

Radical Tragedy

Religion, Ideology and
Power in the Drama
of Shakespeare and
his Contemporaries

Third Edition

With a new Foreword
by Terry Eagleton

**Jonathan
Dollimore**



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JONATHAN DOLLIMORE

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Praise for the third edition:

‘Some critical studies are full of insight, but not many of them are necessary. *Radical Tragedy* ranks among the necessary critical interventions of our time,’ – From the Foreword by **Terry Eagleton**

‘Prefaced by a powerful, provocative essay that brings its argument bang up to date, this splendid new edition of *Radical Tragedy* puts its status as a classic of cultural-materialist criticism beyond question.’ – **Kiernan Ryan**, *Royal Holloway University of London*

‘A welcome new edition of a path-breaking book complete with a brilliantly incisive and thought-provoking Introduction that will enthuse a new generation of students. With an iconoclastic energy all too rare in academic circles, Dollimore fearlessly revalues his own project, and poses questions central to the larger critical, cultural and philosophical debates within English Studies, to which *Radical Tragedy* continues to make a major scholarly contribution.’ – **John Drakakis**, *University of Stirling*

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– **Joel Altman**, *University of California, Berkeley*

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Brighton, September 1982

The introduction to the second edition was started at the Humanities Research Centre, Canberra. and finished at the National Humanities Center, North Carolina. My gratitude to those who made both trips possible. Dedicated to Shayne and Som, and in recollection of Braidwood, New South Wales, one hot afternoon in March 1988.

Chapel Hill, NC, January 1989

Foreword

by Terry Eagleton

At first glance, the title of this book may seem a contradiction in terms, like 'fascist intellectual' or 'Texan *haute cuisine*'. For tragedy has long been regarded as the most blue-blooded of literary forms, disdainfully aloof from everyday life, a question of the downfall of princes rather than the death of a taxi driver. In the hands of conservative commentators, it has become associated with myth and destiny, ritual and blood sacrifice, jealous gods and hapless victims. For this lineage of criticism, tragic suffering is ennobling rather than appalling: it is through anguish and breakdown that our deepest humanity is affirmed, so that we leave the theatre edified and inspired by scenes of carnage and despair.

In this perverse vision, real-life calamities – an air crash, a famine, an outbreak of genocide – do not count as tragic, since they leave us despondent rather than delighted. Aeschylus is tragic, but Auschwitz is not. If tragedy shows social order being violated, it does so only to demonstrate how ultimately impregnable it is. In its bleak portrayal of human hubris or overreaching, it fosters timorousness, reverence and submission, none of which are exactly radical virtues. Besides, in this view tragedy is a thoroughly virile affair, a matter of heroes, warriors and a very masculine nobility of spirit. It does not chime with the sensibility of a secular, sceptical, democratic age.

This, to be sure, is a highly partial, prejudiced view of tragedy as a whole. There is quite enough in actual tragic art, from Aeschylus to Arthur Miller, to refute these assumptions one by one. Even when it comes to the theory of tragedy, there have been dissenting voices in plenty. It is not as though we had to wait upon the birth of modern-day literary theory to recognise that tragedy does not always meekly buckle down to providence, imagine that the sufferings it represents are timeless, edifying or irreparable, or trade in moral absolutes. Whatever the diversity of tragic art as such, however, a certain consistent *idea* of tragedy has been developed from the German idealist

philosophers onward; and what it represents, in effect, is a crypto-religious critique of modernity.

Once religion, discredited by a secularising age, proved progressively unable to perform this critique itself, the idea of tragedy – in fact, a highly edited, tendentious version of the history of the art form itself – was on hand to provide a formidable substitute for it. Like religion, tragedy was a kind of theodicy – which is to say that it could offer some account of why there was suffering in the world, plucking an ultimate meaning from what seemed like senseless destruction. Besides, tragedy was everything that modernity was not: elitist rather than democratic, spiritual rather than scientific, absolute rather than contingent, cosmic rather than earthly, universal rather than culturally specific, a matter of destiny rather than self-determination.

Tragedy served as a kind of aristocratic memory-trace in a middle-class epoch which had less and less use for such high-toned patrician values. If modernity tidied away suffering in its brisk progressivism, tragedy would claim with magnificent perversity that agony and wretchedness were exactly where fundamental human value was most deeply disclosed. If we responded to the torments it presented with fear and horror, this could only be because the human was so unutterably precious to us. For many commentators, then, the form came to represent a golden age of noble spirits whose freedom lay in fearlessly embracing the inevitable – an age which had now yielded ground to a squalid materialism. From this standpoint, it was not as though the men and women of modernity had turned their backs on tragedy for some carnivalesque celebration of everyday life. It was simply that they were not up to it. Tragedy, an art much taken with death, had now expired itself, and along with it a sense of ultimate human value.

It is not least of the virtues of Jonathan Dollimore's pathbreaking study that it rescues tragedy from this sterile ideology, thrusting it firmly back within the complex cross-currents of actual historical life. Reading against the grain of a powerfully tenacious orthodoxy, *Radical Tragedy* shows how Jacobean tragedy – the most astonishing body of tragic art in English history – can be critical rather than conformist, a challenging of authority rather than a confirmation of

it. The book takes issue here with so-called new historicism, which repeats the fatalism of traditional tragic theory with a more fashionable twist. Where that theory saw tragic protest as rebuffed by the heavens, some new historicist critics see it as neutralised by the omnipotence of power. In fact, the political power symbolised by the Jacobean state was to be decisively challenged not long after in a bloody civil war. New historicism is much concerned with interpreting the past in the light of the present; but we may need to historicise new historicism itself. It may well be that part of what we have, in this pessimistic sense that protest in Jacobean drama is always nullified, is a reading of it in the light of the bleak situation of present-day radicals in a triumphantly right-wing United States.

It is to the credit of Jonathan Dollimore's boldly original book that, unlike so much radical criticism, it approaches the religious ideologies of Jacobean England with the utmost seriousness. Religion, after all, was what so much of the common life of those times was about; and it is curious that radicals, who are supposed to take popular consciousness seriously, should so often be found skipping embarrassedly over the religious rituals and beliefs which bulked so large in it. No ideology in human history has been more persuasive and persistent than religion, a symbolic form which links the minutiae of everyday conduct to the most ultimate of spiritual realities, and it is hard to see that any ideology ever will be. The radical's nervousness of religion is parochial as well as patronising: religion may not be the driving force in Middlesbrough, but it is in Dacca.

Without accepting for a moment that these turbulent dramas are always decorously orthodox, Dollimore investigates their metaphysical claims, along with their dealings in power and sexuality. The result is a remarkably wide-ranging study, in which John Marston and Bertolt Brecht, Faustus and Foucault, camp and Christianity, are to be found cheek by jowl. Nor is this, as with so much radical criticism, a mere extraction of the usable 'ideas' of literary works, in crass insensitivity to the intricacies of their form. *Radical Tragedy* is vibrant with ideas, but it is also alive to questions of stage realism and naturalism, to the way in which the dislocated, montage-like structure of these extraordinary dramas has much to do with their vision of the world.

Some critical studies are full of insight, but not many of them are *necessary*. *Radical Tragedy* ranks among the necessary critical interventions of our time.

Introduction to the Third Edition

September 1914

In September 1914 the novelist Hermann Hesse is agonised at the prospect of war destroying the foundations of Europe's cultural heritage, and thereby the future of civilisation itself. Hesse stands proudly for what he calls a 'supranational' tradition of human culture, intrinsic to which are ideals essentially enlightened and humanitarian: an 'international world of thought, of inner freedom, of intellectual conscience' and a belief in 'an artistic beauty cutting across national boundaries' (*If the War Goes On*, pp. 15–17). Even in the depths of war, insists Hesse, a German should be able to prefer a good English book to a bad German one. Three years later he writes along similar lines to a government minister telling him that he would be a more humane leader in this time of conflict were he to read 'the great authors' and listen to great composers like Beethoven (p. 20).

Much later (1946) Hesse would comment as follows on these and other similar writings of the same war period:

When I call [them] 'political' it is always in quotes, for there is nothing political about them but the atmosphere in which they came into being. In all other respects they are the opposite of political, because in each one of these essays I strive to guide the reader not into the world theatre with its political problems but into his innermost being, before the judgement seat of his very personal conscience. In this I am at odds with the political thinkers of all trends, and I shall always, incorrigibly, recognize in man, in the individual man and his soul, the existence of realms to which political impulses and forms do not extend. (p. 11)

Here is an uncompromising expression of that spiritual, essentialist

individualism which underpinned Hesse's equally uncompromising universal humanism. Here too is the corollary of both the humanism and the individualism – a profound distrust of the political, and a corresponding faith in art. *Radical Tragedy*, first published in 1984, attacked just these ideas: essentialism in relation to subjectivity, universalism in relation to the human, and the belief that there was an ethical/aesthetic realm transcending the political. I'll return to this.

Though not beyond criticism – he was little known outside Germany and so wanted to avoid his own books being banned there – Hesse was implacably opposed to the barbaric nationalism of his own country from around 1914 onwards. He went into self-imposed exile in 1919, and never returned to Germany. He was awarded the Nobel prize for literature in 1946, but for most of his life remained a struggling, exiled, writer. His books were eventually banned in Germany in 1943, and that was a severe blow. He began his Nobel prize letter of thanks with the reasons why he could not be present in person: 'the hardships of the National Socialist period, during which my life work was destroyed in Germany and I was burdened day after day with arduous duties, undermined [my health] for good. *Still, my spirit is unbroken . . .*' (*If the War Goes On*, p. 141; my italics).

Wars in the last century compelled artists and intellectuals into rethinking the aesthetic – its scope, its power, its limitations and its dangers.¹ One question becomes paramount: has literature been most compelling when in the service of humane values, or when it has transgressed them? I foreground this question in relation to Hesse – this once celebrated, sometime cult figure, now neglected – because the full significance of an aesthetic humanism becomes apparent in relation to artists like Hesse in a way it doesn't in, say, the squabbles within the English literary critical tradition in the last quarter of the last century. More specifically, the critique of humanism never properly engaged the example of people like Hesse, preferring instead easier targets in academic literary criticism. In other words, within both the humanist tradition, and the theoretical critique of it, the historical conditions of thought matter, and it especially matters that many recent critics of humanism have been

formed, and remain, within an education system, from school to university, which is itself the product of relative security and prosperity in the post-war period.

Right now it's especially revealing to reconsider the life, writing and ethical stand of those like Hesse. Since the publication of *Radical Tragedy* the so-called culture wars of our own time have raged around the canon, the western artistic tradition.² The case of Hesse shows how this debate is fundamentally dependent upon the fate of what we might call a 'high' European humanism, which includes aesthetic considerations but also goes far beyond them. Humanism was always much more than art, but art was intrinsic to, a necessary aspect of, what it was. I was about to remark the crucial proviso that our lives are not now, as were Hesse's and millions of others at that time, devastated by world war. Indeed they are not, but Britain has been involved in several major wars in the last two decades, and as I write is poised to embark upon another. And although the historical conditions are indeed quite different, we too live in a time of acute distrust, and perhaps despair, of the political realm which Hesse would have understood. Additionally, in Britain there is an increasingly bitter debate about just how integrated with Europe – how 'supranational' – we should become, and nationalism, cultural and economic, remains a potent force, breaking up major political parties and stirring potent if as yet localised racism.

September 2001

After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, Britain signed up to another type of war, one whose scope and extent was, and remains, uncertain. If the rhetoric is similar – the need to defend western civilisation from barbarism, democracy from fanaticism – the conditions of this war are so different as to be unimaginable for someone like Hesse. A hastily formed international coalition against terrorism proceeds in the name of civilisation but now it does not need – in fact is now embarrassed by – the old humanist universals. This is partly because we are now acutely aware of how arrogant and unheeding western

humanism could be in relation to cultural and racial difference, not least within its own colonial and imperialist domains. This in turn is one reason why, in western democracies, a confident humanism has given way to an ethic of the multicultural and the multi-racial; for sure, an uncertain assumption of underlying similarities is not entirely absent, but it is subordinate to an equally uncertain embrace of cultural and racial difference. Nothing could be more indicative of this change than the fact that Britain's Prime Minister, as he commuted the world in October 2001, shoring up support for the coalition against terrorism, allowed it to be known that, as he travelled, he read translations of the Koran.

What has become truly supranational is, of course, the very capitalism which Hesse and others saw as yet another enemy of humanism. At one level global capitalism needs and nurtures the multiculturalism which has superseded humanism; at another it promotes a cultural imperialism more arrogant than humanism ever was and underpinned by popular rather than high culture – Hollywood and MacDonalds rather than Shakespeare and Claridge's. I just described it as cultural imperialism; it is also of course an aggressive economic and military imperialism which exacerbates cultural antagonisms. And that means that the multicultural can shift very quickly from being the imagined resolution of those antagonisms, to being the ground where they intensify. Bluntly, terrorism may thrive in relation to the multicultural; a certain kind of terrorism may even presuppose it. The United Kingdom is desperate to show that these new wars are not being waged against Islam precisely because there are many Muslims, including many residing in Britain, who regard them as being so, or at least as a conflict between irreconcilable cultures and religions.

So what has all this got to do with the aesthetic, with literature – indeed with Renaissance drama? For a start, so much contemporary literature is about racial, political, sexual and cultural conflicts experienced at the level of identity. Certainly, for the most part, these are conflicts which seem incapable of aesthetic resolution. Notoriously, Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* both expressed and incited such conflicts. And the awkward truth (voiced by Rushdie himself) that bad times produce good books, can no longer be obscured by the mysti-

fying belief that good books can prevent bad times or at least compensate for them. Just as it seemed as if those conflicts were being fudged into history, they erupted again on September 11th with a terrible ferocity. For the humanist the most traumatic fact about the Rushdie affair was that a work of literature provoked rather than transcended those antagonisms. Does anyone really now believe that good books can prevent bad times?

Without proposing a facile continuity between the early modern and the modern it must be obvious that much of what has just been remarked about conflict in contemporary literature is applicable also to the circumstances of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage (see below, p. lii). One difference is that, whereas today we witness the demise of the humanist aesthetic, in the early modern period it was still centuries away.

Whereas in September 1914 Hesse passionately affirms the humanist aesthetic as an answer to war, in September 2001 it was as if such a vision had simply been forgotten: one listened in vain for significant voices promoting art as an articulation of civilised values transcending cultural, racial and religious conflicts. What precipitated the decline in Humanist faith? Well, all four aspects of Hesse's cultural philosophy – its universal humanism, essentialist (spiritual) individualism, its distrust of the political and a corresponding faith in art – all these were the object of fierce criticism by almost all the strands of literary, cultural and critical theory in the last 25 years or so, and with a degree of success which helped generate the so-called culture wars. Again, this was the context of the writing of *Radical Tragedy*. Culture became 'politicised' as never before, often around the issue of who was excluded from the humanist universe in terms of that holy trinity, race, class and gender. Some academics and politicians trying to cling to the humanist tradition blamed 'theory', and the books it spawned, including *Radical Tragedy*, for its demise. This was too easy and often plain diversionary: the problem goes much deeper, and back much further. Quite apart from the growing antipathy to western humanism from other cultures and world religions, of the kind already mentioned, there were deep misgivings from within the tradition itself.

September 1939

As an example of what I mean, let us go back to the outbreak of yet another war, and yet another September. W.H. Auden's poem '1st September 1939' – widely invoked in relation to September 11th³ – offers a response to the impending Second World War reminiscent of Hesse's to the First:

Defenceless under the night
Our world in stupor lies;
Yet, dotted everywhere,
Ironic points of light
Flash out wherever the Just
Exchange their messages:
May I, composed like them,
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

Reminiscent indeed – but so different. To begin with there is the speaker's poignant hesitancy: beleaguered by negation and despair, can he – can we – ever be strong enough to sustain the affirming flame? In this poem we are composed not of spirit and dust but of Eros and dust; no mention here then of that fierce spiritual flame which once fortified us against both dust and injustice – and against Eros, for that matter. (Remember Hesse: 'my spirit is unbroken', above, p. xv). Unlike spirit, which eventually escapes mortality, Eros is the catalyst of mortality. The early moderns would have understood: 'Leave me O Love which reachest but to dust' (below, p. 94). And now the communication between the civilised is furtive; Hesse's image of a brave supranational humanism reaching out in overground unity, across and above the strife, is replaced here by one suggesting an underground hiding from it; erratic, clandestine communications occur at night between the fragmented and the dispersed. And then there's the description of these very communications as 'ironic': perhaps nothing was more indicative of the diminishing faith in the

humanist salvation of the world than the turn to irony. Irony becomes part confession of, part defence against, the failures of the humanist vision. Together with its near cousin ambiguity, irony becomes the crutch of 'late' humanism, at once guarantee of its sophistication, and confession of its uncertainty; irony provided the intellectual with a rationale for non-commitment, and enabled the academic critic to contain anything which disturbed, by putting it in an imaginary, neutralising tension or balance with what didn't. Yeats saw through this kind of irony, which is why it's almost obligatory now to cite him: the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of a passionate intensity. No surprise then, Auden's subsequent down-playing of the importance of art and the artist; 'we live in a new age', he wrote a decade later, and the artist today, unlike his Romantic precursors, 'neither can have . . . a unique heroic importance nor believes in the Art-God enough to desire it' (*The Enchafed Flood*, p. 150). Later still Auden came to regard even that last stanza of 'September 1st, 1939' as too full of self-congratulation; in fact he came to so dislike this poem he wanted to prevent its being reprinted in his lifetime. So the loss of faith in the artist as 'legislator' (Shelley), is voiced here not by a hard-core anti-humanist 'theorist', but arguably the greatest poet of the last century.

Though Hesse's own faith in the redemptive power of art never faltered, by the end of the Second World War it was tempered. In his acceptance message for the Nobel Prize, as well as the one for the Goethe prize, also awarded in 1946, he affirms again the belief that 'culture is supranational and international', but speaks too of a 'deathly sick Europe' and his own temptation to abandon European culture altogether and turn to the wisdom of the Orient. It's a temptation resisted, but the influence of the Orient is indeed central to his new realisation that the fundamental message of mankind's greatest teachers is stoicism. In these final years there is an even greater insistence on the individual soul as the touchstone of integrity, perhaps now at the expense of the humanism (pp. 123-4, 145, 149). Here he anticipates a development of the latter half of the twentieth century.

For others the Second World War confirmed the bankruptcy of European humanism. And now we are talking not just of its