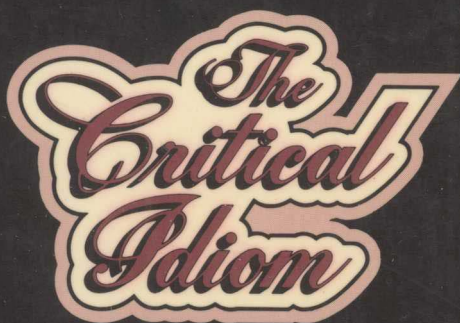


Tragedy

Clifford Leech



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Once more to GABRIELE

Founder Editor's Preface

The volumes composing the *Critical Idiom* deal with a wide variety of key terms in our critical vocabulary. The purpose of the series differs from that served by the standard glossaries of literary terms. Many terms are adequately defined for the needs of students by the brief entries in these glossaries, and such terms do not call for attention in the present series. But there are other terms which cannot be made familiar by means of compact definitions. Students need to grow accustomed to them through simple and straightforward but reasonably full discussions. The main purpose of this series is to provide such discussions.

Many critics have borrowed methods and criteria from currently influential bodies of knowledge or belief that have developed without particular reference to literature. In our own century, some of them have drawn on art-history, psychology, or sociology. Others, strong in a comprehensive faith, have looked at literature and literary criticism from a Marxist or a Christian or some other sharply defined point of view. The result has been the importation into literary criticism of terms from the vocabularies of these sciences and creeds. Discussions of such bodies of knowledge and belief in their bearing upon literature and literary criticism form a natural extension of the initial aim of the *Critical Idiom*.

Because of their diversity of subject-matter, the studies in the series vary considerably in structure. But all authors have tried to give as full illustrative quotation as possible, to make reference whenever appropriate to more than one literature, and to write in such a way as to guide readers towards the short bibliographies in which they have made suggestions for further reading.

John D. Jump

University of Manchester

Prefatory Note

It has, I feel, been a great privilege to be asked by Professor John Jump to write the volume on 'Tragedy' for this series, yet of course few tasks could have been more difficult. A volume of a hundred thousand words, though it might have taken longer, would have been in some respects easier. What is here presented is a cursory glance at what 'tragedy' has meant through the ages, yet I hope that the term may have been in this way somewhat clarified.

Dates of plays are those of first performance (preceded by a 'c.' where the date is uncertain), unless otherwise indicated. Quotations from Shakespeare are from the edition by Peter Alexander (1951); act-, scene-, and line-divisions are from the Globe edition.

In the text, as in the bibliography, the place of publication is London unless otherwise indicated.

I am grateful to Messrs. Hamish Hamilton Ltd and Alfred A. Knopf for permission to include the quotation from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches*, translated by Stuart Gilbert, on pp. 51-2 and to Hope Leresche and Steel and Jonathan Cape Ltd for permission to include the quotation from *Tango* by Slawomir Mrozek, translated by N. Bethell, on p. 11.

Clifford Leech

Toronto, 1969

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I

Some Definitions and Observations

ARISTOTLE

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.

(*The Poetics*, Oxford, 1909, translated
by Ingram Bywater, Chapter VI)

Plots are either simple or complex, since the actions they represent are naturally of this twofold description. The action, proceeding in the way defined, as one continuous whole, I call simple, when the change in the hero's fortunes takes place without Peripety or Discovery; and complex, when it involves one or the other, or both. These should each of them arise out of the structure of the Plot itself, so as to be the consequence, necessary or probable, of the antecedents. There is a great difference between a thing happening *propter hoc* and *post hoc*.

(*The Poetics*, Chapter X)

There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity; e.g. Oedipus, Thyestes, and the men of note of similar families. The perfect Plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not (as some tell us) a double issue; the change in the hero's fortunes must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must lie not in any

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depravity, but in some great error on his part; the man himself being either such as we have described, or better, not worse, than that.

(*The Poetics*, Chapter XIII)

DIOMEDES (4th century A.D.)

[Tragedy is] a narrative of the fortunes of heroic (or semi-divine) characters in adversity.

(J. W. H. Atkins, *English Literary Criticism: The Medieval Phase*, Cambridge, 1943, p. 31)

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE (6th–7th centuries A.D.)

[Tragedy consists of] sad stories of commonwealths and kings.

(Atkins, p. 32)

JOHN OF GARLAND (12th – 13th centuries A.D.)

[Tragedy is] a poem written in the 'grand' style, which treats of shameful and wicked deeds, and, beginning in joy, ends in grief.

(Atkins, p. 111)

CHAUCEER

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde bokes maken us memorie,
Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
Into miserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

(Prologue to *The Monk's Tale*)

SIDNEY

... the high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds,
and sheweth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that 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 . . .

(*An Apology for Poetry, English Critical Essays (Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)*, edited by Edmund D. Jones, 1930, pp. 31-2)

GEORGE PUTTENHAM

Besides those Poets *Comick* there were other who serued also the stage, but medled not with so base matters: For they set forth the dolefull falls of infortunate & afflicted Princes, & were called Poets *Tragicall*.

(*The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), edited by G. D. Willcock and A. Walker, Cambridge, 1936, p. 26)

ANON

Murder be proud, and Tragedy laugh on,
I'll seek a stage for thee to jet upon.

(*Lust's Dominion, or The Lascivious Queen*, probably acted 1599-1600)

JOHN MARSTON

If any spirit breathes within this round,
Uncapable of waightie passion
(As from his birth, being hugged in the armes,
And nuzzled twixt the breastes of happinesse)
Who winkes, and shuts his apprehension up
From common sense of what men were, and are,
Who would not knowe what men must be; let such
Hurrie amaine from our black visag'd showes:

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We shall affright their eyes. But if a breast,
Nail'd to the earth with griefe: if any heart
Pierc't through with anguish, pant within this ring:
If there be any blood, whose heate is choakt
And stifled with true sense of misery:
If ought of these straines fill this consort up,
Th' arrive most welcome.

(Prologue to *Antonio's Revenge*,
c. 1600)

SHAKESPEARE

Whereupon it [Reason] made this threne
To the phoenix and the dove,
Co-supremes and stars of love,
As chorus to their tragic scene.

(*The Phoenix and Turtle*, 1601)

CHAPMAN

And for the authentical truth of either person or action, who (worth the respecting) will expect it in a poem, whose subject is not truth, but things like truth? Poor envious souls they are that cavil at truth's want in these natural fictions; material instruction, elegant and sententious excitation to virtue, and deflection from her contrary, being the soul, limbs, and limits of an authentical tragedy.

(Dedication to *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois*, published 1613)

RACINE

Ce n'est point une nécessité qu'il y ait du sang et des morts dans une tragédie; il suffit que l'action en soit grande, que les acteurs en soient héroïques, que les passions y soient excitées, et que tout s'y ressente de cette tristesse majestueuse qui fait tout le plaisir de la tragédie.
[It is not necessary that there shall be blood and deaths in tragedy:

it is enough that its action shall be great, that its characters shall be heroic, that the passions shall be aroused through it, and that the whole effect shall be that majestic sadness which constitutes the whole pleasure of tragedy.]

(Preface to *Bérénice*, 1668)

THOMAS RYMER

These [the Greek writers of tragedy] were for teaching by *examples*, in a graver way, yet extremely *pleasant* and *delightful*. And, finding in History, the same *end* happen to the *righteous* and to the *unjust*, *virtue* often oppress, and *wickedness* on the Throne: they saw these particular *yesterday-truths* were imperfect and improper to illustrate the *universal* and *eternal truths* by them intended. Finding also that this *unequal* distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the *wisest*, and by the *Atheist* was made a scandal to the *Divine Providence*. They concluded, that a *Poet* must of necessity see *justice* exactly administered, if he intended to please. For, said they, if the World can scarce be satisfi'd with God Almighty, whose holy will and purposes are not to be *comprehended*; a *Poet* (in these matters) shall never be pardon'd, who (they are sure) is not *incomprehensible*; whose *ways* and *walks* may, without *impiety*, be penetrated and examin'd.

(*The Tragedies of the Last Age*, 1677)

DRYDEN

The death of *Anthony* and *Cleopatra*, is a Subject which has been treated by the greatest Wits of our Nation, after *Shakespeare*; and by all so variously, that their Example has given me the confidence to try my selfe in this Bowe of *Ulysses* amongst the Crowd of Sutors; and, withal, to take my own measures, in aiming at the Mark. I doubt not but the same Motive has prevailed with all of us in this attempt; I mean the excellency of the Moral: for the chief Persons represented, were famous Patterns of unlawful Love; and their end accordingly was unfortunate.

(Preface to *All for Love*, published 1678)

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ADDISON

The English writers of tragedy are possessed with a notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in distress, they ought not to leave him till they have delivered him out of his troubles, or made him triumph over his enemies. This error they have been led into by a ridiculous doctrine in modern criticism, that they are obliged to an equal distribution of rewards and punishments, and an impartial execution of poetical justice. Who were the first that established this rule I know not; but I am sure it has no foundation in nature, in reason, or in the practice of the ancients.

(*The Spectator*, 16 April 1711)

HEINRICH VON KLEIST

Man can be great in grief, ay, even a hero,
But only in happiness is he a god.

(*Penthesilea*, 1808, translated by Humphrey Trevelyan)

GOETHE

Even a noble Greek who well knew how to portray heroic characters did not disdain to let his heroes weep when they suffered such agony. He said: Noble are the men who can weep. Leave me alone – you who have a dry heart and dry eyes! I curse the happy for whom the unhappy is only a spectacle.

(*Elective Affinities*, 1809, translated by E. Mayer and L. Bogan)

KIERKEGAARD

The tragic hero does not know the terrible responsibility of solitude. In the next place he has the comfort that he can weep and lament with Clytemnestra and Iphigenia – and tears and cries are assuaging, but unutterable sighs are torture.

(*Fear and Trembling*, 1843, translated by Walter Lowrie, New York, 1953, p. 123)

NIETZSCHE

... tragic myth has convinced us that even the ugly and discordant are merely an esthetic game which the will, in its utter exuberance, plays with itself. In order to understand the difficult phenomenon of Dionysiac art directly, we must now attend to the supreme significance of *musical dissonance*. The delight created by tragic myth has the same origin as the delight dissonance in music creates. That primal Dionysiac delight, experienced even in the presence of pain, is the source common to both music and tragic myth.

(*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872, translated by Francis Golffing, New York, 1956, p. 143)

HENRY JAMES

She was older for him to-night, visibly less exempt from the touch of time; but she was as much as ever the finest and subtlest creature, the happiest apparition, it had been given him, in all his years, to meet; and yet he could see her there as vulgarly troubled, in very truth, as a maidservant crying for her young man. The only thing was that she judged herself as the maidservant wouldn't; the weakness of which wisdom too, the dishonour of which judgement, seemed but to sink her lower. Her collapse, however, no doubt, was briefer and she had in a manner recovered herself before he intervened. 'Of course I'm afraid for my life. But that's nothing. It isn't that.'

(*The Ambassadors*, 1903, Book XII, §II)

A. C. BRADLEY

Thus we are left at last with an idea showing two sides or aspects which we can neither separate nor reconcile. The whole or order against which the individual part shows itself powerless seems to be animated by a passion for perfection: we cannot otherwise explain its behaviour towards evil. Yet it appears to engender this evil within

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itself, and in its effort to overcome and expel it it is agonised with pain, and driven to mutilate its own substance and to lose not only evil but priceless good. That this idea, though very different from the idea of a blank fate, is no solution of the riddle of life is obvious; but why should we expect it to be such a solution? Shakespeare was not attempting to justify the way of God to men, or to show the universe as a Divine Comedy. He was writing tragedy, and tragedy would not be tragedy if it were not a painful mystery.

(*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904, pp. 37-8)

I. A. RICHARDS

Tragedy is only possible to a mind which is for the moment agnostic or Manichean. The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal. . . . Tragedy is perhaps the most general, all-accepting, all-ordering experience known. It can take anything into its organisation, modifying it so that it finds a place. It is invulnerable; there is nothing which does not present to the tragic attitude *when fully developed* a fitting aspect and only a fitting aspect.

(*Principles of Literary Criticism*, reprinted 1934, pp. 246-7)

JEAN ANOUILH

The spring is wound up tight. It will uncoil of itself. That is what is so convenient in tragedy. The least little turn of the wrist will do the job. . . .

The rest is automatic. You don't need to lift a finger. The machine is in perfect order; it has been oiled ever since time began, and it runs without friction. Death, treason and sorrow are on the march; and they move in the wake of storm, of tears, of stillness. Every kind of stillness. The hush when the executioner's axe goes up at the end of the last act. The unbreathable silence when, at the beginning of the play, the two lovers, their hearts bared, their bodies naked, stand for