CASEBOOK SERIES

GENERAL EDITOR A. E. DYSON

Shakespeare's Early Tragedies:

Richard III
Titus Andronicus
Romeo and Juliet

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Richard III, *Titus Andronicus* and *Romeo and Juliet*

A CASEBOOK

EDITED BY

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and

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The Casebook series, launched in 1968, has become a well-regarded library of critical studies. The central concern of the series remains the 'single-author' volume, but suggestions from the academic community have led to an extension of the original plan, to include occasional volumes on such general themes as literary 'schools' and genres.

Each volume in the central category deals either with one well-known and influential work by an individual author, or with closely related works by one writer. The main section consists of critical readings, mostly modern, collected from books and journals. A selection of reviews and comments by the author's contemporaries is also included, and sometimes comment from the author himself. The Editor's Introduction charts the reputation of the work or works from the first appearance to the present time.

Volumes in the 'general themes' category are variable in structure but follow the basic purpose of the series in presenting an integrated selection of readings, with an Introduction which explores the theme and discusses the literary and critical issues involved.

A single volume can represent no more than a small selection of critical opinions. Some critics are excluded for reasons of space, and it is hoped that readers will pursue the suggestions for further reading in the Select Bibliography. Other contributions are severed from their original context, to which some readers may wish to turn. Indeed, if they take a hint from the critics represented here, they certainly will.

A. E. DYSON

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's contemporaries regarded the three plays covered by this volume as tragedies. (At least, each was so described on the title page of its First Quarto and in the relevant title within the First Folio of 1623.) Tragedy, in the formulations it was given by Elizabethan theorists, recounts the falls of eminent men and offers a number of moral lessons. If Kings are Tyrants they will be punished, which implies that there is divine justice. On the other hand, life is entirely unpredictable. There is a contradiction in the argument here, but then tragedy is an enactment of painfully contradictory facts.

Tragedy leads to contradictory responses too. Medieval accounts of tragic falls preach the need for resignation in the face of suffering. Such a lesson encourages the somewhat negative conclusion that the world should be held in contempt as a mere vale of tears. Those who suffer most spectacularly are those who expose themselves to trouble by seeking worldly success. But the Elizabethans came to see a positive significance in suffering as well, and this derived in part from their interest in the plays of the Roman dramatist Seneca, who seemed to be asserting the *nobility* of suffering.

Seneca was, as Joost Daalder puts it, 'the only *tragic* dramatist at all familiar to most Elizabethans.'[1] By 1581 all his plays were readily available in English translations, and a play like Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1589) displays the influence of his sensationalism and declamatory style. His influence on Shakespeare's early tragedies was strongly advocated by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars but in the last fifty years a counter-case has also been put. For example, in 1936, Willard Farnham was arguing that

> Before Christian Europe could produce Shakespeare it needed to evolve slowly its own Gothic sense of tragic form and content . . . [and] experience something of the same vision out of which the earlier classic world had produced tragedy.
>
> (*The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*, Berkeley, p. 3)

Farnham went on to describe a native tradition of both dramatic

and non-dramatic moralising literature (including not only tales of famous falls and treatments of the theme of Contempt in verse and prose, but Morality Plays as well) which, to his satisfaction, provided the structure and ethos of Elizabethan tragedy.

Irving Ribner, in his *Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1960), attempted to reconcile the Senecan and indigenous cases. For him, *Titus Andronicus, Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet* are highly imitative of Senecan tragedy but seek to grasp 'the life-journey of man in conflict with evil' (p. 12). *Titus Andronicus* is like the Morality Plays in that it shows a virtuous man's fall through deception. *Richard III* describes the rise and fall of a deliberately evil man but ends with the cleansing of the social order and employs throughout a universalising ritual technique learnt from the Moralities. *Romeo and Juliet* tells of a hero and heroine whose youthful vulnerability and folly is symbolic of the human condition. Whether or not he makes his case a persuasive one, Ribner typifies much of the criticism of the last thirty years in that he believes Shakespeare wrote all three of these plays, considers each of them worthy of serious attention, and questions the notion of a single formula for 'Shakespearean Tragedy'.

The notion that Shakespearean Tragedy is a distinct sub-genre was given its most famous and influential expression by A. C. Bradley. By the late nineteenth century the critical term *tragedy* had acquired an immense spiritual and ideological significance. In 1904, A. C. Bradley was writing of the Shakespearean tragic hero that he represented 'the full power and reach of the soul' and 'a type of the mystery of the whole world'. As for tragedy itself, it was 'the typical form of this mystery, because that greatness of soul which it exhibits oppressed, conflicting and destroyed, is the highest existence in our view'.[2]

One effect of this development was that these three plays, almost certainly written during the period 1591–1595 (when Shakespeare was in his late twenties and early thirties), had now to live in the shadow of supposedly profounder tragedies written later in his career. Bradley himself played a key role in this process of discrimination. Indeed, he virtually ignored all three plays in his famous lectures on *Shakespearean Tragedy*. *Romeo and Juliet*, he explained, may have been a 'pure tragedy', but it was immature. *Richard III* was *not* pure tragedy. *Titus Andronicus* was neither mature nor pure.[3]

Underlying Bradley's thinking about tragedy is an assumption

that the word has a universal and eternal meaning. If such were the case, then after 2,500 years of effort we might indeed be able to identify the essence of 'pure tragedy', isolate the best examples of the genre and dismiss the rest. But an historical approach to the word undermines such a proposition. As Raymond Williams has argued, the tradition of tragic theory since Aristotle is characterised by change rather than stability.[4] Bradley's ideas inevitably reflected the nature of the culture within which he was writing. Such diverse factors as the cult of the hero, the popularity of the naturalistic novel, and the growth of humanism as an alternative to religious faith, contributed to the particular emphases in Bradley's notion of what constitutes 'pure tragedy'.

We may also wish to distance ourselves from Bradley when he uses such terms as 'maturity' and 'immaturity'. His usage is, of course, only part of the widespread wish since Coleridge to conceive of literature as a living organism subject to growth and decay. But why should we be bullied by a metaphor? Does it not give a spurious authority to highly subjective judgements? And when a critic evaluates a work of literature as displaying 'maturity', are we really being told any more than that the author's ideas about life have happened to coincide with those of the critic?

Richard III

The critical response to *Richard III* has been dominated by a discussion of its eponymous 'hero' and also by a debate about the success or failure of its structure. As early as 1700 these two issues were implicitly taken up by Colly Cibber (1671–1757) when he made a radical adaptation of the play. His version held the stage, despite Samuel Phelps's attempt in 1845 to restore Shakespeare's text, until 1870. He cuts the play drastically, retaining only about a third of Shakespeare's lines, incorporates bits of other Shakespeare plays and adds a thousand or so lines of his own. Margaret, Clarence, Hastings and Edward are omitted entirely, Buckingham, Rivers, Grey and Vaughan are reduced in significance, and eight whole scenes go by the board. The resulting play concentrates relentlessly on Richard himself, and in particular on his feelings and the feelings of his victims (both areas which Cibber 'wrote up'). He is effectively isolated, an unsympathetic and inexplicable moral phenomenon without the ironical placing of history or divine providence.

George Steevens* wrote in 1793 that he regarded Cibber's adaptation as 'judicious' and was relieved that it omitted Clarence's dream 'and other undramatick incumbrances'. Charles Lamb,* on the other hand, considered Cibber's version 'wretched' (letter to Robert Lloyd, 26th June 1801) and one therefore assumes that his comments derive from a study of the printed text. He detected an ambivalence in Shakespeare's portrait of Richard: 'He set out to paint a *monster*, but his sympathies produced a *Man*'. For Lamb, Richard was a man with a knowledge of the human heart and, above all, an 'habitual jocularity',[5] and Lamb was full of admiration for his genius, and his mounting spirit. Georg Gottfried Gervinus* approved the prominence which Shakespeare gives to Richard. It provides an intellectual unity, for everything else in the play is organised in relation to the brutality which is Richard's character. Hermann Ulrici,* another mid-nineteenth-century German, appears to be condemning the play for what he regards as an artistic defect—the want of 'drastic animation' in the first four acts ('On the one side we have only power and energy, on the other only submission and impotence'). But the resulting portrait of Richard is a study in tyranny. And this, he asserts, is the historical significance of the whole drama, its presentation of 'the historico-political phenomenon of selfishness in its worst form'. Similarly, R. G. Moulton* finds in the centrality of the character study of Richard the artistic and moral integrity of the play. Like Lamb, Edward Dowden* finds himself admiring Richard's 'daring experiment of choosing evil for his good'. This recognition of a paradoxical ambivalence in our response to Richard is at the heart of much criticism of the play in the twentieth century too.

An ambivalence is already built into the play's structure, for it presents an immediate problem of generic location. The editors of the First Folio called it a tragedy but inserted it into the section occupied by the history plays. R. G. Moulton, writing in 1885, regarded it as a sort of Christianised Greek Tragedy, arguing that Shakespeare had transformed the world of history into 'an intricate design of which the recurrent pattern is Nemesis'.[6] Sixty years later, Lily B. Campbell felt that it succeeded in being simultaneously history and tragedy, even though Shakespeare was 'writing without a clear distinction between these genres in mind'.[7]

* The authors whose critical material is included in the relevant section of this Casebook are indicated by an asterisk.

But tragic form is surely under strain in this play. It may indeed be regarded as the culmination of a tragic process which begins with *Richard II* and occupies the whole cycle of eight English history plays. And one of the statements they all seem to be making is the tragic one that hopes and ambitions fade and achievements are lost. But could Shakespeare afford to let such a statement emerge when he is supposed to be celebrating the 'Tudor Myth'? Isn't the victory of Richmond, the grandfather of Queen Elizabeth I, necessarily *comic* in the formal sense? And if we return to the character of the 'hero', can we take him seriously? Isn't Richard too much of both the comedian and the monster? Has he the human representativeness, the dignity, the capacity for moral insight and growth, which many critics have demanded from a tragic figure?

These issues are raised by A. P. Rossiter.* Rossiter saw himself as mounting a challenge to the dominant reading of the play as 'moral history', of which E. M. W. Tillyard* is the most famous exponent. The assault on Tillyard's books and the 'Elizabethan World Picture'[8] has been conducted with some intensity in recent years. The accusations against Tillyard are, firstly, that his account is usually over-simplified and reductive and, secondly, that his own political assumptions inform his readings of the plays. In the case of *Richard III* Tillyard asserted that 'in spite of the eminence of Richard's character the main business of the play is to complete the national tetralogy and to display the working out of God's plan to restore England to prosperity' (*Shakespeare's History Plays* (London), p. 199). Richard is indeed the instrument of God's ends but Shakespeare's instrument is Richmond who makes a 'full declaration of the principle of order, thus giving final and unmistakable shape to what, though largely implicit, had been all along the animating principle of the tetralogy' (ibid., p. 201).

Rossiter chooses to attack Tillyard's wish to see the play as ultimately unproblematic. Rossiter not only finds in the play rather more than the Tudor myth and the Christian principle of history but is conscious that his response is always ambivalent. Shakespeare has converted the Senecan tyrant into a creature with another nature, deriving from the native Morality tradition—the 'diabolic humorist'. The play's unity derives from the central paradoxes that (a) we must find Richard morally ugly but are nevertheless seduced by his 'volcanic Renaissance energies', his stage personality and histrionic skill, and (b), while we recognise God's agency in Richard's

killing and may even lack Christian charity to those whom he destroys, 'God's will. . . . sickens us'. Rossiter stops short, however, of drawing conclusions about Shakespeare's attitude to his material: Shakespeare, he says, is not debunking or disproving the Tudor myth, indeed he is not *proving* anything, preferring to pass the responsibility to us of interpreting 'relatives, ambiguities, irony'. When he talks of the play as being comic history rather than moral history he seems to be using 'comic' as a term denoting tone rather than form. When he talks of the play as 'a process thoroughly dialectical' he seems to be using the phrase formalistically rather than politically. For Rossiter, perhaps because of the prevalent ideas of the American New Criticism in the post-war period (the lecture was first delivered in 1953), irony and paradox are seemingly acceptable structures in themselves, complete in their uncompletedness.

For all that Rossiter is interested in considering *Richard III* as an experiment in 'comic history', it is implicit in his discussion that the play is tragic ('Early it may be; but the play is a triumphant contrivance in a manner which cannot properly be compared with that of any other tragedy'). Furthermore, the emphasis he puts on both Richard himself and the ambivalence of our attitude to him encourages a reading which conceives of Richard as a tragic hero.

Peter Reynolds* takes as his topic the theatrical presentation of Richard as hero. He argues against what he regards as the dominant reading of the part, a reading which dates back to Cibber and received further authorisation in Laurence Olivier's 1955 film version of the play. This theatrical tradition makes of Richard a matinee idol whose star-quality finally overrides all moral considerations. Reynolds not only questions the authority of that tradition by proposing an alternative reading but tries to explore the significances of other characters who occupy the stage, even when they are silent.

Even so, Reynolds still concentrates on one man, Richard. Irene G. Dash* begins her reading by exploring the significance of a woman, Margaret – a woman whom Cibber and Olivier chose entirely to omit from their versions of the text. Those directors who cut the part of Margaret conventionally argue that the play is too long and something has to go; that the play lacks unity, and concentration on Richard supplies it; and that, without a knowledge of the earlier plays in the tetralogy, an audience is at a loss to understand Margaret's contribution. Dash alerts us to the fact that

the directorial decision to silence Margaret only reinforces the larger wish of a male-dominated society (both the society portrayed by the play and the society in which the play is performed) to render women silent, and therefore powerless. She then goes on to consider the other women in the play, arguing that Shakespeare's text 'challenges the idea of woman's innate inferiority' and reveals him to be a proto-feminist.

Titus Andronicus

Despite the absence of his name on their First Quartos, *Richard III* and *Romeo and Juliet* have always been accepted as being by Shakespeare. However, *Titus Andronicus* is a different matter. Francis Meres listed it as one of Shakespeare's tragedies in 1598, but most readers during the next three centuries regarded it as shocking and inept and doubted whether the great man could have been responsible for such a piece of work. Even the editor of the 1984 *Oxford Shakespeare* edition of the play felt the need to devote nine pages of his Introduction to the question of authorship before concluding, 'I believe that the evidence I have presented points to the conclusion that *Titus Andronicus* is entirely by Shakespeare'.[9]

Whether or not it was by Shakespeare, the critical assault on *Titus Andronicus* has been pretty wholesale. Edward Ravenscroft* called *Titus Andronicus* 'a heap of Rubbish'. 'Rubbish' suggests he was attacking its content, but his scorn was actually directed at its form (hence 'heap'). However, Lewis Theobald* was appalled by the plot and the diction, and Samuel Johnson* and August Wilhelm Schlegel* by the barbarous incidents and shallow sensationalism. What grudging praise pre-twentieth-century critics offered focused on details of language or characterisation. Johnson found the style 'not always inelegant' and Schlegel admitted that, in addition to some beautiful lines and bold images, there were occasional original and affecting features in the presentation of Titus and Aaron.

The turning point in the play's critical fortunes came in 1943, when Hereward T. Price wrote a detailed defence against three hundred years of abuse ('The Authorship of *Titus Andronicus*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 42 (1943), pp. 55–81). According to Price, the author of this experimental play is Shakespeare and his stagecraft is 'excellent'. Price finds the structure entirely coherent: it is, he claims, a political play organised around a central hero, Rome. Its harshness is intentional, an attempt to be Senecan.