelling sense of tragedy can be seen to develop through the plays.

Tragedy, for Shakespeare, is the genre of uncompensated suffering, and as he writes in that mode the successive plays reveal an ever more profound formal acknowledgment of their desolating controlling logic. "What are tragedies," asks Thomas Kyd, "but acts of death?" (*Soliman and Perseda*, 1.1.7), but death alone is not enough to define the genre for Shakespeare. A play like *Everyman*, for example, is unmistakably an act of death, but its fundamental logic of radical consolation undoes the tragic force of Everyman's dying. The title of the Flemish version of the morality, *Den Spiegel der Salicheit van Elckerlijc* (The Mirror of Everyman's Salvation), attests to its essentially comic form. Located with the benevolent economy of Christian salvation, Death, however unwelcome, does not appall, for ultimately it results in Everyman's *Salicheit*, his salvation or bliss. In the context of the Christian promise to swallow up death "into victory," death indeed loses its "sting" (1 Corinthians 15: 51–5). As Everyman suffers the death "that we all endure" (l. 888), Knowledge announces, "Now hath he made an ending" (l. 890). The Angel recognizes, however, that such a death is actually a beginning: "Now shalt thou into the heavenly sphere / Unto the which all ye shall come / That liveth well before the day of doom" (ll. 899–900). There can be no tragedy in Everyman's death if he dies into a more authentic order of being and we, with Knowledge, can "hear angels sing / And make great joy and melody / Where Everyman's soul received shall be" (ll. 891–3).

In Knowledge's lines we may possibly hear anticipatory strains of Horatio's gracious response to Prince Hamlet's death: "let flights of Angels sing him to his rest" (5.2.349); but in the contextual differences between the two we may gauge the distance between the tragic universe and Christian comedy of the morality play. In *Everyman* the song of the Angels confirms the play's movement from *tristia* to *gaudium*. In *Hamlet* the lines confirm nothing except perhaps the failure of Hamlet's promise. Not only does Horatio's humanity itself serve to differentiate his authority from that of Knowledge, but also his statement lacks the confirmation from the play that Knowledge's receives in *Everyman*. At the end of the morality the Angel assures us that Everyman has indeed entered "into the heavenly sphere." God's redemptive love has wrought comedy from tragedy. In the tragedy, however, Horatio hopes for the song of angels, but what we hear is not the angelic choir he feels should welcome Hamlet into eternity but the martial music of Fortinbras's advancing troops. "Why does the drum come hither?" asks the puzzled Horatio, and the answer lies in the logic Shakespeare has discovered, The tragedies chronicle "the way to dusty death" (*Macbeth*, 5.5.23), but they take us no further. Unlike Everyman's, the ending made by the tragic agonists is final and rending. In their consuming rhythms, the tragedies uncompromisingly insist that death still has its sting.

Shakespeare's tragedies witness to the horror and mystery of human suffering. Pain and loss remain the central tragic facts, necessarily restricting a Christian perspective

which would insist “that the afflictions of this present time are not worth the glory that shall be unto us” (Romans 8: 18). The promise of an afterlife of glory would indeed lead us to say with the distracted King Lear, “If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (5.3.266–8), but Shakespeare’s tragedies pointedly withhold such redeeming knowledge. Within the boundaries of tragedy, Lear’s conditional can never be made declarative. *King Lear* ends, and still “All’s cheerless, dark and deadly” (5.3.291).¹⁰

Still, few today would expect tragedy (or indeed any other literary form) to offer the full compensation of Christian redemption. “Christian salvation opposes tragic knowledge,” in Karl Jaspers’s famous phrase,¹¹ but it did not need a twentieth-century existentialist to make the point. In *Twelfth Night* Feste proves Olivia a fool for her excessive grief over her brother’s death: “The more fool, madonna, to mourn for your brother’s soul, being in heaven” (1.5.67–8). An eternity of bliss is indeed a more than adequate compensation for any suffering in this vale of tears. But Shakespeare’s tragedies refuse even lesser consolations, and indeed in that refusal lies their power and the deepest logic of their form. Tragedy for Shakespeare is the literary genre in which suffering is not only irreparable but is also neither compensated nor even effectively consoled. Understandably, many critics would have it otherwise. If they grant that the effects of tragedy are generally irreversible, they would find meaning, even value, in the experience of human suffering based on what it teaches; though plays seem to me far less confident that anything is finally learned beyond how intensely we feel the need to make suffering seem intelligible.

In this, *King Lear*’s Edgar anticipates the responses of many of the play’s readers (spectators, interestingly enough, seem less likely to indulge in the rationalization of the play’s spectacle of suffering). He has, as Michael Goldman has said, a “gift for confidently formulating some principle about the uses, limits, or significance of suffering only to have it shattered by succeeding events,”¹² and the remarkable resiliency to keep applying it. On the heath he discovers in Lear’s suffering affective terms that seemingly enable him to bear his own:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,
 We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
 Who alone suffers suffers most i’ th’ mind,
 Leaving free things and happy shows behind;
 But then the mind much sufferance doth o’erskip
 When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship. (3.6.100–5)

Yet this perception, which momentarily makes his pain “light and portable” (106), is immediately tested and found wanting. Edgar comes face to face with his blind and embittered father, and though his grief now “hath mates,” this new “fellowship” rudely increases his “sufferance.” Edgar is led to confront the world’s seemingly limitless capacity to inflict pain: “I am worse than e’er I was, / And worse I may be yet. The worst is not / So long as we can say ‘this is the worst’” (4.1.26–8).

Relentlessly the play demonstrates that no intellectual formulation can be equal to the tragic necessity of human suffering, yet Edgar's confidence that suffering has moral significance cannot be shaken. Again and again he seeks some new way to make tragic experience intelligible and hence bearable, successively reformulating a perspective each time the action denies him the apparent consolation just discovered. Through his rationalizations not only is he "made tame to fortune's blows" (4.6.217) but also he would lead Gloucester to submit patiently to the will of the gods. He accompanies his despairing father to a place that Gloucester takes for the cliffs at Dover, and when Gloucester finds himself alive after his supposed fall, Edgar persuades him his "life's a miracle" (4.6.55). The "great opposeless wills" of the gods (38) can be happily submitted to as the heavens are shown just and the gods "ever gentle" (213).

But, of course, it is Edgar, rather than the merciful heavens, who has saved Gloucester. "Think that the clearest gods who make them honours / Of men's impossibilities have preserved thee" (73–4), Edgar says; and the emphasis must fall on "Think." Thinking does not make it so, however comforting or even necessary the thought might be. Nothing in the play confirms Edgar's vision of the clearest gods actively participating in human history and earning for themselves "honours / Of men's impossibilities". (This is not, of course, to say that Gloucester should have been left to his despair, but rather to insist that it is imperfect human love that ameliorates it rather than the gracious action of a perfect and perfecting providence.)¹³ Edgar's language reflects Christ's reply to those who asked despairingly, "And who then can be saved?": "And he said, the things that are impossible with men, are possible with God" (Luke 18: 26–7). But in the tragic world of *King Lear* "the things that are impossible with men" are no more possible for any other agency. We discover not the clearest gods who would save man but the "eyeless rage" (3.1.8) of an anarchic nature that would annihilate him.

Still Edgar will not easily abandon his conviction that the play's spectacle of suffering is proof of the retributive action of providence. "The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us" (5.3.171–2). To Edmund he would rationalize even his father's hideous ordeal: "The dark and vicious place where thee he got / Cost him his eyes" (173–4). Edgar insists, like so many critics of tragedy, that suffering has moral meaning, and though Edmund confirms his brother's vision ("thou hast spoken right; 'tis true"), the example Edgar chooses in fact invalidates it. Edgar argues that Gloucester's adultery merits the "extrusion," to use Dr. Johnson's revealingly self-protective Latinate word, of his eyes; and indeed an English audience might have remembered that the homily "Agaynst Whoredome and Adulterie" claimed that "among the Locrensians the adulterers had both their eyes thrust out."¹⁴ Yet Edgar's confident moral economics are undercut by the horrible scene of Gloucester's blinding. We are made to watch as Gloucester's eyes are viciously put out, and the monstrous cruelty of Regan and Cornwall cannot easily convince us that "the gods are just." In truth, Gloucester is not blinded for his lust, but most literally for his gratuitous act of kindness towards Lear that leads Cornwall to label him a

“traitor.” It is not the dark and vicious place where Edward was conceived that costs Gloucester his eyes but the dark and vicious place that is the play world.

Only in the last lines of the play (at least in the Folio text) does Edgar abandon his sententious moralizing. The grim parade of death inhibits him now from offering yet another formulation of how suffering might be borne or understood.

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
 The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
 Shall never see so much, nor live so long (5.3.322–5)

Time is now “sad,” and even the resilient Edgar must bow beneath its crushing “weight,” no longer able to express any confidence greater than that the future will never experience comparable suffering. But even this limited confidence (however much it too is unearned) is expressed in unduly reassuring couplets, imposing a formal order on an action in which truly to speak what we feel would likely be to say nothing more than Lear’s reiterated howls (255).

In its most fully developed form, tragedy, as Shakespeare comes to understand it, offers nothing to reassure us about the world of mortal accidents. As Lear desperately imagines that the dead Cordelia still breathes, he admits that “If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (263–5). But the feather does not stir and Cordelia does not live. Sorrows here are not redeemed, nor are they redemptive. No reconciliation is possible or even desirable with such a universe, and Lear’s death comes as a welcome relief from the world’s harrowing cruelty. Perhaps predictably, Edgar urges Lear, in words that significantly echo his phrase that initiates Gloucester’s reconciliation with the universe, “Look up, my Lord” (311; cf. 4.6.59); yet this time, rather than occasioning a reaffirmation of faith by the suffering monarch, the line elicits Kent’s rebuke: “Vex not his ghost; O, let him pass. He hates him / That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer” (312–14). In a merciless world the only mercy is to be allowed to leave it. The best we can say is that the destructive action comes to an end.

Critics, however, have regularly said more. The destructive action, we are told, instructs, even refines. In the spectacle of suffering reside the most profound truths of the human condition. Indeed, it is tragedy’s presumed ethical intelligibility and utility that have inevitably served as the basis of its cultural prestige. We learn from its dreadful spectacle. Thus Sidney (who did know the *Poetics*)¹⁵ tells us in *The Defence of Poesy* that tragedy “maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded.”¹⁶ But the value (and the perplexing pleasure) of tragedy surely does not lie in its didactic impact, and in any case the humbling lessons of “the uncertainty of this world” are inevitably taught more memorably out of the theatre than in it. Indeed, one might say that for Shakespeare this kind of moralizing is more likely to

be the bitter cause of tragedy than its reassuring effect. Tragedy would be far less harrowing if it were certain that humane truths can be learned by experiencing it.

Not unreasonably, one still might point precisely to *King Lear* for evidence that suffering does instruct and ennoble. Indeed, Lear comes to see in Poor Tom's ostentatious poverty a poignant sign of "how this world goes" (4.6.143–4), and if Tom's suffering is but mimed, it is nonetheless part of the process that leads Lear not only to recognize the moral challenge of the world's unmistakable disparities of wealth and power but also and more importantly to see them as signs not of an immutable social order but of an intolerable social injustice. The means of amelioration rest not with Heaven but with sympathetic human action. Those with a surplus of wealth must shake "the superflux" to provide for those in need, and that alone will "show the heavens more just" (3.4.35–6). "Distribution," as Gloucester says, "should undo excess / And each man have enough" (4.1.73–4).

Yet the sympathy Lear discovers to animate his leveling depends upon an experience the play insists is unique ("we that are young / Shall never see so much"). As Jonathan Dollimore writes, "in a world where pity is the prerequisite for compassionate action, where a king has to share the suffering of his subjects in order to 'care,' the majority will remain poor, naked and wretched."¹⁷ But perhaps even more disturbing is that Lear's painfully learned compassion is so easily left behind as the tragic action appallingly intensifies. In a lacerating fifth act where so much that has happened before can either be dismissed, like the announcement of Edmund's death that is "but a trifle here" (5.3.294), or be temporarily lost to memory, like Albany's astonishing "Great thing of us forgot" (235) at the belated mention of King Lear, Lear's utopian social vision is itself abandoned without a second thought in the final agon. If the tragic experience indeed improved its sufferers, one might say of tragedy itself, as the gentleman does of Cordelia, that "Sorrow would be a rarity most beloved / If all could so become it" (4.3.23–4). But tragic suffering neither instructs nor improves; at best it numbs.

Lear dies with no final recognition. In the 1608 Quarto text Lear distractedly says "pray you vndo / This button, thank you sir, O, o, o," and then successfully wills his own death: "Breake hart, I prethe, breake" (sig. L4r). In the 1623 Folio text, before he dies he seemingly has some insight that he wishes to share: "Do you see this? Looke on her! looke her lips, / Looke there, looke there" (5.3.309–10; TLN 3282–3). But whatever he thinks he sees he is unable clearly to communicate, and if, as Bradley thought,¹⁸ he dies in joy convinced Cordelia is alive, the terrible fact of her death, terrible both for the survivors and for the audience or readers of the play, must mock the idea that tragic suffering leads to knowledge (Aristotle's *anagnorisis*). The Folio ending is arguably darker than the Quarto version. The Quarto's exhausted Lear is replaced in the Folio by a hallucinatory one. In "the false anagnorisis at the end," as A. D. Nuttall sees, "Shakespeare makes his rejection of the final, classical insight completely inescapable."¹⁹

If Aristotle's theory of tragedy, especially in Sidney's neo-Aristotelian version, is based on its culturally stabilizing, even reforming, capacity, Shakespeare's a- (if not,

as Nuttall would have it, anti-) Aristotelian tragic practice is far less comforting. It tells us that loss may teach nothing but the unspeakable murderousness of the world. If the endings of these plays display some form of the conventional tragic pattern in which the destruction of the hero is followed by some social or spiritual reintegration of the society, they are in these plays less a sign of what has been, however painfully, learned, than a mere acknowledgment that the catastrophic conclusion is not the “promised end” but merely the “image of that horror” (*King Lear*, 5.3.261–2). As metaphoric rather than actual apocalypse the ending cannot help but acknowledge human duration. Raymond Williams, in his attack upon the unconsidered individualism of post-Enlightenment Europe, insists that tragedy is not merely the story of “what happens to the hero” but is as much “what happens through the hero.” But Shakespeare, anyway, is less interested in what survives the tragic agon than this suggests. Surely Williams is right that “Life does come back, life ends the play, again and again,” but Shakespeare’s tragedies offer little optimism about what “meanings are reaffirmed and restored.”²⁰ What future is acknowledged by the plays offers little in the way of affirmation, only time (admittedly itself some consolation) “to have more talk of these sad things” (*Romeo and Juliet*, 5.3.307; cf. *Othello*, 5.2.370–1, where Lodovico announces his intention to head “straight abroad,” that he may “to the state / This heavy act with heavy heart relate”).

The conclusions of the tragedies quickly tie up the tragic matter and cast our attention back on the destructive events. Even in *Romeo and Juliet*, although the “ancient grudge” (Prologue, 3) has ended, our focus is not on the time of peace that is now at hand but on the disheartening action just concluded. Of course it is true that the doomed lovers “with their death bury their parents’ strife” (8), but the play denies this accord restorative force. In addition to his son, Montague’s “wife is dead tonight” (5.3.210), and the elder Capulet has lost his only child. At the end of act 1, Juliet’s father had lamented that “Earth hath swallowed all my hopes but she” (1.2.14), but by the end of the play earth will cruelly swallow even this “hopeful lady” (15). The feud ends, then, not because the killing logic of hatred has been learned and eschewed, but because no one is left alive to continue it. Even the families’ joint gesture of peace is at best valedictory rather than restorative; dumb, golden statues stand mockingly in place of the “quick, bright things [that have] come to confusion” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 1.1.149). “Some shall be pardon’d, and some punished” (5.3.308), we are assured by the Duke, but no convincing principles of justice and responsibility have been discovered that might permit the reparatory actions of the state to seem particularly reassuring. And the final couplet rounds off the action and again fixes our attention back upon the tragic lovers: “For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo” (309–10).

Some, however, have even found considerable consolation in this contraction and enclosure. Murray Krieger, for example, has argued that the tragedies’ centripetal energy “brings us the assurances of form, presents its form, presents its formal order as a token, a security – something given in hand – to guarantee the cosmic order beyond the turbulence it has conquered.”²¹ But perhaps, as the broken rhythms of

Krieger's sentence might themselves suggest, there is something desperate in this assertion; it is almost literally whistling in the dark. Tragedy – at least tragedy as Shakespeare writes it – offers no convincing guarantees of an ultimately sustaining and reassuring order, either cosmic or civic. And in this his tragedies reveal how poorly they satisfy the theoretical conception of Aristotle, for whom even the most appalling examples of human self-destructiveness reveal an intelligibility that is ultimately ethical and “reclaimable for the polis.”²²

Shakespeare accepts, then tests and finally extends (perhaps even, explodes) the conventional understanding of tragedy, discovering its deepest logic precisely in the refusal of its offered consolations and exploring the necessary formal response to that understanding. The earliest tragedies – *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet* – are, in a radical sense, Shakespeare's masterpieces; the young playwright displays his mastery over inherited forms, declaring his ability to rework recognizable classical models, one Senecan, one Ovidian, into compelling contemporary plays. *Titus* is explicitly a classical play, an early example of Shakespeare's several explorations of Rome and *Romanitas*, but here in its most grotesque aspect. These Romans speak the familiar language of classical virtue and stoic self-control, but their actions display uncontrollable passions and an often hideous injustice; they are too much like the Goths they see as their enemies and opposites for “great Rome” (5.1.2) to be more than a tattered ideal. No play has more appalling images of human cruelty. Dr. Johnson lamented “the barbarity of the spectacles,”²³ but clearly they are exactly what Shakespeare insists we see. “Enter . . . *Lavinia, her hands cut off and her tongue cut out, and ravished* (2.3.0s.d.); *Enter a messenger with two heads and a hand*” (3.1.234s.d.); severed limbs, hands and heads, and “pasties” (5.2.189) made of human flesh, create the visual texture of the play's nightmare world. Bodies are “lopped and hewed” (2.4.17), just as the state itself is “By uproars severed” (5.3.67). But the real nightmare is that moral difference dissolves in the play's hideous rhythms of revenge. With the exception of the pitiable Lavinia, victims become tormentors in turn. Aaron may be a “ravenous tiger” (5.3.5), no less than is Tamora (195), but Rome itself, however much it imagines itself a bulwark against rapacious nature, reveals its moral kinship with what it loathes and fears. Rome is not the source and defender of civilized value but is itself “a wilderness of tigers” (3.1.54).

The play's gruesome spectacle provokes another of tragedy's anguished questions about a natural order that would permit such barbarism: “O why should nature build so foul a den, / Unless the gods delight in tragedy” (4.1.58–9), laments Marcus. And the limited restoration at the end offers no answer. The conventional culminating gestures of renewal are conspicuously muted here. In a hasty valedictory the new emperor, Lucius, assigns the Roman dead to their respective family monuments, and only finds a compelling voice in the final four lines as he denies Tamora funeral rites: “No mournful bell shall ring her burial, / But throw her forth to beasts and birds to prey: / Her life was beastly and devoid of pity, / And being dead, let birds on her take pity” (5.3.198–9). In the final two lines the awkward repetition of “pity,” where one might expect a rhyme, accentuates pity's absence from the play and denies the ending even

the limited formal satisfaction of a concluding couplet. As with the Romans and the Goths themselves, identity where one expects difference, disturbs.

Titus, in many ways, anticipates the fully realized pattern of the tragedies. Its grim spectacle of suffering is inadequately balanced by the small gathering of survivors at the end who, however determinedly, at most can punish but not prevent the atrocities of the play world. If this modestly recuperative ending is meant to be “a reflection of a more just moral and political order,”²⁴ it is a distressingly pale one, arguably only a little less unnerving in its smug ineffectuality than the hideous actions which have preceded it.

Play after play repeats this pattern. *Romeo and Juliet*, as we have seen, offers a more fully articulate effort to salvage something from the ruins of wasted lives, but its vision of renewed social harmony is finally no more satisfying than *Titus*'s concluding vision of remorseless hate. Neither play allows us to find in its images of continuity anything that will compensate us for what has been lost. *Macbeth*, however, is perhaps the most obvious exception to my generalization about the nature of Shakespeare's tragic structures. The end of the play indeed seems to establish a compelling restoration not merely of lineal right but of moral right as well. The destructive course of Macbeth's life is revealed, in De Quincey's phrase, as an “awful parenthesis” in the orderly progress of time. Malcolm's coronation restores the line of Duncan, ending the period of Macbeth's unnatural rule, and once again “the time is free” (5.8.55). Apparently this is a world in which “things” can indeed “climb upward / To what they were before” (4.2.24–5).

But such an upward climb would reverse the tragic trajectory, and *Macbeth* will itself refuse the desire to turn its action into a moral and political romance. This is, however, a desire given voice by the moral characters of the play. For them, the action is a reassuring demonstration of the resiliency of the natural order. They return to Scotland “to dew the sovereign flower and drown the weeds” (5.2.30), to purge aberrant evil and reestablish natural right. “March we on,” says Caithness, “To give obedience where it is truly owed: / Meet we the med'cine of the sickly weal; / And with him pour we, in our country's purge, / Each drop of us” (25–9). For them, the action of the play is curative, but if that is indeed what the arc of the play defines, *Macbeth* hardly seems a tragedy at all. If we accept the understanding of the invading Scottish lords, the action is, in its transparent justness and seeming inevitability, a homiletic warning in an ultimately comic form.

But *Macbeth* is a tragedy; it is not the triumph of the moral world that compels us but the fall of the immoral Macbeth. The moral world sees nothing remarkable in his fearful actions, imaginatively reducing Macbeth in size so it can apply its conventional, though necessary, judgments. Angus insists at their approach to Macbeth's castle, “now does he feel his title / Hang loose upon him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief” (20–2). The proffered comic structure of the play with its orthodox moral teleology would insist that Angus is right, but the play gives us a Macbeth who resists even the transparent reasonableness of the moral judgments. Macbeth is no dwarf, but a giant, even in his callous brutality. When he is confronted by young

Siward, it is not the youth's innocence or goodness that thrills but Macbeth's gigantic presence. After his challenge on the battlefield, admittedly the boy does not shrink from Macbeth's terrifying identification, "My name's Macbeth" (5.7.7); but Siward is swiftly dispatched, and his opposition seems more callow than noble, more preposterous than sublime.

Siward's death is given a conventional valediction. His father is assured that his son died "like a man" (5.8.43). The boy, he is told, received his fatal wounds "on the front," and the father completes the line: "Why then, God's soldier be he" (5.8.47). Metrically and morally all is neatly settled. But not least in the ease with which Old Siward accepts his son's death (even Malcolm admits "He's worth more sorrow"), the play asks more searching questions about what it means to live or die "like a man."²⁵ Lady Macbeth has urged Macbeth to murder by challenging his manliness, and, though Macbeth asserts his willingness only to do "all that may become a man" (1.7.46), he transgresses those boundaries so he might become in her eyes "so much more the man" (51). Macbeth urges the murderers to act against Banquo by appealing to their sense of manliness (3.1.90–1). And, lest this be thought only the perverse misconstruction that produces the play's criminality, Malcolm similarly reforms Macduff's more humane conception of masculinity by turning his tears for his slaughtered family into the desire for revenge. "Dispute it like a man," Malcolm says; and he receives the appropriate rebuke from the grieving husband and father: "But I must also feel it like a man" (4.3.221). Nonetheless, in fewer than ten lines Macduff is led to "let grief / Convert to anger" (228–9), and, with his resolve to march against Macbeth, he is assured by Malcolm that "This tune goes manly" (235).

In the harsh world of the play, to be a man is to kill and be willing to be killed. If the play would humanize the definition by insisting that the cause for which one risks one's life or takes one matters, it also disturbingly blurs the very differences its stark morality demands. In part the play's resistance to its moral construction lies in the difficulty of discovering where "obedience . . . is truly owed." Nothing should be simpler. Macduff seemingly clarifies the issue, if it needs clarification, by calling Macbeth an "untitled tyrant bloody sceptred" (4.3.104), but, however bloody his scepter, Macbeth is, as Macduff knows well, *titled*. Although Macbeth is undeniably a murderer, he lawfully succeeds and is crowned. "Tis most like the sovereignty will fall upon Macbeth," observes Ross; and Macduff responds: "He is already named and gone to Scone / To be invested" (2.4.29–32). "Named" and "invested," Macbeth is legally king, and at least by the absolutist logic of King James's own imperial political philosophy, Macbeth is "truly owed" at least the passive obedience of his countrymen.²⁶

But the complex political issues, perhaps of interest today more to historians than to literary critics or playgoers, find their parallel in the play's moral design, where again seeming right disturbingly blurs. Duncan's gracious sovereignty is set against Macbeth's willful brutality, but Duncan's rule depends upon – indeed demands – Macbeth's violence. The unexplained revolt that begins the play is put down by Macbeth's ferocious defense of Duncan's authority. Violent disruption is violently

repaired. Certainly we are to distinguish Macbeth killing *for* the king from Macbeth's killing *of* the king. Killing for the king marks Macbeth as "valiant," a "worthy gentleman" (1.2.24); killing the king marks Macbeth as monstrous, an "abhorred tyrant" (5.7.11). But from the first the play undoes even these apparently unassailable oppositions, obscuring easy distinctions that would legitimize the state's monopoly on violence. Not merely does Macbeth's merciless treatment of "the merciless Macdonwald" (1.2.9) confound the crucial difference, but also the unanchored pronouns that literally confuse the two. Macbeth carves "out his passage"

Till he faced the slave
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the navel to th' chops,
And fixed his head upon our battlements. (1.2.20–3)

Only "our battlements" is clearly differentiated; the referents of the third person singular pronouns are as "doubtful" as the battle itself that the captain reports. All that is "fixed" is the head of a rebel.

Hero and villain, as Harry Berger has ingeniously demonstrated,²⁷ are throughout unnervingly intertwined and indistinguishable, as in the captain's image of the rebel troops and the king's forces as "two spent swimmers, that do cling together" (28). In the battle Macbeth fights bravely, but textual density and syntactic ambiguity uncannily dislocate his loyalties. Duncan "reads / [Macbeth's] personal venture in the rebels' fight" (1.3.91); he "finds [Macbeth] in the stout Norweyan ranks" (95). Macbeth confronts the invading King of Norway, who is "assisted by that most disloyal traitor / The Thane of Cawdor" (1.2.53–4), not with the certain authority of Duncan, "clear in his great office" (1.7.18), but only with confusing "self-comparisons, / Point against point, rebellious arm 'gainst arm" (1.2.56–7).

Though the play in part does insist upon stark moral distinctions to animate its moral comedy, it then carefully undoes them to make the play a tragedy. Malcolm and Macduff insist to the end that the action is reparative. Evil has been defeated and right triumphantly reestablished. Malcolm points proudly to "this dead butcher and his fiend-like Queen" (5.9.35) and ends inviting all assembled "to see us crowned at Scone" (41). But the assurances and the affirmations of the end are Malcolm's, not the play's. Certainly the play insists upon a more complex understanding of Macbeth and his Lady, both too sensitive in their awareness of evil to be reducible to the moral cartoon of Malcolm's judgment. And the action ends with unsettling echoes of its beginning: with an attack upon established rule from disloyal nobles and a foreign army, with the victorious nobility rewarded with new titles, and with the execution of a rebellious Thane of Cawdor. Malcolm is three times hailed as king exactly as Macbeth had been by the witches. Perhaps this is renewal, but it sounds too much like repetition. Maybe, as Malcolm would have it, the nation has been returned to moral and political health or maybe all that has happened is the establishment of the conditions for a new round of temptation and disorder (as in Roman Polanski's 1971

film of the play, which ends with Malcolm's brother, Donalbain, going off to seek the witches and his own crown, or, indeed, as in the chronicles themselves, where the historical Donal Bane turned rebel, allying himself with the King of Norway, killing Malcolm's son and successfully claiming the throne).

The play ends with a vision of futurity that is too weak to prevent Macbeth's reality from dominating what we have witnessed. Perhaps the moral world succeeds more impressively than it does in *Titus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Othello*, but it never exerts a more powerful claim on our interests and sympathies than that over which it triumphs. Benedetto Croce acutely observed that "in *Macbeth*, the good appears only as the revenge taken by the good, as remorse, as punishment."²⁸ It is incapable of wresting attention or concern from Macbeth's tragic course. At the end of the play even Macbeth knows that his defeat is necessary and desirable, but although we share that knowledge morally, our dramatic distance from it is measured in that, if we inevitably feel relief at his defeat, we are never able truly to rejoice in the victory of his enemies. Though theatrical superstition insists on referring to the play as "The Scottish Play," it is pointedly the tragedy of Macbeth. "To the end," as Bradley observed, "he never totally loses our sympathy;"²⁹ and no less true is that to the end Malcolm never totally gains it. Even, then, in its unusual manner, *Macbeth* confirms the tragic pattern, tempting us with a restorative vision that it makes us refuse, forcing us to face frontally, as Macbeth himself must do, the terrible image of what he has become.

For Shakespeare, tragedy will not easily give way to the efforts to deny it. In its endings, the exhausted survivors will inevitably seek to convince themselves that the tragedy has not only passed but also that its causes have been banished and the experience has at least taught worthy lessons. But the plays insist that tragedy is something far less reassuring, as the most seemingly reassuring of them, *Macbeth*, makes us see. Tragedy tells us that human cruelty is terrible and its consequences are not easily contained. This is not to say that the vision of such a world where suffering is seemingly inevitable and where nothing is offered as effective compensation or consolation is true; it is only to say that such a vision is tragic.

A coda: this understanding of tragedy may explain something about both *Coriolanus* and *Timon of Athens* that has generally been seen as a limitation of those two late plays. After the metaphysical density and poetic richness of the so-called "great" tragedies, the harshness of these two classical plays often has been taken as evidence of a decline in Shakespeare's artistic powers or, less judgmentally, of a change in his conception of tragedy. But it seems to me that in their stylistic severity these two plays uncompromisingly display the fullest extension of Shakespeare's tragic understanding into the drama. If a play like *King Lear* devastatingly refuses any of the consolations it seemingly offers, from the happy ending promised by the historical material to the resignation that would at least leave Lear and Cordelia together "like birds i' the cage" (5.3.9), it still offers its readers and playgoers the not inconsiderable consolation of its remarkable artistic control, what Henry James called "the redemptive power of

form.” The old conundrum about the pleasure of tragedy is answered by recognizing not only, as Samuel Johnson saw, that it “proceeds from our consciousness of fiction”³⁰ but also that the fiction itself shows, in A. D. Nuttall’s words, “the worst we can imagine ennobled by form.”³¹ But the two late classical plays refuse even that. Pushing the logic of tragedy as far as it can go, they insist that we witness the disintegration of their heroes without the ennobling comforts of Shakespeare’s poetic imagination seemingly in play; they refuse even the consolations of art.

NOTES

- 1 For the Hegelian A. C. Bradley (1991), it was only these four plays that fully realized the characteristics of “pure tragedy” (p. 21), the representation of a world “travailing for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, and evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste” (p. 51); see pp. 23–51.
- 2 Knutson (1998: 260).
- 3 Meres, *Palladis Tamia* (London, 1598), sig. OO2r.
- 4 The conceptualization of the subgenre was not, of course, completely dependent upon the Folio’s practice. “History,” of course, already appears as one of the genres personified in the Induction to *Warning For Fair Women* in 1598. But prior to the Folio it would be difficult to discover a widespread and coherent principle of generic definition.
- 5 Pleyner (1968), esp. pp. 94–126; for a valuable overview of Shakespeare’s generic understanding, see Danson (2000).
- 6 For a useful survey of what ideas might have been available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, see Kelly (1993). For a valuable selection of modern theorizations, see Drakakis and Liebler (1998).
- 7 See Bernard Weinberg’s magisterial *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (1961), esp. chapter 9, “The Tradition of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: I. Discovery and Exegesis,” vol. 1, pp. 349–423.
- 8 Book II, Prose 2, 70–2; Robinson (1957: 331).
- 9 Muir (1972: 12).
- 10 For a fuller account of the formal characteristics of Shakespeare’s tragedies, and from which some paragraphs here have been borrowed, see Kastan (1982), esp. pp. 79–101.
- 11 Jaspers (1952: 38). In the mid-twentieth century there was much discussion of the tensions between tragedy and Christian thought; see, for example, Laurence Michel’s “The Possibility of Christian Tragedy” (1956: 403–28). Recent theorists of tragedy have largely been uninterested in the question, presumably as the incompatibility seems so apparent. But for an age in which religious thought was so central, even as the Reformation fractured the sense of security that it might offer, tragedy must have been viewed in some relation to the belief in a just and merciful God, if only as a heuristic model of an existence in God’s absence.
- 12 Goldman (1972: 99).
- 13 For an important discussion of the relation of the imperfections of love to the play’s notion of tragedy, see Stanley Cavell’s brilliant “The Avoidance of Love”, in his *Must We Mean What We Say* (1976): 267–353.
- 14 *Certain Sermons and Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches* (1908: 137).
- 15 For an account of Sidney’s familiarity with Aristotle, see Buxton (1964: 72).
- 16 Duncan-Jones (1989: 230).
- 17 Dollimore (1984: 191).
- 18 Bradley (1991: 291).
- 19 Nuttall (1996: 97).
- 20 Williams, “Modern Tragedy,” in Drakakis and Liebler (1998: 155–6).

- 21 Krieger (1973: 4).
- 22 The phrase is Adam Phillips's in a review of Jonathan Lear, *Open-Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul* (1998), first published in *The London Review of Books* and reprinted in his *Promises, Promises: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Literature* (2000: 172).
- 23 Woudhuysen (1989: 223).
- 24 Mehl (1986: 19).
- 25 On the play's complex construction of masculinity, see Adelman (1992: 130–47); and Kimbrough (1983: 175–90). There have been, of course, numerous studies of the centrality of the definition of manhood to the play, one of the earliest and most influential being Waith (1950: 262–73).
- 26 James had argued "very strongly and expressly against butchering euen of Tyrannical Kings" in his *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, in McIlwain (1918: 64). For a fuller account of the complex politics of the play, see Kastan (1999: 165–82).
- 27 Berger (1997: 70–97); first published as "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: Preface to a New Interpretation", *ELH*, 47 (1980): 1–31.
- 28 Croce (1920: 229).
- 29 Bradley (1991: 305).
- 30 "[I]f we thought murders and treasons real, they would please no more," Johnson adds; in his "Preface to the Edition of Shakespeare's Plays" (1765), in Woudhuysen (1989: 136).
- 31 Nuttall (1996: 99).

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Thus, tragedy, in spite of many variations in form and substance, has proved remarkably consistent, and this can hardly be explained by literary reasons alone. In common usage the word "tragedy" denotes not just a form of drama, but a particular kind of event, a specific experience, or even a general view of our world-order. "Tragedy" can mean some strikingly unhappy accident or a merciless, arbitrary destiny, a moral exemplum of just retribution or an unfathomable catastrophe, suggesting an essentially malevolent fate. In the context of literature, tragic suffering implies an idea of dignity and of inevitability, of more than average stature, even though this may not be true of every single stage tragedy. Recommend this book. Semantic Scholar extracted view of "Manhood and Valor in Two Shakespearean Tragedies" by Eugene M. Waith. A "rarely most beloved": Shakespeare and the Idea of Tragedy. David Scott Kastan. Art. 2007. Related Papers. The Allen Institute for AI Proudly built by AI2 with the help of our. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. Tragedy, reversal of fortune, Peripeteia. the idea of tragedy as the fall from prosperity to wretchedness. Fate, tragedy and Nemesis. inescapable trajectory of the tragic action.