NORTHROP FRYE

Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy

FOOLS OF TIME

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The basis of the tragic vision is being in time, the sense of the one-directional quality of life, where everything happens once and for all, where every act brings unavoidable and fateful consequences, and where all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation. In the tragic vision death is, not an incident in life, not even the inevitable end of life, but the essential event that gives shape and form to life. Death is what defines the individual, and marks him off from the continuity of life that flows indefinitely between the past and the future. It gives to the individual life a parabola shape, rising from birth to maturity and sinking again, and this parabola movement of rise and fall is also the typical shape of tragedy. The mood of tragedy preserves our ambiguous and paradoxical feeling about death; it is inevitable and always happens, and yet, when it does happen, it carries with it some sense of the unnatural and premature. The naiveté of Marlowe's Tamburlaine, astonished by the fact that *he* should die when he has been wading through other men's blood for years, is an example, and even Shakespeare's Caesar, so thoroughly disciplined in his views of death in general, still finds his actual death a surprise.

Being in time is not the whole of the tragic vision: it is, in

itself, the ironic vision. Because it is the basis of the tragic vision, the ironic and the tragic are often confused or identified. The nineteenth-century pessimism which produced the philosophy of Schopenhauer and the novels of Thomas Hardy seems to me ironic rather than tragic. So does the philosophy and literature of existentialism, which I think of, for reasons that may become clearer later on, as post-tragic. But tragedy, no less than irony, *is* existential: the conceptions that existential thinkers have tried to struggle with, care, dread, nausea, absurdity, authenticity, and the like, are all relevant to the theory of tragedy. Tragedy is also existential in a broader, and perhaps contradictory, sense, in that the experience of the tragic cannot be moralized or contained within any conceptual world-view. A tragic hero is a tragic hero whether he is a good or a bad man; a tragic action is a tragic action whether it seems to us admirable or villainous, inevitable or arbitrary. And while a religious or philosophical system that answers all questions and solves all problems may find a place for tragedy, and so make it a part of a larger and less tragic whole, it can never absorb the kind of experience that tragedy represents. That remains outside of all approaches to being through thought rather than existence. The remark of the dying Hotspur, "Thought's the slave of life," comes out of the heart of the tragic vision.

Tragedy revolves around the primary contract of man and nature, the contract fulfilled by man's death, death being, as we say, the debt he owes to nature. What makes tragedy tragic, and not simply ironic, is the presence in it of a counter-movement of being that we call the heroic, a capacity for action or passion, for doing or suffering, which is above

In Greek tragedy, the gods have the function of enforcing what we have called the primary contract of man and nature. The gods are to human society what the warrior aristocracy is to the workers within human society itself. Like aristocrats, they act toward their inferiors with a kind of rough justice, but they are by no means infallible, and we often glimpse their underlying panic about the danger that men will become too powerful. Man has certain duties toward the gods, and he expects, without having the right to claim, certain benefits in return. But as long as the gods are there, man is limited in his scope, ambitions, and powers. Men in Greek tragedy are *brotoi*, "dying ones," a word with a concrete force in it that our word "mortals" hardly conveys.

Such a view is by no means original with the Greeks: much earlier, for example, the Gilgamesh epic in Mesopotamia had portrayed the gods in a similar aristocratic role. There, the gods found that they could not continue to live without having to work: this being beneath their dignity, they created men to do the work for them. The epic then goes on to describe how man attempts and fails to achieve immortality. It is a very ironic story, but if we compare it with the Iliad we feel that the heroic, or distinctively tragic, component is missing. The intense interest that the gods in the Iliad take in the conflict going on below them is their response to the infinite quality in human heroism. They watch it, not with a detached ironic amusement, but with a tragic sense of engagement. For one thing, some of the heroes are their own progeny. The only moral check on their desire to seduce human women is the slave-owner's check, the fact that all children born of such a union will be lost in the lower society. We are occasionally

reminded in the Iliad that the Olympian gods, no less than the Christian God, are losing their own sons in the human struggle, and, unlike the Christian God, they are compelled to leave their sons' souls in Hades.

As for the heroes themselves, their life sustains a continuous illusion. Nothing that is *done* in a heroic conflict has anything except death for its form, and the *klea andron* that Homer celebrates, the brave deeds of men, consist only in spilling and destroying life. In Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus in the Iliad there is one terrible instant of awareness in which Sarpedon says that if he could think of himself as ageless and immortal, like the gods, he would walk out of the battle at once. But, being a man, his life *is* death, and there is nowhere in life that is not a battlefield. Unlike his counterpart Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgita*, he can hope for no further illumination on that battlefield. The Greek heroes belong to a leisure class remote from our ordinary preoccupations; this gives them more time, not for enjoying life, but for doing what the unheroic cannot do: looking steadily and constantly into the abyss of death and nothingness. The Greek gods respect this, just as the Christian God respects the corresponding contemplative attitude, the *contemptus mundi*, on the part of the saint.

There are two kinds of death in Greek tragedy: ordinary death, which happens to everybody, and heroic death, which may be directly caused by the gods out of fear or anger, or, if not, has at any rate some peculiar significance, a marking out of a victim. Death may thus be seen as caused by the impersonal force of fate or by the will of the gods. Sometimes, as in the fall of Oedipus, an oracle or prophecy is being

fulfilled, and this combines the two themes of divine will and natural event. Gods and fate both represent an order or balance in the scheme of things, the way things are. If this order is disturbed by human pride, boastfulness, or insatiable ambition, a personal divine force reacts to it, after which the pattern of ordinary fate reappears in human life. This reappearance is called nemesis. Death in itself is a natural event; a death brought about by the gods forcibly assimilates human life to nature. Thus the gods, however harsh in their wrath or jealousy, manifest by their actions a social and moral force in human life itself, the principle of stability, or living in the face of death, which in the soul is called temperance (*sophrosyne*) and in society justice.

The individual gods, like individual men, may be partial and passionate: Greek poets and philosophers, like their successors, could never quite solve the problem of how a being can be an individual and yet not ultimately finite. But even in Homer we can see how conflicts among the gods are contained within a single divine order, the will of Zeus. This single divine order corresponds to the order of temperance or stability among the conflicting impulses of the human mind. The Hippolytus of Euripides is a chaste and virtuous youth: in other words he is a worshipper of Artemis. He is eventually justified by his faith in Artemis, but he is so aggressively chaste and virtuous that he provokes the anger of Aphrodite and comes to grief. In relation to the whole group of Olympian gods, his chastity is excessive and unbalanced. But temperance and stability do not provide a static order; they are an ordering of powers and forces. Pentheus in *The Bacchae* tries to keep a tight grip on himself when confronted with

Dionysus, and is swept out of the way like a leaf in a hurricane.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche describes the Greek sense of the limited and finite as the "Apollonian" side of Greek culture. This is the sense that comes out particularly in the exquisite Greek feeling for plastic form, and which, in the verbal arts, ranges from the profoundest conceptions in Greek thought, Plato's *idea* and Aristotle's *telos*, to cautionary proverbs of the "nothing too much" type. The sense of infinite heroic energy Nietzsche identifies with the "Dionysian," where the individual is not defined and assigned a place in the scheme of things, but released by being dissolved into the drunken and frenzied group of worshippers. Nietzsche's Apollonian–Dionysian distinction is one of those central insights into critical theory that critics must sooner or later come to terms with, though coming to terms with it means, first of all, deciding whether the particular historical projection given to the insight is the best one. I use it because I find it illuminating for Shakespeare: I am quite prepared to believe that it may be less so for the Greeks, where Nietzsche's argument seems greatly weakened by what appears to me a preposterous view of Euripides. Nietzsche is on much sounder ground in saying that the spirit of tragedy was destroyed by a spirit he identifies with Socrates and associates with comedy and irony. Tragedy is existential: Socrates, with his conception of militant knowledge, begins an essentialist tradition in human thought. His disciple Plato is the greatest of all the essentialist philosophers, of those who have approached reality through thought rather than experience, and Plato's literary affinities are clearly with the comic poets, not the tragic ones.

We next meet tragedy in Seneca, whose tragedies are Greek subjects recollected in tranquillity. Or relative tranquillity: there are melodramatic qualities in Elizabethan drama that are popularly thought of as Senecan—ghosts screaming for revenge, an action full of horrors and with lots and lots of blood—but these are mainly generalizations from one Senecan play, *Thyestes*. In this play Atreus revenges himself on his brother by inviting him to dinner and serving him his children in a pie—an incident which reappears in *Titus Andronicus*—but even this is an authentic Greek theme. Seneca is, again, an essentialist philosopher, a Stoic, and for him the two contracts we have mentioned, the primary contract with gods and nature which is natural law, and the secondary social contract which is moral law, are identical. He tends to think of his characters as heroic in proportion to the extent to which they identify themselves with this law. They are heroic in endurance rather than in action, in their capacity to surmount suffering rather than in the power of their wills.

Hence rhetoric, the ability to express an articulate awareness of what is happening, has a function in Seneca that is quite different from its function in the three great Greeks. In the Greek plays the action is presented by the characters and represented by the chorus: the chorus has a role of response to the action that, like the music in an opera, puts the audience's emotion into focus. Seneca retains the chorus, but he has much less need for it: the rhetorical speeches take over most of the chorus's real dramatic functions. Even action, in Seneca, is constantly dominated by consciousness. To know is a higher destiny than to experience, and by virtue of his consciousness man may rank himself with the gods, in fact may even outgrow them. In Euripides' *Heracles* the hero's

two levels of nature. Man lives in a lower nature, the physical world or world of the four elements which moves in cycles. This is particularly the Dionysian world of energy, and it is, for practical purposes, identical with the wheel of fortune. A state of aggressiveness, or what we now call the law of the jungle, is "natural" to man, but natural only on this lower level of nature. Above this world is a world of specifically human nature, the world represented by the Christian paradise and the Classical Golden Age, and symbolized by the starry spheres with their heavenly music. Man lost this world with the fall of Adam, but everything that is good for man, law, virtue, education, religion, helps to raise him toward it again. It is therefore also natural to man, on the higher level of nature, to be civilized and in a state of social discipline. The king or ruler symbolizes the invisible ideals of social discipline, and the respect paid to him derives from those ideals. But while he symbolizes them he does not incarnate them. No earthly king is clear of the wheel of fortune, or independent of the aggressive energy of the lower nature. He must know how to wage war, how to punish, how to out-manœuvre the over-ambitious. In *Richard II* the kingdom is symbolized by a garden, and the garden, which is a state of art and a state of nature at the same time, represents the upper human level of nature. The gardener is addressed as "old Adam's likeness." But the garden is not the garden of Eden; it is the garden that "old" Adam was forced to cultivate after his fall, a garden requiring constant effort and vigilance.

In contrast to most of his contemporaries (Chapman is the chief exception), Shakespeare's sense of tragedy is deeply rooted in history. *Richard II* and *Richard III* are nearly

identical with tragedy in form, and even when a history-play ends on a strong major chord it is never a comedy. The difference is chiefly that tragedy rounds off its action and history suggests a continuous story. We may compare the Greek dramatic tragedies with the Iliad, which, though complete in itself, is part of an epic cycle that keeps on going. As complete in itself, it is a tragedy, the tragedy of Hector; as part of the epic cycle, its central figure is Achilles, who does not die in the Iliad, but leaves us with a powerful intimation of mortality. Sometimes the continuity of history gives a cadence to a history-play that tragedy cannot achieve. *Henry V* ends with the conquest of France, just before Henry died and all his achievements began to vanish; *Henry VIII* ends with the triumph of Cranmer, Cromwell, and Anne Boleyn, along with the audience's knowledge of what soon happened to them. In other words, the history-play is more explicitly attached to the rotation of the wheel of fortune than the tragedy. But the difference is only one of degree: Fortinbras, Malcolm, perhaps Edgar, all provide some sense of "historical" continuity for their tragedies; we know what happens to Troy after the conclusion of *Troilus and Cressida*; Athens comes to terms with Alcibiades after the death of Timon, and the Roman plays are episodes of the continuing story of Rome.

The easiest way to get at the structure of Elizabethan tragedy is to think of it as a reversal of the structure of comedy. Comedy exhibits a type of action that I have elsewhere called a drive towards identity. This identity is of three kinds. There is plural or social identity, when a new social group crystallizes around the marriage of the hero and heroine in the final

moments of the comedy. There is dual or erotic identity, when the hero and heroine get married. And there is individual identity, when a character comes to know himself in a way that he did not before, like Parolles, Angelo, or Katherina the shrew. Translating this division into tragic terms, there are three main kinds of tragic structure in Shakespeare and his contemporaries. There is, first, a social tragedy, with its roots in history, concerned with the fall of princes. There is, second, a tragedy that deals with the separation of lovers, the conflict of duty and passion, or the conflict of social and personal (sexual or family) interests. And there is, third, a tragedy in which the hero is removed from his social context, and is compelled to search for a purely individual identity. In Greek drama, these tragic structures might be called the Agamemnon type, the Antigone type, and the Oedipus type. In terms closer to Christianity, they might be called the tragedy of the killing of the father, the tragedy of the sacrifice of the son, and the tragedy of the isolation of the spirit. A critic who had learned his critical categories from Blake, like the present writer, would most naturally think of them as, respectively, tragedies of Urizen, tragedies of Luvah, and tragedies of Tharmas. In Shakespeare, we have a group of tragedies of order, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*; a group of tragedies of passion, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Coriolanus*; and a group of tragedies of isolation, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Timon of Athens*. These are not pigeon-holes, only different areas of emphasis; most of the plays have aspects that link them to all three groups. What seems a rather odd placing of *Othello* and *Coriolanus* should become clearer as we go on; *Titus Andronicus* belongs

mainly to the first group. As passion or strong interest always conflicts either with another passion or with some externalized force, the passion-tragedy could also be called the dilemma-tragedy, as the example of *Antigone* indicates.

In each of Shakespeare's three social tragedies, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*, we have a tragic action based on three main character-groups. First is the order-figure: Julius Caesar in that play; Duncan in *Macbeth*; Hamlet's father. He is killed by a rebel-figure or usurper: Brutus and the other conspirators; Macbeth; Claudius. Third comes a nemesis-figure or nemesis-group: Antony and Octavius; Malcolm and Macduff; Hamlet. It is sometimes assumed that the hero, the character with the title-role, is always at the centre of the play, and that all plays are to be related in the same way to the hero; but each of the heroes of these three tragedies belongs to a different aspect of the total action. The nemesis-figure is partly a revenger and partly an avenger. He is primarily obsessed with killing the rebel-figure, but he has a secondary function of restoring something of the previous order.

The Elizabethan social or historical tragedy shows, much more clearly than the other two kinds, the impact of heroic energy on the human condition, the wheel of fortune creaking against the greater wheel of nature. Central to the form is an Elizabethan assumption about society, which is simple but takes some historical imagination to grasp. Society to the Elizabethans was a structure of personal authority, with the ruler at its head, and a personal chain of authority extending from the ruler down. Everybody had a superior, and this fact, negatively, emphasized the limited and finite nature of the

on sleeping lovers, and elsewhere in the wood Peter Quince's company is rehearsing a farcical version of the story of Pyramus, one of the many stories in which also, in the original Ovidian version, a purple or red flower springs from the dying hero's blood.

In the tragedy there is the day-world of Verona, when the Capulets are abroad and feuding is likely to break out, and the night-world of the Capulet party, the balcony scene, and the graveyard, where the sexual passion is fatal and ends in a much more serious version of the Pyramus story. The love itself is described as a day within a night, and, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the night-world is a Dionysian world:

> And fleckled darkness like a drunkard reels
> From forth day's path and Titan's fiery wheels.

And just as in the comedy the drive toward the fulfilment of love is carried through by the fairies and the tragic side of the story is reduced to parody, so in the tragedy the drive toward the fatal conclusion is in the foreground and the unseen impulses that prompt the lovers to fall in love so suddenly and so completely are suggested only by way of parody, in Mercutio's account of a fairy "hag" who evokes dreams of love from lovers. The sense of fatality and of a sinister sexual incubus (or succuba) is part of the character of Cressida and of Cleopatra: it is not part of the character of Juliet, and a special device is needed to suggest it. This is in spite of the fact that she rapidly bursts out of her role as a demure and bashful maiden at the Capulet party to become the Queen of the Night who calls to the horses of Phoebus to put an