Shakespeare

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That strange genre, Shakespearean tragedy, challenges our belief that we read literature or watch plays out of enjoyment. Why would we enjoy watching suffering and death? Even those who see literature as educational usually offer some version of the sugar-coated pill metaphor—a coating of pleasure will induce us to swallow good lessons that are sometimes bitter medicine. But where is the sugar coating in this bleak and bloody genre?

Is the blood itself the sugar? Does the appeal of Shakespearean tragedy lie in its very sensationalism? Or does Shakespearean tragedy offer not exactly pleasure but a deep satisfaction, in that it tells the plain truth about death and human misery? Unlike genres which gloss over death and misery with false and saccharine happy endings, do Shakespearean tragedies pay us the compliment of assuming we are tough enough to bear reality? Another question: is the misery of tragedy offset by some good that it does? Is tragic suffering redemptive, and thus ultimately a pleasing rather than horrific spectacle? And if so, is this good? By regarding suffering as redemptive, do we evade constructive action in this world by tolerating suffering and those who cause it? Or can suffering lead to improvement of man’s lot? After all, King Lear learns greater compassion through his suffering, and develops a sense of social justice, and even though he dies without having a chance to put these qualities to use, we as audience are able to learn what he learned without having to suffer as he suffered. Is it this kind of growth that makes Shakespearean tragedy tolerable? And if so, what happens if the tragic hero doesn’t grow, as many don’t?

So many questions—tragedy provokes questions, and takes on big issues. Among the biggest is one that philosophers since ancient times have grappled with, the ‘problem of evil’: if a benevolent and powerful force rules the universe, how do we account for the existence of evil and suffering? Milton tackled that problem in *Paradise Lost*, trying to ‘justify the ways of God to man’. Tragedy is one of many human efforts to explore the problem of evil. And it is typical of tragedy to explore questions rather than to propound answers: if sermons explain evil in the declarative mood and legal statutes prohibit evil in the imperative mood, tragedy is an interrogative genre, full of questions. One question it nearly always asks is ‘why?’ Tragedy’s central question is the one that often springs to people’s lips when any terrible event occurs: why did this have to happen?
Causes of disaster

When we try to answer tragedy’s ‘why’, we often think in terms of the ‘tragic flaw’—something in the tragic hero’s character accounts for the terrible things that happen to him. Beloved of English instructors to this day, the notion of the tragic flaw goes back to the inventors of tragedy, the ancient Greeks, who spoke of it in terms of hamartia, a mistake in judgement leading to calamity, and of hubris, some outstanding quality or conspicuous behaviour that brings one to the attention of the jealous gods, who are thereby provoked to inflict disaster. In the Renaissance, the idea of hubris got entangled with notions of guilty pride, giving the tragic flaw a moral tinge it hadn’t had in ancient Greek times.

Overemphasis on the tragic flaw can narrow our vision of a Shakespearean tragedy. For one thing, it blames the victim for his or her misery, and so undercuts our sympathy, marring the pity that Aristotle thought was one of tragedy’s two major emotional effects (the other was terror). And overemphasizing the tragic flaw also neglects the complexity of evil in these plays. Tragic disaster is brought on not only by flawed heroes like Titus Andronicus, Othello, Hamlet, and Lear, but also by villains like Aaron in Titus Andronicus, Iago in Othello, Claudius in Hamlet, and Goneril, Regan, and Edmund in King Lear. Especially in Shakespeare’s early and middle tragedies, deliberate villainy and human malice often work against the protagonist. Sometimes rather than being particularized in one villain, human malice is distributed among members of a group, such as the feuding factions in Romeo and Juliet.

Another cause of disaster in tragedies is what we might loosely call Fate—the gods, the stars, the Goddess Fortune, chance, accident—all forces beyond the protagonist’s control. In fact, the original meaning of ‘dis-aster’ was ‘under the malign influence of the stars’—the first-mentioned cause of the undoing of Romeo and Juliet, those star-crossed lovers. Today we have different notions of deterministic forces outside a person’s control—the class system, global capitalism, oppressive governments, even a capricious stock market that can make or break an individual—but we can still appreciate the sense of helplessness and lack of personal control over events that the Renaissance called Fate. Chance and accident, too, are pervasive in tragedy, and often seem to play into the hands either of human villains or an evil destiny, as when a messenger detained in a plague quarantine can’t deliver his crucial message telling Romeo that Juliet isn’t really dead, or when Desdemona’s dropping her handkerchief plays into Iago’s hands, helping him destroy her and her husband. In a larger sense, the ethos of a protagonist’s culture might work against him: racism bubbles under the surface of the Venetian culture in which Shakespeare’s only black protagonist, Othello, makes his home, and the macho militarism of Rome turns Coriolanus into a killing machine unable to adapt to civilian life.

To explain everything by some flaw in a tragedy’s protagonist (over-sensitivity in Hamlet, pride in Othello, sensuality in Antony and Cleopatra) is simplistic, and does
violence to the complexity of evil whose multiple causes are intricately interwoven in every tragedy. But the idea of a tragic flaw makes sense at least in that it attributes some blame to the protagonist. Where Shakespeare parts company with Aristotelian notions of tragedy is that while Aristotle declared that tragedy involves unmerited misfortune, Shakespeare, over the course of his career, makes protagonists more and more responsible for their own catastrophes, moving from the largely innocent Romeo and Juliet to heroes more clearly responsible for setting in motion the forces that destroy them (King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus), occasionally even casting outright villains as heroes (the Macbeths).

Granting protagonists some agency, some control over their own lives even if it means fatally harming themselves, at least alleviates our sense of depression at seeing a blameless person crushed by outside forces. But this move also returns us to the blaming-the-victim problem, and it runs the risk of damaging audience sympathy. Do we need audience sympathy to have a tragedy? Most would agree that we do: rubbing our hands gleefully together when someone exceedingly wicked meets his doom is not a tragic response. But can we sympathize with a tragic hero who is an outright criminal? Aristotle thought we couldn’t. Shakespeare, apparently, thought we could.

Across the sweep of his ten tragedies, Shakespeare makes increasing demands on audience sympathy, choosing as his later tragic heroes—and therefore inviting some measure of audience identification with—such unpromising tragic figures as the murderous Macbeths; the stubborn, wrathful, self-centred old power abuser King Lear; the ageing sensualists Antony and Cleopatra; and the pugnacious mama’s boy Coriolanus. How could he have expected audience empathy with such a sorry crew of social misfits?

**Tragic scapegoats**

One theory is that tragic heroes serve as scapegoats: the ills of a whole society, heaped on their shoulders, seem to disappear magically when the protagonists are killed. This is supposed to account for our getting something like pleasure out of this strange, bleak genre. Romeo and Juliet are the innocent sacrifice familiar to Greek tragedy: in Euripides’ tragedies, for example, young people are often sacrificed to save a family, city, or nation from some grave crisis. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet, though not a religious rite as in Greek tragedy, have a kind of religio-magical effect: the feud ends, and Verona is saved. Innocence here is crucial: to dismiss the lovers’ feelings as puppy love is to miss a vital emotional effect: precisely because it is puppy love, we respond to Romeo and Juliet as virtual children, innocent victims.

Some think that scapegoats must be innocent, but in cultures which practise forms of scapegoating—including the popular magic of Renaissance England with its sacrifice
of warty toads and ritual bludgeoning to death of tied-up roosters—the victim is often spotted or tainted in some way. Do Shakespeare’s ‘guilty’ tragic heroes serve some scapegoat function as well? It is true that Scotland’s woes are pronounced cured upon the death of the Macbeths. But again, overemphasis on guilt is distorting: the killing of a scapegoat often, in Shakespeare, cures evils much more extensive than can be accounted for by any flaw in the scapegoated protagonist himself. Coriolanus exacerbates but does not solely cause Rome’s class tensions, yet when he is banished, tensions cease, in ‘a happier and more comely time / Than when these fellows ran about the streets, / Crying confusion’ (4.6.29–31). At the end of a tragedy or a history play with a ‘tragic ending’, society’s troubles are judged to be cured now that an offending protagonist is dead, as happens in Macbeth, Coriolanus, and Richard III; but a thinking audience is often left uneasy by this blaming of the victim. These plays often leave the impression that the troubles temporarily cured by sacrificing a scapegoat are deeply rooted in their society, and will recur.

Scapegoating is a troubling phenomenon, leaving us with a sense of its futility in the long run, and the melancholy recognition that in the fallen world of civic and national strife, every generation will need its scapegoats. It is partly our recognition that scapegoating is only a piece of wishful thinking, of magical thinking, that helps us sympathize with even a guilty protagonist, whose disaster most often outweighs his or her offence. We forgive, because the protagonist is (in King Lear’s words) ‘more sinned against than sinning’.

We would also forgive, if we were a good Renaissance Christian audience, because God commanded us to, and because we were sinners too, and shouldn’t judge. Shakespeare’s radical demand, going far beyond Aristotle, that we sympathize, that we understand, even a protagonist who brought all this on himself, is ultimately the demand of a Christian culture.

**Tragedy and other genres**

Tragedy as a genre comes from classical Greece and Rome. Shakespeare and his contemporary dramatists knew little about the great Greek tragic writers (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides), but they knew some classical theory from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and they were very familiar with the Roman tragic writer Seneca, on whom they drew for such sensational elements as bloodiness, revenge, ghosts, prophecies, and the supernatural. Seneca’s plots were bloodthirsty, but he always kept the gore offstage and left bloody violence to be described by a messenger. Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists put it all right up there onstage—Queen Margaret stabbing a child to death in *Henry VI Part Two*, Gloucester’s two eyes being gouged out with the nauseating comment ‘Out, vile jelly!’ (*King Lear*, 3.7.86), Macbeth’s bleeding severed head stuck up on a pole. Some think that the Renaissance had developed a tolerance (or even a taste)
for sensational gore from watching public executions; whatever the reason, gore was a hallmark of tragedy.

Shakespeare and his contemporaries were also influenced, in creating the tragic genre, by medieval stories of the 'fall of princes'—dismal tales about rulers such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar who died at the height of their power. Such tales were originally supposed to teach the brevity and uncertainty of life and the unwisdom of worldly ambition, but Renaissance tragedy uses the 'fall from a great height' motif much less preachily. Figures of evil in tragedies are sometimes influenced by the Vice figure in medieval morality plays—a wicked tempter who was originally an allegorical representative of Evil. Characters such as Richard III and Iago show signs of descent from the Vice, and they also owe something to the influence of the Italian Renaissance writer Machiavelli, who advocated an amoral will to power, seen in England not so much as politically expedient as downright demonic.

Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists were not fussy about keeping their genres and influences pure—they picked up traditions, plots, and characters as indiscriminately as magpies, and the boundaries of Renaissance dramatic genres are gloriously messy. Some plays can be considered either tragedies or history plays: Richard II and Richard III belong to cycles of history plays, but like tragedy, they feature a strong central protagonist and a tragic ending. In the First Folio, Richard II and Richard III are included with history plays, but both were called tragedies when first published in quarto versions. The plots of King Lear and Macbeth come from Holinshed, source of most of Shakespeare’s English history plays. A deeply tragic figure like Shylock appears in a comedy, and the comedy Love’s Labour’s Lost ends with a death and the postponement of all its weddings. Scenes of clowning appear at dark moments in tragedies—just after Macbeth kills King Duncan and just before Cleopatra commits suicide. Shakespeare’s greatest comic figure, Falstaff, occurs in history plays and a comedy, and meets a lonely, scapegoated death reminiscent of tragedy. Scapegoatings occur in history plays as in tragedies—Henry V and his Chief Justice ask us to believe that Henry IV’s usurped crown and a violent civil war can all be cured by the rejection and expulsion of the seedy old drunk Falstaff, along with a few tavern-keepers and prostitutes.

Still, despite fascinating overlaps, tragedy can be distinguished from other genres at least broadly. Shakespearean tragedy differs from comedy in its unhappy ending, its more intense degree of suffering and evil, its more fully developed protagonists, the higher social class of its major characters, a higher percentage of blank verse, and in the fact that it is usually male-oriented.

Shakespeare identifies women with fertility (one reason their roles are central in comedy); by destroying them in tragedy, he stresses a triumph of sterility. Most tragic heroes are sterile in having no children: Hamlet tells his potential bride to become a nun; Othello and Desdemona, Romeo and Juliet, Richard III, and probably the Macbeths die childless; Lady Macbeth imagines baby-murder; Macbeth has a 'fruitless crown', a 'barren sceptre'; Lear curses his daughter with sterility, and his line perishes. Since neither Romeo nor Juliet has siblings, the fact that their death ends the feud is a
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Pyrrhic victory: death both reconciles the families and wipes them out. Old Capulet will not sire more heirs, and Romeo's mother dies the same night as her son. Her gratuitous last-minute demise seems part of a campaign to leave no women alive onstage at a tragedy's end. Except in the Roman plays, Shakespeare kills off every woman prominent enough to have appeared in a tragedy's last scene: Lavinia, Tamora, Portia, Ophelia, Gertrude, Desdemona, Emilia, Ladies Macbeth and Macduff, all three daughters in Lear (a play with no other women). Most of these deaths are ill-prepared for and thinly explained—they have less to do with individual circumstance than with the anti-fertility agenda of Shakespearian tragedy, a direct contrast with the world-peopling action of comedy.

Tragedy differs from history plays first in emphasizing the private person, where histories emphasize the public person: even when tragic heroes are politically powerful, tragedies are more interested in their moral, ethical, and emotional dimensions than in their political dimension. Though the political and the domestic interpenetrated in this age (comparisons were often drawn between a nation's ruler and a family's father, as discussed in Chapter 13), the emphasis still falls, in tragedy, more heavily on the domestic than on the national role. Second, history plays muffle moral issues in favour of political realism, and it is common to find in history plays no clear-cut set of heroes and villains, but ambiguous collections of partly good, partly bad characters drawn in shades of grey. Third, except perhaps for Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra, each tragedy stands alone, while Shakespeare's English history plays are linked in continuous historical sequence throughout a total of eight plays. Fourth, history plays often feel cut off arbitrarily at the end of Act Five, with unfinished actions left for the next play in the cycle; each tragedy, however, has a pronounced, even resounding climactic fifth act featuring spectacular violence and a stage strewn with corpses. Finally, history plays paint on a broader, less focused canvas crowded with characters vying for attention; tragedies focus on one or two prominent central protagonists. And a protagonist, a tragic hero, possesses distinctive features.

The tragic figure usually possesses an exalted social and/or political status: some are monarchs or princes (Hamlet, Lear, Macbeth, Cleopatra); some are generals or military heroes (Titus Andronicus, Othello, Coriolanus). The exceptions—Romeo and Juliet and Timon of Athens—if not politically or militarily powerful, are at least well-placed socially. The literary decorum of the period demanded that tragic figures speak with dignity befitting their high rank, in blank verse or other high-caste verse form, while those of lower social rank, populating comedies or the subplots of tragedies, might jingle along in tetrameter couplets or sink to prose. In cases when a hero is a scapegoat whose death is supposed to purge his or her society, the tragic hero's royal, noble, or heroic stature enables him or her to represent the entire society.

In keeping with tragedy's focus on the private person, however, nearly all tragic heroes are in some way alienated from their public, political roles. Hamlet has not succeeded his father as king; Lear has resigned his kingdom; the Macbeths have usurped the crown; Cleopatra ignores her kingdom in favour of private infatuation;
Titus is rejected by an ungrateful emperor; Othello is a foreign mercenary and racial outsider; Timon of Athens loses contact with senators and influential citizens when he goes bankrupt; Coriolanus, unable to bring himself to play his society's political games, is banished from the country he has valiantly defended. Where comedies bring people together in community, the tragic hero grows increasingly isolated—not only from the public life to which his high rank entitles him, but from the people closest to him. Romeo and Juliet get separated from each other and at fatal moments are abandoned by their closest confidantes, Friar Laurence and Juliet's nurse. Hamlet becomes disgusted with his mother and estranged from Ophelia. Othello is driven apart from his bride and discovers he didn't know his best friend very well after all. King Lear banishes his most trusted adviser and his most loved daughter, and his other two daughters reject him.

The tragic hero

It is no accident that it is in this bleak genre, where isolation is a prelude to death, that we find some of Shakespeare's most individualized characters. Shakespeare's age newly valued, but was also suspicious of, idiosyncratic and individualized personality, and therefore situated it in villains like Iago in Othello, in the tragic figures sometimes found in comedies, like Shylock in the Merchant of Venice, in the comic figures of history plays who may find themselves scapegoats, like Falstaff in Henry IV Part Two, and in the doomed protagonists of tragedy. Lovers in Shakespearian romantic comedies are often interchangeable—in A Midsummer Night's Dream, who can remember whether it was Demetrius or Lysander who was first in love with Helena—or was it Hermia? Relative flatness of character in Shakespeare's comedies is not an artistic blot: it expresses a sense of community, where beautiful young lovers find other beautiful young lovers pretty much like themselves, and together propagate a new generation of beautiful youngsters, thus peopling the world. Even death doesn't seem so drastic in the context of a comedy, since we know life will go on—in the community and in the next generation.

But in tragedy, a tragic figure is cut off from community, and her individuality makes her so irreplaceable that we cannot be consoled by any prospect of human continuity: 'Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little! . . . Thou'lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never' (King Lear, 5.3.270, 306–7). Highly individualized personality in Shakespeare is often connected with defeat and death, as if it were something best stamped out; but it is also individuality that heightens the tragedy, that makes the action tragic at all. Tragedy affirms, by the intensity of its mourning for the dead hero, the value of what has been lost—the irreplaceable, unique human life.

The tragic hero is individualized by complexity of personality—Hamlet is by turns sensitive and brutal, suicidally melancholy and manically elated, broodingly lyrical and scorchingly satirical, a faithful friend to Horatio and a fatal friend to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; he is scholar, fencer, soldier, lover, poet, theatre buff, joker, prince.
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His speech is distinctive. He asks lots of questions and he rapidly repeats words and phrases: 'Very like, very like'; 'Thrift, thrift, Horatio'; also—unusual among exalted tragic figures—he speaks a lot of prose. Othello speaks in rolling, eloquent, musical blank verse, swelling with huge geographic images arising out of his life as a world-travelling soldier. The verbs of the early King Lear are almost entirely imperative; later, his speech resolves itself into curses, and only gradually do polite requests creep in: 'Pray you, undo this button'—his changing speech patterns track his changing character.

Tragic figures are also given individualized treatment in that each tragedy seems designed for the hero, or vice versa: each hero is placed in the tragic circumstances with which he is least equipped to cope, almost like a test (which, tragically, he always fails). King Lear, who defines his whole identity in terms of being 'a royal king' and 'so kind a father', gives away his kingdom and becomes estranged from all of his children—that is his testing situation, and it drives him mad. The same circumstances would hardly bother Coriolanus at all. If two tragic heroes swapped plays, Hamlet would never be vulnerable to Iago's insinuations—he would devise some mousetrap test to check on the authenticity of the handkerchief, and dally along with so many soliloquies that Iago's plot, which depends on speedy action and lack of close scrutiny, would come to light and the whole situation be saved. Conversely, Othello would never stand about, listening to Claudius praying and debating with himself whether to kill him: that robust man of action would smother Claudius first and ask questions later. The very absurdity of such hero-swapping brings into focus just how individualized the plots are: each protagonist is confronted with exactly the situation which will most severely test his unique individual qualities.

The tragic hero also possesses an uncompromising character, very unlike the flexible, resilient comic hero. The tragic hero doesn't go around obstacles but runs straight into them. Would King Lear ever, under any circumstances, answer Cordelia's 'Nothing, my lord', with a conciliatory 'well, let's all have some supper and talk this over later, when we've had a chance to rest up from a hard day'? Is Romeo likely to talk Juliet over with papa Montague or consider travelling around Europe with Benvolio for a while to see if he gets over his infatuation with this most unsuitable girl? Would Othello consider discussing his marital problems with a clergyman? Offered what looks like an easy face-saving compromise, 'The price is to ask it kindly' (Coriolanus 2.3.69), which would ultimately prevent civil war and avert his own death, Coriolanus can't bring himself to utter one civil sentence. The very uncompromising cussedness that dooms such tragic heroes is inseparable from the spirited integrity that makes them great.

One can evade trouble in a comedy, where running away is not considered reprehensible. Orlando in As You Like It, young lovers in A Midsummer Night's Dream, the hero of Pericles, Camillo in The Winter's Tale, and many other comedic figures escape from danger or intolerable situations simply by running away to a forest or to sea. But most tragic figures, with their blinkered, straight-ahead approach to life, don't even consider running away: they march head-on into catastrophe. The few who do try to run away—like Romeo and Juliet—can't get away with it. Shakespearian tragedy is deeply claustrophobic: characters are boxed into situations and incapable of seeing
their way out. Again, we should not be too quick to blame the victims: their inability to escape is only partly attributable to their inflexible personalities; it also reflects circumstances beyond their control.

**Radical tragedies**

In Shakespearean tragedy we confront at every turn the issue of individual agency versus circumstances beyond one’s control, and since most such circumstances are political or cultural, a question arises about whether Shakespearean tragedy might be politically radical. For several decades in the mid-twentieth century, Shakespeare was judged politically conservative, an upholder of monarchy, aristocracy, and the Church of England; a believer in unchangeable social hierarchy, and a proponent of obedience to authority, in the family and in the state. Beginning in the 1980s, however, books such as Jonathan Dollimore’s *Radical Tragedy* started making claims for Shakespearean tragedy as a politically dissident genre. Sir Philip Sidney had, after all, given as one of tragedy’s excellences that it ‘maketh kings fear to be tyrants’; and quite a lot of the misery in Shakespeare’s tragedies arises from the repressive behaviour of tyrants—Saturninus in *Titus Andronicus*, Claudius in *Hamlet*, the Senate oligarchs in *Coriolanus*, Macbeth, Lear, possibly Julius Caesar. Those who pronounce Shakespeare radical don’t find in such images of repressive government any evidence of devotion to authority and political hierarchy at any cost. They think Shakespeare might have been reading some sixteenth-century resistance literature, which justified principled (even violent) resistance to unjust political authorities. *King Lear* is deeply concerned about social justice and the creation of a compassionate society: Lear himself is forced to live in a hovel and witness dire poverty, and comes to realize that he himself is responsible for these wretched economic conditions:

> You houseless poverty . . .
> Poor naked wretches, where’er you are,
> That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
> How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
> Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
> From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en
> Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
> Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
> That thou mayst shake the superflux to them.

(3.4.27-36)

The famous ‘belly’ speech in *Coriolanus* used to be interpreted as Shakespeare’s statement of belief in an inflexible class system: a patrician justifies the privilege of his own class by lecturing the plebeians on the importance of the belly (metaphor for the patricians) in storing and distributing food to the whole body (metaphor for society as a whole). More recently, however, radical-minded readers have noted that
the plebeians have been rioting because they are hungry, while the patricians are hoarding up corn in their warehouses, which exposes the hollow illogicality of the 'belly' speech: even granted their 'right' to store and distribute food supplies, the patricians have abused their position by storing but not distributing. Even in the 'belly speech's' own terms, the plebeians' grievances are justified. And this play was written during a time of famine in England, when the rich were being accused of hoarding grain and the poor were rioting in protest, clearly suggesting that this tragedy was making a radical political comment on its own society.

Those who see the plays as radical, as interventions in the politics of their day, tend to be very sceptical of the tragic flaw. Jonathan Dollimore locates the 'fatal flaw' not in the individual but in the state and the social order it upholds. Once again, here in a political context, overemphasizing the role of the individual in producing the tragic outcome obscures the crucial role of society and culture, not only in influencing what happens to the individual, but in forming that individual in the first place.

And might Shakespearean tragedy be religiously radical? Religion in the period had a good deal to say about individual responsibility versus outside control. One influential strain of contemporary Protestant thought, Calvinism, granted individual free will no influence on events, which were seen as entirely predestined by God. Re-enter the problem of evil: If God predetermined all that happens, is he responsible for evil? How could he be, if he is benevolent? This question keenly interests characters in Shakespearean tragedy. Macduff demands on behalf of Macbeth's murder victims, 'Did heaven look on / And would not take their part?' (4.3.225–6). In our own time, people have asked where God was during the Holocaust, and the same question is provoked by Shakespearean tragedy, with its deeply unfair universe, full of undeserved suffering and death. 'I have not deserved this,' cries Desdemona; and 'A guiltless death I die' (Othello 4.1.236, 5.2.132); 'I am a man / More sinned against than sinning', declares Lear (3.2.57–8).

Although the Shakespearean tragic figure does set in motion the chain of events culminating in disaster and death, the punishment is nearly always in excess of the fault—yes, King Lear was arrogant, unperceptive, and insensitive, but are these capital offences? Did he deserve to be abandoned by his children and to die miserably, for these shortcomings? Did Cleopatra deserve death for being strong-willed and loving sex and wine? And what about the host of lesser characters swept to their doom in tragedy's general catastrophe—did Paris in Romeo and Juliet, or Roderigo in Othello, or Lady Macduff in Macbeth deserve to die? There is no balance and reasonableness about what happens in tragedy. That, in large part, is what makes it tragic.

But this is hard to accept, and it makes tragedies painful to read and to watch. People often resist this unfair tragic world, doggedly trying to make it fair, by depicting Desdemona as an undutiful daughter and rather flirtily with Cassio, Othello as a braggart, Romeo and Juliet as impatient and oversexed, Coriolanus as snooty about the plebeians—all, by this view, had death coming to them. We have all heard such reactions to these disturbing plays, from students and from professional critics. They
are understandable reactions, like the response of Job’s so-called comforters to his tribulations: ‘Who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off? If thou wert pure and upright, surely now [God] would awake for thee, and make the habitation of thy righteousness prosperous’; or in other words, you must have done something to deserve this.

Overemphasis on the tragic flaw, to the neglect of the pervasive role of malice, an unjust society, chance, accident, and pure bad luck in nearly every tragedy, is part of a wistful desire to find the hero guilty of something serious enough to merit extreme suffering and death, and thus to preserve our sense that life is fair. But the profoundness of Renaissance tragedy is that at its best, it takes a steady look at a world where no just higher authority ensures that every person gets a square deal—not political authority, not divine authority. If fairness in this world is to be achieved, we must achieve it ourselves. As a tragedy ends, we realize that like the tragic hero, we are on our own. To weep for a tragic hero is to weep for ourselves.

FURTHER READING

Belsey, Catherine. *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985). This influential study challenges the widespread notion that Shakespearean tragedy offers insights into a timeless or universal ‘human nature’ and argues that a more modern sense of individual subjectivity did not even exist in Shakespeare’s time.


Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1904). The book that inaugurated twentieth-century criticism of Shakespeare’s tragedies, contributed the idea of tragic waste, and set up *Hamlet, Othello, King Lear,* and *Macbeth* as the greatest Shakespearean tragedies. Long under fire for treating dramatic characters as real people, as if they had lives beyond the page or stage, the book is still something that serious students of Shakespearean tragedy need to know about.

Cartwright, Kent. *Shakespearean Tragedy and Its Double: The Rhythms of Audience Response* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991). This book examines the way audiences sometimes engage closely with and sometimes are distanced from the action and characters of tragedies, and how Shakespeare manipulates these responses to gain tragic effects.


survival and that not only the protagonist but the community are tragedy's subject. The book also focuses on disasters that occur when a community violates or neglects the central rituals that hold it together.

