

JOHN RUSSELL BROWN

A.C. BRADLEY ON  
SHAKESPEARE'S  
TRAGEDIES

A CONCISE EDITION  
AND REASSESSMENT

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LEAR  
ANTONY &  
CLEOPATRA  
MACBETH  
OTHELLO  
CORIOLANUS  
AMLET

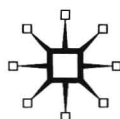


# A. C. Bradley on Shakespeare's Tragedies

A Concise Edition and Reassessment

JOHN RUSSELL BROWN

palgrave  
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# Preface

The text of *Shakespearean Tragedy*, and page references to it, are taken from the fourth edition of 2006. Bradley's lecture on *Antony and Cleopatra* is quoted from *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 2nd edition, 1909), that on *Coriolanus* from *A Miscellany* (London: Macmillan, 1929). Minor changes in punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, and the numbering of statements or arguments are introduced without comment for the sake of clarity or to avoid unnecessary complications. Editorial additions are printed within square brackets and omissions in the course of a passage are marked by a number of ellipses or, in some cases, a space and three asterisks. Only a few of Bradley's footnotes are retained.

Quotations from Shakespeare in *Shakespearean Tragedy* are from the Globe edition, the text that Bradley used throughout his book. Editorial quotations are from the edition by Peter Alexander (London: Collins, 1951, and many times reprinted).

While preparing this book I have consulted on numerous occasions with Robert Shaughnessy who, in preparation for his Introduction to the fourth and full edition of *Shakespearean Tragedy*, was exploring the cultural and scholarly contexts in which Bradley had written. He was both my critic and support in a most collaborative and friendly spirit: I am much in his debt and glad to be so.

At Palgrave Macmillan I could always count on Kate Wallis to further the project and supply advice on the needs of both publisher and readers. As the copy went to press, Valery Rose and Jocelyn Stockley have been assiduous and helpful in every possible way. I know how fortunate I have been to benefit from their skills; I am most grateful and my book much better prepared for its readers.

April 2006

**John Russell Brown**

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# Introduction

Some students take readily to A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, written more than a hundred years ago, and set about reading its sequence of lectures and copious notes in one long, private session. They are likely to be the same readers who enjoy the long novels with a moral purpose that, like Bradley's criticism, were written as the nineteenth century was coming to its end. Both forms of writing were in keeping with major elements in the culture of that time and Bradley's fame was soon established; it is more surprising that it has lasted so strongly to the present day.

Everyone with more than a passing interest in Shakespeare will have encountered his name and many without knowing why he achieved such prominence in the study of Shakespeare. This book sets out to explain his achievement, offer a concise edition of the lengthy original, and defend Bradley from much harsh criticism and occasional ridicule that his work has attracted over the years.

*Shakespearean Tragedy* does not immediately grip attention and positively encourage readers to read on. The first two chapters on the 'substance' and 'construction' of the plays are packed so full with brief references to all the tragedies, both early and late, and to the comedies and histories, that a reader not already well acquainted with Shakespeare's complete works will be unable to follow the argument closely and consistently. Even browsing through the later chapters on single plays is likely to prove difficult because Bradley did not write in a style that is used today and lacked the sharp rigour of the best contemporary criticism. Throughout we are likely to stumble at his recurrent use of *spiritual*, *soul*, *moral order*, *superior power*, *sweetness of spirit*, and other very general concepts.

When I was an undergraduate and wanted to know what this apparently unsinkable critic had to say, I read no more than a few pages before I lost patience and put the book down. I tried again later, after I had started to publish about Shakespeare on my own account, but it was still some years before I had read Bradley's every word and began to benefit directly from his truly amazing and unprecedented enterprise. For students who are experiencing a similar resistance to his writing and for readers with limited time who are drawn to the inner psychological tensions and uncertainties of Shakespeare's plays, this concise version offers a more welcoming entrance

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to his criticism than the full text of *Shakespearean Tragedy* and argues that it is a useful and even necessary part of our understanding of the tragedies. I doubt if anyone today would want to imitate Bradley's style of writing or be content with all his conclusions but by assimilating his methods of study we can strengthen our grasp of the plays and find that his insights quicken our own responses. I hope to present enough of his book in accessible form to encourage readers to study the plays for themselves with a patience and imagination similar to Bradley's, and to do so in their own ways and for their own purposes.

Part I analyses Bradley's critical and scholarly methods and examines his claim to permanent value for a study of the tragedies. On more general grounds, they are shown to be relevant to the study of all script-based drama. What he called an 'eager mind' or 'a vivid and intent imagination' (p. xlvii) enabled Bradley to envisage and then analyse what happens when written dialogue becomes the basis for performance and, in this process, changes in effect and gathers meanings that are as eloquent as they are transitory. He did not write about specific productions or performances but frequent theatre-going helped him to enact the plays over and over again in his mind and in such a palpable way that his senses and emotions were awakened, as well as his intellect, and raised questions that demanded answers. He asks readers to study a play as if they were actors who had to act 'all the parts' (p. xlvii). As its action unfolds in the reader's mind, the persons of the play will take on a local form and inhabit a particular place as if they were embodied in an actor's presence and had become actually alive. This form of actor-centred and yet imaginary performance can easily become self-indulgent and overly subtle or sentimental but Bradley, by using his copious and precise memory of the texts, was persistently sceptical and seemingly tireless in exploration. He continually criticized his own conclusions and carefully honed the drama as it was enacted in his mind. In this private and personal endeavour, he had much in common with leading actors of his day, Henry Irving and Ellen Terry outstandingly, among others; their writings and interviews are lasting testimonies to a constant questioning of the texts and their own responses. In his thinking about the inner consciousness of individual characters Bradley also had affinities with Stanislavski and Freud, two contemporaries whose writings and ideas were unknown to him.

Such an engagement with the texts has permanent value for any study of drama that respects a play's theatricality and seeks out its potential in performance. Unlike much current 'performance criticism', Bradley's understanding was not limited by the achievements of individual actors and productions or by the theatrical fashions of his time and place. He was endlessly resourceful, responding to hesitations and uncertainties as well as clear verbal statements or irreversible actions. He was aware of the temporary and unstable nature of any theatrical event, the progressive nature of a

performance, and an audience's changing expectations as the narrative advances.

Having lectured and taught in large and small classes in both universities and adult classes, in Liverpool, Glasgow and Oxford, Bradley had a strong sense of his readers as audiences. He was able to engage them in argument and lead them by degrees ever deeper into the texts and the possible meanings that lie within them. At the same time he would draw on earlier literature and entertain judgements that were not his own. His book offers a progressive understanding of the plays that is still effective today, once the unfamiliar elements in his language – its generalized concepts and, perhaps above all, its tempo and rhythm – are no longer felt as deterrents but accepted as his vehicle for thoughtful and, at times, adventurous discourse. This critic lets us know when he is taking risks and stands back for us to follow if we wish or if we can. Gradually we gain confidence in our guide, even if we cannot entirely share in his quest. The first part of this book is intended to assist in this process and make the journey more enjoyable by noting the advantages and limitations of this approach and by observing the territory through which it passes.

We need to be aware of Bradley's blind spots and the facts and opinions that have been disproved or challenged in the years since he wrote. Once we adjust our focus to take account of these, his criticism becomes more remarkable and persuasive; with appropriate expectations, we can then build on his unquestionable discoveries. For example, we are unlikely to pursue the concept of a 'great man' as Bradley did, and yet we share readily his interest in the sources of intellectual power and personal domination, adding our later awareness of the horrors and terrors that a few charismatic, gifted and ambitious men can bring upon others. We may not be so concerned as he was to trace the workings of a God, fate, destiny, or some hypothetical 'supreme power' that shapes men's end, but the plays often speak about these matters and Bradley's argument about their importance will help us to enter into the minds of the persons of the plays while maintaining, as Bradley did, the beliefs or agnosticism that we bring to our studies.

Bradley's special interests and the blind spots need to be negotiated with care because they do not always draw attention to themselves. He was so interested in 'heroes' that he paid little attention to lesser persons and the part they played in a play's argument or the audience's experience of the entire play in performance. For example, when we hear of the cruelty and horrors perpetrated by Macbeth and see their effect on himself and others can we conclude as Bradley did that his 'greatness of soul' is the 'highest existence' that we know? Our response to *Hamlet* is bound to be affected by the arrival of Fortinbras, accompanied by his army and the English Ambassadors, and by the sound of cannon shot as four Captains lift up Hamlet's corpse. These visual and aural effects take considerable time to enact as they complete significant story lines and compete with spoken

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words for our attention. Surely a reader or critic with the 'eager mind' which Bradley requires should attempt to assess their contrasting effects, as well as dwelling on the exceptional qualities of Hamlet's speeches and the mysteries of his consciousness.

Bradley is most rewarding as a critic when we can see beyond the horizons and fixed ideas of his mind. Part II of this book presents his judgements on individual plays and demonstrates the exceptionally detailed and performative engagement with the texts in which their lasting value lies. Having regard to how he worked, we can follow where he leads, towards a view of the plays that is grounded in their presentation of persons who think and feel with a complexity similar to our own, but finer and more intense, and as they are engaged in crucial and awesome action beyond our experience. When we add a concern for the wider context of the narrative and its social and political implications, and when we add more visual, spatial and physical understanding of performance, his judgements can be the start of further exploration into the minds and sensations of the speakers, and modify our response to issues raised by a play's text and by the performances of an entire theatre company.

The concise presentation of Bradley's book that follows offers extensive passages of his most illuminating criticism and follows closely the course of his argument about each of the four major tragedies. But his argument with other opinions that are now discredited and his incomplete and sometimes – we now know – inaccurate accounts of Shakespeare's intellectual context are almost entirely excluded. Most of his more sentimental and biased accounts of the plays' characters are also dropped. The result is necessarily a patchwork but it should give the reader a ready entrance to what is most durable in Bradley's book without losing the frequent sensitivity and enthusiasm of his writing.

*Shakespearean Tragedy* deals only with the four tragedies that Bradley considered to be 'great' but this shortened version of his book concludes with passages taken from Bradley's lectures on *Coriolanus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Published a few years after his ground-breaking study and in anthologies that were not subsequently republished, these have not commanded such attention. But the two Roman tragedies extended the reach of his criticism in two significant ways. Both brought political issues to the forefront and, at crucial moments, silent elements of performance draw all attention. If his major work had considered six and not four tragedies, some of its conclusions might have been different.

## PART I

# Practical study and criticism



## CHAPTER ONE

# Verbal and Physical Imagery

Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* is dedicated 'To my students' and carries the subtitle 'Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear [and] Macbeth'. A Preface further explains that the lectures are 'based on a selection from materials used in teaching at Liverpool, Glasgow, and Oxford'. The book's contents had been tested on a variety of listeners, repeatedly reconsidered, and cut down to what their author thought most necessary to communicate. And the process of reflection continued with the addition of long explanatory and often exploratory notes. Today most books about Shakespeare are written by teachers but at the beginning of the last century the long gestation and practical testing of this book were remarkable and signalled a new kind of attention to Shakespeare's plays, one that was both prolonged and personally engaged. Several times Bradley says that the plays should be read with an 'eager mind', and he implied that his book needed a similar mixture of diligence and excitement. More specifically Shakespeare's texts should be read as if they were one long continuous poem, written with the finesse and intensity of lyric poetry. Following the expectation of the romantic poets of the previous century, he expected Shakespeare to 'load every rift . . . with ore' (John Keats, letter to Shelley, August 1820). In the same spirit as Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he closely examined Shakespeare's imagery for the associations and reflections it brought to a reader's mind and the suggestion it gave of thoughts and feelings not directly or consciously expressed.

Since the 1930s many critics have taken the same approach. Caroline Spurgeon's *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1935) and H. W. Clemen's *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (1936, translated from the German in 1951) marked out the way and soon a careful dissection of a play's verbal imagery was used to reveal meanings, implications, and intellectual issues not previously recognized. For example, Cleanth Brooks argued that Shakespeare's texts required the same subtle investigation and exegesis as the complex, 'metaphysical' poetry of John Donne: failing that, they could not be understood. Bradley had said much the same:

■ Where his power or art is fully exerted it really does resemble that of nature. It organizes and vitalizes its product from the centre outward to the minutest markings on the surface, so that when you turn upon it the most searching light you can command, when you dissect it and apply to it the test of a microscope, still you find in it nothing formless, general or vague, but everywhere structure, character, individuality. In this his great things, which seem to come whenever they are wanted, have no companions in literature except the few greatest things in Dante; and it is a fatal error to allow his carelessness elsewhere to make one doubt whether here one is not seeking more than can be found. It is very possible to look for subtlety in the wrong place in Shakespeare, but in the right places it is not possible to find too much. (p. 54) □

Bradley's study of imagery is marked apart from that of many later critics by the connection he perceived between verbal imagery and physical on-stage action. He was also aware that the value of any particular moment depends on its position in the progress of the drama. Here is his account of Ophelia's speeches and on-stage performance:

■ To the persons in the play, as to the readers of it, she brings the thought of flowers. 'Rose of May' Laertes names her.

Lay her in the earth,  
And from her fair and unpolluted flesh  
May violets spring!

— so he prays at her burial. 'Sweets to the sweet' the Queen murmurs, as she scatters flowers on the grave . . . (p. 118) □

From his study of the verbal and physical imagery of a play Bradley was able to write about sensations, impressions, imaginary 'pictures', 'atmospheres', and all manner of thoughts that are not consciously formed or recognized by the persons of the drama. He was paying attention to those elements in a reader's or an audience's experience of the play that are real enough but have little to do with argument or narrative, that are intangible and yet unmistakable. Such perceptions may occur only fleetingly in an instant and yet Bradley shows that they accumulate and grow in power so that they come to influence almost every other aspect of an audience's response, and never more so than in *Macbeth*:

■ A Shakespearean tragedy, as a rule, has a special tone or atmosphere of its own, quite perceptible, however difficult to describe. The effect of this atmosphere is marked with unusual strength in *Macbeth*. It is due

to a variety of influences which combine with those just noticed, so that, acting and reacting, they form a whole; and the desolation of the blasted heath, the design of the Witches, the guilt in the hero's soul, the darkness of the night, seem to emanate from one and the same source. This effect is strengthened by a multitude of small touches, which at the moment may be little noticed but still leave their mark on the imagination. We may approach the consideration of the characters and the action by distinguishing some of the ingredients of this general effect.

Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over this tragedy. It is remarkable that almost all the scenes which at once recur to memory take place either at night or in some dark spot. The vision of the dagger, the murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night-scenes. The Witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or, 'black and midnight hags', receive Macbeth in a cavern. The blackness of night is to the hero a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play. The faint glimmerings of the western sky at twilight are here menacing: it is the hour when the traveller hastens to reach safety in his inn and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins; the hour when 'light thickens', when 'night's black agents to their prey do rouse', when the wolf begins to howl, and the owl to scream, and withered murder steals forth to his work. Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his 'black' desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hell. The moon is down and no stars shine when Banquo, dreading the dreams of the coming night, goes unwillingly to bed, and leaves Macbeth to wait for the summons of the little bell. When the next day should dawn, its light is 'strangled', and 'darkness does the face of earth entomb'. In the whole drama the sun seems to shine only twice; first, in the beautiful but ironical passage where Duncan sees the swallows flitting round the castle of death; and, afterwards, when at the close the avenging army gathers to rid the earth of its shame. Of the many slighter touches which deepen this effect I notice only one. The failure of nature in Lady Macbeth is marked by her fear of darkness; 'she has light by her continually'. And in the one phrase of fear that escapes her lips even in sleep, it is of the darkness of the place of torment that she speaks. (pp. 253-4) □

Bradley has paid attention to 'a multitude of small touches' that, unless a reader seeks them out, will 'be little noticed but still leave their mark on the imagination'. Their effect on the actors' performance may be surreptitious but, inevitably, it colours how the words are spoken, and in turn influences physical performance. In certain scenes – after the murder, in the

sleepwalking, or the solitary moments in the midst of the final battle – the movement from image to image, thought to thought, depends entirely on these unwilling and irrational movements of the mind. And Bradley remained alert to alternative sensations so that he continued:

■ The atmosphere of *Macbeth*, however, is not that of unrelieved blackness. On the contrary, as compared with *King Lear* and its cold dim gloom, *Macbeth* leaves a decided impression of colour; it is really the impression of a black night broken by flashes of light and colour, sometimes vivid and even glaring. They are the lights and colours of the thunderstorm in the first scene; of the dagger hanging before Macbeth's eyes and glittering alone in the midnight air; of the torch borne by the servant when he and his lord come upon Banquo, crossing the castle-court to his room; of the torch, again, which Fleance carried to light his father to death, and which was dashed out by one of the murderers; of the torches that flared in the hall on the face of the Ghost and the blanched cheeks of Macbeth; of the flames beneath the boiling caldron from which the apparitions in the cavern rose; of the taper which showed to the Doctor and Gentlewoman the wasted face and blank eyes of Lady Macbeth. And, above all, the colour is the colour of blood. It cannot be an accident that the image of blood is forced upon us continually, not merely by the events themselves, but by full descriptions, and even by reiteration of the word in unlikely parts of the dialogue. The Witches, after their first wild appearance, have hardly quitted the stage when there staggers onto it a 'bloody man', gashed with wounds. His tale is of a hero whose 'brandished steel smoked with bloody execution', 'carved out a passage' to his enemy, and 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps'. And then he tells of a second battle so bloody that the combatants seemed as if they 'meant to bathe in reeking wounds'. What metaphors! What a dreadful image is that with which Lady Macbeth greets us almost as she enters, when she prays the spirits of cruelty so to thicken her blood that pity cannot flow along her veins! What pictures are those of the murderer appearing at the door of the banquet-room with Banquo's 'blood upon his face'; of Banquo himself 'with twenty trenched gashes on his head', or 'blood-bolter'd' and smiling in derision at his murderer; of Macbeth, gazing at his hand, and watching it dye the whole green ocean red; of Lady Macbeth, gazing at hers, and stretching it away from her face to escape the smell of blood that all the perfumes of Arabia will not subdue! The most horrible lines in the whole tragedy are those of her shuddering cry, 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' And it is not only at such moments that these images occur. Even in the quiet conversation of Malcolm and Macduff, Macbeth is imagined as holding

a bloody sceptre, and Scotland as a country bleeding and receiving every day a new gash added to her wounds. It is as if the poet saw the whole story through an ensanguined mist, and as if it stained the very blackness of the night. When Macbeth, before Banquo's murder, invokes night to scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day, and to tear in pieces the great bond that keeps him pale, even the invisible hand that is to tear the bond is imagined as covered with blood. □

This discussion of images, impressions, and 'atmosphere' is part of a more traditional criticism when linked to the progress of narrative and the sequence of on-stage action:

■ Let us observe another point. The vividness, magnitude, and violence of the imagery in some of these passages are characteristic of *Macbeth* almost throughout; and their influence contributes to form its atmosphere. Images like those of the babe torn smiling from the breast and dashed to death; of pouring the sweet milk of concord into hell; of the earth shaking in fever; of the frame of things disjointed; of sorrows striking heaven on the face, so that it resounds and yells out like syllables of dolour; of the mind lying in restless ecstasy on a rack; of the mind full of scorpions; of the tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury; – all keep the imagination moving on a 'wild and violent sea', while it is scarcely for a moment permitted to dwell on thoughts of peace and beauty. In its language, as in its action, the drama is full of tumult and storm. Whenever the Witches are present we see and hear a thunder-storm: when they are absent we hear of shipwrecking storms and direful thunders; of tempests that blow down trees and churches, castles, palaces and pyramids; of the frightful hurricane of the night when Duncan was murdered; of the blast on which pity rides like a new-born babe, or on which Heaven's cherubim are horsed. There is thus something magnificently appropriate in the cry 'Blow, wind! Come wrack!' with which Macbeth, turning from the sight of the moving wood of Birnam, bursts from his castle. He was borne to his throne on a whirlwind, and the fate he goes to meet comes on the wings of storm. (pp. 253–6) □

## CHAPTER TWO

# Subtextual Meanings, Tensions and Sensations

Although Bradley knew nothing of the actor training of Constantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) or the psychology of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), his interest in unspoken, unwilled, and unconscious elements of drama was in tune with the revaluation of words, unconscious motivations, and the presentation of self that was to be a mark of twentieth-century thought, social studies, and acting theory. But his interest in the subtextual life of a playtext also had contemporary parallels nearer home in the compellingly truthful performances of such star actors as Macready and Irving, Sarah Siddons and Ellen Terry. As these actors prepared their performances, they studied with great care those same details of a text that to others would seem ‘inconsistent, indistinct, feeble, exaggerated’. Bradley was like them when he looked for possible evidence of ‘some unusual trait in character, some abnormal movement of mind, only surprising to us because we understand so very much less of human nature than Shakespeare did’ (p. 54).

This way of reading a text led him to make judgements that literary scholars have sometimes – and even recently – condemned as too subtle or irrelevant because not supported by the text in so many words. Throughout the mid-twentieth century he was faulted for treating the persons of a play as if they were actually breathing and alive in their minds but today it is that criticism of his method that seems ill-considered and perverse. Now that acting has become a subject for research and teaching in universities, texts that were written for performance are better understood. Bradley set out to study a playtext as actors do in rehearsal (see p. 27, below) and can help us to do the same. He sometimes exaggerated small details and gave too much weight to accidental or personal responses but the direction and ambition of his criticism have increasingly been judged irreproachable and, indeed, obligatory. He had entered difficult and uncertain territory when he sought