



*Shakespeare
and Tragedy*
John Bayley

JOHN BAYLEY

SHAKESPEARE AND TRAGEDY



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INTRODUCTORY



Modern techniques of criticism should find a good field for exploitation in Shakespeare's plays: it is surprising that they have not so far been much used. Treating a text as a purely verbal experience, they read it as a multiple code to be deciphered by a number of signifying keys. They remove the author, and so should find it convenient that few attempts are now made to discover Shakespeare the man in his work. The author is his language and its functions, extending into all our own further acts of imagination about his text. And oddly enough something very like these conscious tenets of structuralism and semiotics have long been unconscious assumptions where Shakespearean criticism is concerned: Shakespeare critics have talked about him in this way without knowing it. Working inside a code of significance, they have understood and interpreted him according to their own lights and their own ideas of enjoyment

These up-to-date critical methods have tended none the less to prefer more modern texts. Balzac, Flaubert, Goethe, George Eliot, Henry James – they can not only be shown to mean a very great deal but something in their language codes already meets the critic half-way and acquiesces in the infinite extensibility of their meanings. They have no objection to the critic excluding them from a text which has become themselves. To remove the author in these cases is paradoxically to take for granted that he is and cannot be other than wholly identified with his work. As V. S. Naipaul has commented: 'Fiction never lies; it reveals the writer totally.' This makes for an intimacy between critic and author which the transformation of the latter into a linguistic code does nothing to compromise.

Intimacy with Shakespeare is of a different kind: not with the text as author but with the text as world. About the world there is nothing to say, though there is everything to say about our relations with it. But intimacy is not based on an invisible mutual understanding, as between author-text and client-decoder, about the text's significance and seriousness. And though Shakespeare's world is inside the words, these have a special and open relation with gesture, intonation, and sound. The ghost of Hamlet's father cries

But, soft! methinks I scent the morning air:
Brief let me be.

Our pleasure in the text as speech here is quite complex. The pause, the appeal to a pre-verbal sense instinct, enclose a wariness, something almost furtive, as if ignominious death had turned a king among men back into something from Circe's animal kingdom. This both reverses and enhances the marvellous wordiness of the ghost, his verbalisation of his predicament. His words move Hamlet intensely, and impress the audience, but the contrast between the ghost as speaker, and as a subtly and disquietingly physical being, has its own sort of comedy: not the author getting at the ghost, or giving any hint to the audience to do so, but as if both parties were separately savouring, and intently examining, the problematic nature of its existence.

When Ophelia says to Hamlet 'You are keen, my Lord, you are keen', the words reveal her instantly and as if inadvertently; they do not seem to be a part of the code of *Hamlet*. Because Flaubert is decipherable at constant speed in his own code, *Madame Bovary* is gradually built up and identified wholly in terms of it and its creator. Ophelia's words give us a more authoritative glimpse of a girl's predicament than does the whole of Flaubert's novel. They do so because of the suddenness and unexpectedness with which an impression is first received, and then derecorded, vanishing in an absence of uniformity and of tone.

All authors, including Shakespeare, make appeals to a 'metanarrative' which purports to come from outside the coding of the text. 'How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport?' The author gives a meaning glance at the audience over the heads of his characters. A complete story by Somerset Maugham begins like this. 'One of the inconveniences of life is that it seldom gives you a complete story. . . . Generally nothing happens. The inevitable catastrophe you foresaw wasn't inevitable at all, and high tragedy, without any regard for

artistic decency, dwindles into drawing-room comedy.' This is a way of introducing the reader to the conventional use here of the tragic and the comic, and of confirming the author's authority on both. Shakespeare's presentation of the murder of Caesar is confirmed as literature by its reference to the original event, Maugham's story from the life as coincident with the text it has become. Like the various modes of 'naturalism' in any fiction, such effects serve to propel us more surely into the world of the work of art.

But Shakespeare's plays are not 'theatre' in the sense in which the ordinary play is expected to be, and usually confirms itself as. Brecht's plays are plays in this sense, and so are Marlowe's or Ibsen's, Shaw's, Pinero's, or Chekhov's; they are designed to render specific effects which actors in the theatre can give, and to transmit certain ideas to the audience (ideas which in Brecht's case have usually been taken in by the audience well before the end of the performance). But impressions from Shakespeare are not like those from plays, or from any other genre of art. Maurice Morgann anticipated the methods of Roland Barthes when he 'cracked the code' of Shakespeare's Henry IV plays, in his essay of 1777, 'On the Dramatic Character of Sir John Falstaff', and announced that Falstaff is not a coward and buffoon but a man with the kinds of courage that go naturally with a strong character. What the play requires Falstaff to be is not what its language actually reveals him as.

Morgann's key word, 'impression', corresponds in some degree with the modern conception of 'code', and the suggestions based on it can be as enlightening in the case of the eighteenth-century critic as of the modern one. Both reveal the extent to which the pleasure of a certain kind of text goes with our readiness to exploit its unexpectedness, and believe in what it seems to suggest. Like everything else in art this unexpectedness of impression, these sensations unconfined to and undifferentiated by form and genre, are of course themselves produced by art; and yet they do not seem to lead us back to the author as text, as they would in the case of Balzac or Henry James or Flaubert, but to a new aspect of the text as a world.

Morgann was the first critic of Shakespeare to imply that such investigations had an authority of their own; and that an impression received from Shakespeare, however apparently subjective, also had a certain right to self-confidence. In general the impression we may receive from the tragedies written by Shakespeare is that the tragic form exists for him as a means of giving its freedom to every *other*

aspect of life and art. Such an impression would suggest the only real distinction – a formal one – between the tragedies and the histories, comedies, and the last plays. In them he seems to define the form and achievement of each play, as Henry James said of *The Tempest*, ‘by his expression of it exactly as the expression stands’. His tragedies, showing that they are tragedies, seem also to avoid being themselves. In a sense that would also be true of *Henry IV*, which the presence of Falstaff turns into something different from a history play, but there an inspired addition suffuses the historical narrative. The tragedies add nothing to a traditional tragic formula but produce a different result. The tragic characters avoid their roles by performing them in their own way.

Such an avoidance creates its own freedom, as in the case of *Hamlet*. Hamlet needs tragedy in order not to be exactly expressed, as comedy would have expressed him. This is not a question of different kinds or versions of Hamlet, but of the general freedom with which the tragic process surrounds him. By its action Shakespearean tragedy vividly suggests other worlds in which its operation is irrelevant, has no place. The code’s indications lead us outward. Hamlet is a man dispossessed of himself, or rather one who has no chance to become himself. Even more indeterminate, less dramatically enticing, is another world in *King Lear*, in which the ego lives by language and the family by silence. The hidden worlds implicit in Shakespearean tragedy, but not revealed by its formal specification, can also seem to encapsulate, in unnervingly realistic terms, a different sort and centre of artifice. Farce enters the marriage bed of the lovers in *Othello*. As if in a comedy, where beds are for everything but love, they are interrupted by a disturbance and appear to spend the rest of the night discussing it.

But no suggestion of incongruity threatens the coexistence of these worlds, or flattens them into diagram. Tragedy as a catalyst reveals both different modes of being and separate kinds of art. It is this relation between the form and idea of tragedy, and the modes of Shakespearean creation in relation to it, that I shall be trying to analyse and explore.

Shakespeare is not one of the English tragedians in the sense that Lydgate had been, or as some of his own contemporaries were, like Ben Jonson and Webster and Massinger: or as Dryden and Addison were to be, and then Tennyson and Sir Henry Taylor in the nineteenth century and T. S. Eliot in the twentieth. These authors variously had ideas of adding to the art and form of tragedy, defining it in relation to English

drama and the English poetic tradition, in concert with other schools and theories of the genre. Shakespeare's tragedies depend on the form in a different sense. They need it for diversionary, often almost parodic, excursion. With no apparent intention of doing so they evade its most characteristic commitments, fulfil them too literally, transform them.

Nor are they in any way a uniform body. There is a greater resemblance among the Greek tragedies, those in the classic French or Spanish genre, or in the German Romantic tradition, or among the tragedies of Shakespeare's own contemporaries, than there is between *Macbeth* and *Timon of Athens*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *King Lear* or *Coriolanus*. The stories in each of these seem to have engendered in Shakespeare's imagination a different way of looking at the world, and a new way of creating it in art. No doubt a measure of chance was involved. Sometimes the idea and the intellectual challenge of the form may have operated, at least initially, as it did upon other tragedians of the time. Then there was the success of the history plays as *exempla* of historic misfortune and political lesson, the rise and fall of princes and dynasties; and Shakespeare's supreme gift for turning chronicle and received tradition into popular drama. A readiness to imitate others goes with this, and a lack of assertive impulse. Ben Jonson's scholarship about the ancient world as source of tragedy, or Massinger's interest in social, legal and moral problems, are aspects of those writers' individuality, a source of ambition, of status and pride. But in relation both to the past and to the tragic form Shakespearean intelligence does not work like that.

This unusual relation with the materials of tragedy was held a fault and often censured in the century and a half following Shakespeare. It was seen in a different light from Morgann's time onwards, when Shakespeare's example seemed godlike and his influence was at its height. I suspect it was something about the atmosphere of that influence which made Schiller say, of his own tragic trilogy on the history of Wallenstein, that he took it on because it was a subject that did not interest him particularly. Perhaps he felt that this avowed lack of reflective interest might confer on him something of the detachment, the primal strength in creation, which he and other writers had begun to revere in Shakespeare. What is natural in Shakespeare begins, in the focus of Schiller's attitude, to seem portentous. It seems clear that Shakespeare was not in this self-conscious sense detached from his material, but in the bustle of his demanding profession there was no doubt an element of luck in how subjects for plays turned out.

Tragedies exemplary of the genre depend either on action or idea. The uncompromising finality of action in Greek tragedy is as remote from Shakespeare as is that exposition and catastrophe in terms of an evolving idea which distinguishes Romantic tragedy in the nineteenth century, or the stately resolution of dilemmas which is the engine of the neo-classic. The satires and *autos* of the Spanish school are no nearer to Shakespeare, except in point of time, than are Hebbel's and Grillparzer's Hegelian-style conflicts between history and the individual, or the confrontations arranged in modern poetic tragedy between individual and myth.

But with Shakespeare the mere fact and story of consciousness replaces both action and idea. It is the imminence of action which brings that consciousness into prominence, but it remains independent of action. The tragedy itself may be bounded in a nutshell, but the minds of Hamlet, of Macbeth and Othello, make them kings of infinite space. F. R. Leavis writes that the world of action is where Othello has his 'true part'. But there is no such thing as a true part for any hero of Shakespearean tragedy, and certainly not in action. It is his consciousness that fills the play. In Othello's case the action is supplied by Iago, who has no proper existence outside it. As he exclaims, after a successful bout of it, 'Pleasure and action make the hours seem short'. As short as those of an enacted play, which the hero's consciousness transcends. The usurpation by the mind of both practical action and purposeful idea in tragedy – the mind of a murderer, a revenger, a man and a woman in love – this is far from being the sum of Shakespearean tragedy; but it is the most important feature of Shakespeare's relations with the tragic form.

CHAPTER 1

THE KING'S SHIP



On Dover cliff

In the fourth act of *King Lear* the blinded Gloucester comes to the edge of Dover cliff, led by his son Edgar in the disguise of a Tom of Bedlam. Or rather he does not quite come to the edge; how near it he gets is not clear.

GLOU. When shall I come to the top of that same hill?

EDG. You do climb up it now; look how we labour.

GLOU. Methinks the ground is even.

EDG. Horrible steep

Hark! do you hear the sea?

GLOU. No, truly.

EDG. Why, then your other senses grow imperfect

By your eyes' anguish.

IV. vi. 1-6

Keats was haunted by 'Hark, do you hear the sea?' It is a sea heard in the mind only, for Edgar will soon revise his deceit and say that he cannot hear it either. Their little exchange has a kind of intimacy deep inside it, as if the pair had grown accustomed to one another in the course of their long walk. But however far the pair may be from the cliff's edge, Edgar's next words bring us all to it.

Here's the place, Stand still. How fearful
And dizzy 'tis to cast one's eyes so low!

The crows and choughs that wing the mid-way air
 Show scarce so gross as beetles. Half-way down
 Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade.
 Methinks he seems no bigger than his head.
 The fishermen that walk upon the beach
 Appear like mice, and yond tall anchoring bark
 Diminish'd to her cock, her cock a buoy
 Almost too small for sight. The murmuring surge
 That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes
 Cannot be heard so high.

IV. vi. 11-22

In the company of Garrick and some others Dr Johnson observed of this that 'the crows impede your fall' If you expect to be in fear of falling Johnson is probably right. But in fact, as the speech takes you, you are doing something more like soaring. The workaday intimacy in that little exchange between the pair now bursts exuberantly out. In his mindless emphases ('horrible... fearful... dreadful trade...') Edgar apes a cheerful working-man's relish in the way things are. In the midst of tragedy we briefly glimpse the daily round of hazard and accident - fires, floods, falling off ladders - and with Edgar we rise to the pointless occasion of them. However unexpected, there is here a proper moment for Dickensian enjoyment. And we have got there at last, to the cliff's edge, for whatever purpose.

But there is no purpose, only the sudden sense of freedom and exhilaration. The crows and choughs, the mice-like fishermen, the samphire gatherer, are beheld by the spectators as if they had abruptly floated off into a world outside the play Johnson's logic makes us realise this. If the play had a mental world it must needs engross us in, and the characters along with us, then we should need to feel in that precipice the terror of what Gloucester thinks he is about to do. Then indeed, as Johnson says, we should need to feel the description to be 'all precipice, all vacuum'. The crows then might certainly impede us from the play's cliff of fall - 'frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed'. But we are outside the drama: the drama is nowhere; we have no need to pay attention to it but only to the goings-on at the foot of Dover cliff.

Those are not part of the play, but they do not disassociate themselves from it either. If they were either in it, or self-consciously out of it, the play would not be a Shakespearean tragedy, or rather not this tragedy by Shakespeare. All, but in various ways, disclose kinds of

existence outside the preoccupations of their tragic matter. Sailors, fishermen and samphire gatherers, going about their occupation, are seen with the eye of joy, the joy of seeing the gift of 'the clearest gods'. The events of tragedy are going on in what is according to its lights an equally workaday world, in which the audience are doing their bit. Here they look up and look out of it. In Shakespeare's tragedies the transcendental takes many forms. But its effect is to make our consciousness feel homeless. There is in a way no tragedy other than the awareness of this. There are worlds which we can imagine and dream of in our philosophy but which we cannot live in – this is true even of the world we now see lived in by ships and waves, pebbles and people. The requirements of life make our sense imperfect through a necessary numbness; but the world Gloucester cannot see, and which only the play can show us, is also one which we recognise and delight in.

There is no question of any such worlds being 'true' ones, or truer than others. Shakespeare's idealism is only accidentally Platonic: it does not suggest that reality is elsewhere and that we are living in a world of shadows. Shadows and reflections are what we live in and by; enriched and presented by art they become the life and soul of consciousness. In giving us the pulse of life Edgar's description is none the less totally literature. Playing with shadows as it does – and 'the best in this kind are but shadows', as Theseus observes in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the play makes a vision of workaday life seen from the cliff's height seem inhabited by different beings, a tragic glass without the bitter liquid in it. The trick of Shakespearean art makes the illusion at a distance different from that closer to hand. 'Life's a dream', not in the sense in which Calderon's play asserts the idea, but because the mirage of art itself gives the different appearances of life that constitute a dream. There is no waking, though the art of this tragedy suggests that we endure in order to awake

Literary consciousness has come to reject tragedy as something that feigns by contriving the worst; and thus cheering us up, paradoxically, by an obvious misrepresentation of the way things really and unremittingly are. Shakespeare's feigning is of a uniquely comprehensive kind which creates the appearance of tragic reality not by reduction but by multiplication. In his essay 'Tragedy and the Whole Truth', Aldous Huxley draws attention to the difference between the way in which tragic grief is represented and the ways in which it actually has to fit in to the priorities of existing. The overwhelming desire for a drink or

something to eat never anticipates the proper expression of grief at the end of a tragedy. But Homer records in the *Odyssey* that after Scylla and Charybdis had seized and devoured some of their party, Ulysses and the survivors managed to land, and after recruiting themselves with the best supper they could make, began to lament and shed tears for their absent comrades. This account of Homer, says Huxley, is the whole truth as human beings have to experience it.

A valid point, for tragedians do not look at things but at the human version of them: they are concerned with what people create about themselves inside their minds, and what images and defensive overlookings they foster there. As a form, tragedy flourishes at times when language has the confidence of a specially rich and active function in relation to human fates – an elaborately protective function. The language of tragedy has words for any situation. Shakespeare represents grief, and the self-protector's need to express it, in rhetorical modes of range and subtlety, from the noisy outburst of the nurse and the Capulet parents over the seemingly dead Juliet, to the response of the Scottish lords to Duncan's murder, and the symphonic ritual of the survivors at the end of *King Lear*:

KENT.	Is this the promis'd end?
EDG. Or image of that horror?	
ALB	Fall and cease!
	V. iii 263–4

The language of tragedy does not describe events but takes them over, and in Shakespeare it does more. Words can redeem both protagonists and audience from those events by darting off outside them, under the impetus of their own self-generative ardour, 'in the quick forge and working-house of thought'. A Greek chorus does this with more energy and obviousness, bringing a unity to the response of spectators and actors that does not exist in Shakespeare.

Coriolanus is too exhausted from the reaction after his bout of fighting in Corioli to remember the name of his former benefactor in the city whom he wished to be spared. He gives up the attempt and thinks only of a draught of wine. There is a small parallel there with Huxley's point about Homer, the kind of resemblance that is sure to turn up somewhere in the tragedies. But the Dover cliff scene is itself, and amongst other things, an indicator of what Huxley was getting at. It releases us from the point of view, the preoccupation that, in

rhetorical form, dominates tragedy. Romeo is dominated by it when he recalls the Mantuan apothecary who might sell him poison, but the poetry also shows us the apothecary as Edgar's account showed us Dover cliff:

Let's see for means: O mischief, thou art swift
To enter in the thoughts of desperate men
I do remember an apothecary,
And hereabouts he dwells, which late I noted
In tattered weeds, with overwhelming brows,
Culling of simples; meagre were his looks,
Sharp misery had worn him to the bones:
And in his needy shop a tortoise hung,
An alligator stuff'd, and other skins
Of ill-shap'd fishes: and about his shelves
A beggarly account of empty boxes,
Green earthen pots, bladders, and musty seeds,
Remnants of packthread, and old cakes of roses,
Were thinly scattered to make up a show.

V. i. 35-48

By contrast Macbeth's rhetoric is wholly illustrative of himself:

Howe'er you come to know it, answer me.
Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the churches: though the yeasty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature's germens tumble all together
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you.

IV. i. 51-61

That war of shadows is working for Macbeth, not carrying on a life of its own. And yet there seems a real froth of surf: a real cornfield flattened by wind and rain. Our glimpse of them is as brief as possible but it exists: the shadows are defined as sharply as possible. Performance is eked out with the mind in the fullest sense, and in the mind's capacity for multiple response, each separated from the other.

The language of Shakespearean tragedy exactly comprehends and endorses the simplest religious premise: that we live in no abiding city but in a world of shadows out of which thought aspires to regions that seem to it everlasting. Religion needs a transcendental truth; Shakespeare's transcendentalism is equally ideal but implies nothing but differentiation. It is brief, with a brevity that intensifies the relation between language and the mind, and often draws its own kind of attention to the process. Marvell, the most Shakespearean of poets, has the same sense of the possible relation in art of mind and language.

The mind that ocean, where each kind
Does streight its own resemblance find;
But it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds and other seas. . .

We seem to feel the process going on all round us on the cliff-top. The sense of exhilarating space is in one area: the knowledge of Gloucester and his ruined sense, in another. The freedom of mind and sense, in this poetry, is often exulted in by the poetry itself; the power of its charge to leap from point to point with telegraphic economy is a feature that grows more marked in Shakespeare's style as the plays go on.

I boarded the King's ship; now on the beak
Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin,
I flam'd amazement: sometimes I'd divide
And burn in many places; on the topmast,
The yards and bowsprit, would I flame distinctly,
Then meet and join.

I. ii. 196-201

Ariel's description of his magic is also a description of the height of Shakespeare's tragic style. Parodied and exuberant, it reveals itself in his words and actions: on Dover cliff it gives itself to us without consciousness, through the sole medium of what is created. It is a typical paradox that Shakespearean tragedy should consist so much of angelic moments – another is Banquo's reference to 'the temple-haunting martlet' that makes its nest on the wall of Macbeth's castle – which bring home the nature of the tragic, as his poetry gives it to us, more unmistakably than all its rhetoric of loss and darkness, misfortune and disaster.

The tragic relates here to the ideal, and how momentary it is;

consciousness apprehends it as it declares itself, with the rapidity of magic. We think of Shakespeare as down-to-earth, and as a universal model sensibility, adjustable to any age. As regards his finest sense of the tragic neither of these assumptions is true. The distance, in Shakespearean tragedy, of 'living' from 'writing' is what gives him his complete anonymity, but it also reveals such writing to be an angelical activity. A coincidence with Renaissance idealism is conferred upon us, more or less, by our boarding the king's ship, not to do as Ariel does, but to share in the rareness of his magic. Shakespearean tragedy depends upon the fact that angelic perceptions are too good for this life, but they are none the less what creatures who have to live this life, and live it with an unsuitably godlike apprehension, depend on.

We are accustomed today to think of the writer's sensibility as what he lives in all the time and shares with us; must do so, totally, in order to be himself as a writer for us.

What I want to do now is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole: whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea. Waste, deadness, come from the inclusion of things that don't belong to the moment; this appalling narrative business of the realist. . . . Why admit anything to literature that is not poetry – by which I mean saturated?

That is Virginia Woolf in *A Writer's Diary*, talking about her novel *The Waves*, and how to read it. Her idea of the 'saturation' of consciousness is as different as possible from that elevation of consciousness which we have in Shakespeare. The logic of Virginia Woolf's method is already present in Sterne, naturalised by Hegel and the German philosophers, explored by Wordsworth and Coleridge. Today it is taken for granted – 'One life, one writing' as the poet Robert Lowell puts it. Whitman would have understood that, and so would every American writer today. What is comprised is not so much the autobiographical, though that comes into it, as the homogeneity of consciousness manipulated by art – 'the voice of the sea' becomes a part of thought and sensation. In Shakespearean tragedy the voice of the sea, which Keats heard, comes from another world which our consciousness visits, aware that it cannot live there, or even remain there for more than a moment.