

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY?

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1

THE question ‘What is Shakespearean Tragedy?’ can understandably prompt one to start listing distinctive features of various plays by Shakespeare—as if a successful enumeration of its characteristics would amount to an understanding of the genre. To a certain extent, such inventories are probably unavoidable when talking about an entire body of work, about more than a particular scene or play. Moreover, many descriptions of what A. C. Bradley famously called the ‘facts’ of Shakespearean tragedy are undeniably true and useful. It is illuminating, for instance, to observe with Bradley that Shakespeare’s tragedies present ‘a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate’, where the protagonist ‘always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes’, and where this active ‘contribution’ means not just things done ‘tween sleep and wake’ but ‘acts or omissions thoroughly expressive of the doer—characteristic deeds.’¹ Bradley’s conclusions, like those of other perceptive commentators on Shakespeare, are important and worth discussing, and I will return to them.

However, rather than approach Shakespearean tragedy as the sum-total of certain features or ‘facts’, or as a generic object of study, I propose that we see Shakespearean tragedy as a discrete form of art—as the birth of a distinctive art form, the same way we think of ‘painting on canvas’ or ‘symphonic music’ as art forms that arrived on the world stage at a particular place and time.² Whereas a ‘genre’ purports to be a collection

¹ The centre of a Shakespearean tragedy, Bradley argues, ‘may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action.’ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 28–9.

² Having said this, I must quickly add that I am not concerned with establishing which play is the ‘first’ Shakespearean tragedy, any more than I would want to fix a precise date or origin for painting on canvas, or for orchestra music. Such matters are subject to debate, and we can change our minds about the particulars. The larger point is that every artistic medium emerges historically—it was not always ‘there’—and unfolds through a certain historical development that can be examined. Which means the point of ‘changing our mind’ about the particulars, or dates, would be the new

of objects that share common, taxonomically graspable features or techniques, there is no exhaustive list of features that ‘add up’ to Shakespearean tragedy—since, for a start, it is up to us to discern, decide, or debate, what will even count as features of this art form. Moreover, if Shakespearean tragedies all shared certain inherent, generic characteristics, then it would be difficult to distinguish between *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* and *Othello*—but of course we all know that each of these is an entirely different play; each brings to light new features or expressive possibilities for Shakespearean tragedy, helping us to better discern the art form as such, to better see its purview or expressive task. Shakespearean tragedies show what they are, as an art form, in light of one another. For the same reason, though it is unconventional to say so, we should probably regard Shakespearean tragedy not just as a finite, canonical collection of plays by William Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and so forth) but as a novel, modern, artistic practice—instanced with special power in a range of works by Shakespeare, but still practicable by others afterwards. Shakespeare may have been the first, or the most successful or the most indispensable, to work in the medium of Shakespearean tragedy, but he was not the last.³

To see Shakespearean tragedy as an art form, then, is to see it as a practice that, having originated somewhere and sometime (with Shakespeare, in this instance), takes on a life of its own by generating new features, techniques, and characteristics—thereby resisting any final taxonomy, at least so long as the art form remains vital as a human practice. If to delimit a ‘genre’ is to circumscribe a domain of objects or experiences according to constitutive traits or attributes, then art forms or practices take it upon themselves to ‘work through’, or make sense of, their own socio-historical and material pre-conditions—as if expressing a newly discovered need for such sense-making.

All this gets me to the question that I really want to raise in this brief essay: What does the art form of Shakespearean tragedy ‘work through’, respond to, and make sense of?

I will propose at least one answer to this: Shakespearean tragedy works through the loss of any ‘given’—nature, or God, or ‘fate’—that might explain human societies, histories, actions, destinies, relationships, and values. At the same time, Shakespearean tragedy works through the loss of social bonds on which we depend for the meaning and worth

historical-self-understanding such a change of mind would amount to (and not just a different chronology).

³ By ‘indispensable’, I mean that we need Shakespeare’s work, especially, in order to understand later developments in the ‘art of Shakespearean tragedy’. Though I do not have the space here to discuss what might be called the history of Shakespearean tragedy since Shakespeare, I would note that Friedrich Schlegel and Goethe—like many German romantics—saw modern drama, the novel, and romantic literature as developments of Shakespearean drama; just as Jan Kott saw Beckett’s work as traversing the terrain of *King Lear*; just as Stanley Cavell sees Hollywood comedies of remarriage as extending Shakespearean romance—a suggestion that is being developed by Sarah Beckwith in her recent work on *The Winter’s Tale* and its inheritors. (To say nothing of the *New York Times*, in which one reads recently, ‘Haven’t you heard TV is the new Shakespeare?’) My suggestion, at any rate, is that we regard Shakespearean tragedy as inaugurating an artistic form whose possibilities have been explored by other artists in Shakespeare’s wake—from Ibsen and Beckett, to Sarah Kane and Pedro Almodovar and on and on—though obviously one can regard Shakespeare as a ‘master’ of the form. (See Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*, ‘Too Much Shakespeare? Be Not Cowed’, 12 September 2013.)

of our lives together—showing those bonds to be, in spite of that dependence, fully dissolvable. In this way, Shakespearean tragedy helps us make sense of how we interact with one another—without the help of any Archimedean standpoint, with only the interactions themselves as sources of intelligibility and meaning. In Shakespearean tragedy, our actions (must) explain themselves.

By this point you will have realized that my ambitions for this essay are hopelessly lofty. Although these ambitions are probably not realizable in these few pages, I want to try to convince you that they are not misguided, and they at least set us in the right horizon when it comes to thinking about Shakespearean tragedy.

2

How, then, does Shakespearean tragedy ‘work through’ the loss of any givens that might explain our interactions—or that might explain what happens in a Shakespearean drama?

Consider that all artistic practices are ways that we try to evaluate and make sense of our lives, of our social-historical world and its demands, of the claims of nature upon us (whatever those are felt to be at a given place and time), and of what we do (or might do) and say with one another. Artistic practices are not the only way we do this, of course; there are also mythology, religion, education, science, and philosophy. Still, by defining art in this somewhat grandiose way, I mean to suggest that artistic practices are—like religion or philosophy—a fundamental way in which we find out who we are, and who we might become, in light of the material and social conditions we inherit.⁴ To put it the way that many German philosophers would once have put it, art is a historical practice through which we come to understand ourselves both as ‘objects’—as bodies in motion, as finite or mortal creatures, exposed to the claims of social norms, nature, and the laws of physics—and as ‘subjects’, capable of leading or directing our lives, and of reflecting on them as such.⁵ At the same time, artistic practices can be distinguished from religion and philosophy, in that their sense-making potential is tied to the way they work with (or through) specific media—stone, paint, sound, or speech—and to the way in which artistic transformations of these media reflect socio-historical transformations in our overall self-understanding.⁶

⁴ To avoid confusion, by the term ‘we’ I mean ‘we creatures who undertake artistic practices that express and reflect their social-historical and material conditions’. Because those conditions are social and historical, this ‘we’ is a historically changing and revisable ‘we’—not an ahistorical, uncritical ‘we’. I see the formation of human collectives as a practical, social-historical matter—not as stemming from some metaphysical, natural, or theological given.

⁵ Consider how many similar reflections can be found in Shakespearean tragedy. To take perhaps the most famous: is not Hamlet’s ‘to be or not to be ...’ an expression of *both* Hamlet’s position as subject-agent directing his life, one who might ‘take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them’, *and* as an object in the world, one who suffers ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ and ‘the thousand natural shocks the flesh is heir to’?

⁶ For a discussion of the way in which early modern artistic practices presage and anticipate modern aesthetic philosophy, see the essays collected in *The Insistence of Art: Aesthetic Philosophy and Early Modernity*, ed. Paul A. Kottman (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, forthcoming).

Some readers will already have recognized that I am borrowing my terms for discussion from G. W. F. Hegel's discussion in his *Lectures on Fine Art*. Hegel's terms are useful in this context, I think, for two basic reasons. First, Hegel provides a way of talking about 'dramatic poetry', and about Shakespearean tragedy in particular, in terms of our 'need' for particular art forms at a given place and time. By 'need', I mean our need to carry out certain artistic practices in order to understand who we are, and what we might do together, in light of certain historical-material conditions.⁷ In this sense, Hegel's approach has the virtue of helping us to understand Shakespearean tragedy within a broader history of concrete artistic practices and works, with its internal transformations and innovations—rather than in terms of ahistorical 'genres', or categorical 'features' of aesthetic experience. Second, Hegel is useful here because he himself struggled to articulate the distinctiveness of Shakespearean tragedy (which he thought of as emblematically 'modern') with respect to ancient tragedy, and above all with respect to his own powerful interpretations of Greek tragedies like *Antigone* or *Oedipus the King*. Towards the end of this chapter, while taking account of the usefulness of Hegel's interpretation of tragedy for understanding Shakespearean tragedy, I also want to show how Shakespearean tragedy productively challenges Hegel's own claims about tragedy, in ways that might help us to better see what Shakespearean tragedy is doing.⁸

For Hegel, the development of artistic practices—that is, of historically shifting, context-specific needs for different 'art forms' (e.g. the need for pyramids in Egypt, for classical sculpture in Greece, or for painting in Christian Europe, or for film in the twentieth century), as well as internal developments within those arts (from 'symbolic to classical to romantic', for example, or from epic to lyric to drama)—presents an ongoing and increasing de-naturalization or 'spiritualization' of our self-understanding. In other words, the more that we see ourselves as—or teach ourselves that we are—free and self-determining subjects, the less we are dependent upon, or needful of, artistic expressions that work with 'natural' media (stone, wood, clay) in order to understand ourselves, and our world. The twist in Hegel's story is that artistic practices *are* (or 'have been') a primary way we teach ourselves this lesson—because by transforming natural material in modes that we can regard as 'free' from material or instrumental needs, we express our own liberation and, in this way, *become* free. (Art, claims Hegel in a famous passage, allows a free human

⁷ So, I mean what Hegel calls 'the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of spirit [*Geist*].' G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, (Oxford: Clarendon University Press, 1975), 1: 7. This is not to preclude there being other 'needs' for Shakespearean tragedy. For instance, I think we continue to 'need' Shakespeare (or the theatre generally) to do important work for, and by, the imagination (what the Chorus in *Henry V* calls our 'imaginary forces'). I am thinking, especially, of the way in which reading or performing Shakespeare can, from a young age, 'educate the imagination' (to use Northrop Frye's felicitous phrase) or cultivate emotional sensibility to, and practical judgments about, intractably difficult human predicaments. This is a deeply important cultural need, surely, and one that Shakespeare and great literature meet better, probably, than any other human product.

⁸ Quick aside: while Hegel's lectures may seem an arbitrary point of entry in light of the terms of much contemporary Shakespeare scholarship, they might appear more pertinent if we recall the debt owed to Hegel's account of Shakespeare and of dramatic poetry by many of our most influential commentaries on Shakespearean tragedy: Goethe, Nietzsche, Bradley, Lukacs, Benjamin, Wilson Knight, Kott, Frye, Cavell, and others.

being to ‘strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself’.)⁹ And once this lesson is absorbed—that is, once we see ourselves as increasingly liberated from the demands of nature, inasmuch as the terms of our self-understanding depend less upon, are less limited by, something ‘out there’ called ‘Nature’ or ‘God’ or the ‘One’ or whatever—we find ourselves less needful of artworks by which we ‘taught ourselves’ this lesson.

Furthermore, Hegel observes, this ongoing de-naturalization unfolds (or has unfolded) through an increased awareness *within* artistic practices of artistic practices as medium-specific. Classical Greek architecture, for instance, manifests a higher awareness of its own status as ‘architecture’—of itself as a freestanding, artificial, material construction—than does earlier ‘symbolic’ architecture.¹⁰ Similarly, as Robert Pippin has convincingly argued, the deepening self-reflexivity of modernist and abstract painting—paintings about painting as such—might be understood to fall within the purview of the overall narrative that Hegel offers.¹¹ And—to move closer to Shakespeare—thinking along these lines also led Hegel himself, at the end of his *Lectures on Fine Art*, to consider dramatic poetry as ‘the highest stage of poetry and of art generally’—first, because ‘in contrast to the other perceptible materials, stone, wood, color and notes, speech is alone the element worthy of the expression of spirit’.¹² If artistic practices are medium-specific modes of self-understanding, goes the thinking here, then what medium or form could be more adequate to our reflexive self-understanding than that which, so to speak, we know to be ‘ours’ from the get-go? Not just elements ripped from an indifferent domain of nature (sound, colour, hard materials like stone or marble)—but what Giambattista Vico described in terms of ‘poetic wisdom:’ elements of culture and history, words and deeds, social principles and passionate aims, conflicts between individual characters.¹³ And—second—because such elements are the ‘stuff’ of dramatic poetry, to work in the dramatic arts entails a degree of self-awareness (as a historical being or ‘people’) that is probably missing, say, from most symbolic sculpture. Dramatic poetry is, in other words, inherently more self-reflexive than sculpture,

⁹ Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 31.

¹⁰ ‘The peculiarity of Greek architecture,’ writes Hegel in a typical formulation, is that by fluting and other means ‘it gives shape to ... supporting *as such* and therefore employs the column as the fundamental element in the purposiveness of architecture.’ *Ibid.*, 2: 666, my emphasis.

¹¹ I am, of course, skipping over a number of important questions—for example, those having to do with the differences between the fates of classical and romantic art in Hegel’s account. But I think my overall point about denaturalization as self-reflexivity can stand, for the moment, without tackling those questions. See, Robert Pippin, ‘What was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)’, *Critical Inquiry* 29 (August 2002), 1–24; and *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, ‘Dramatic Poetry’ from *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, ed. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 57.

¹³ If sculpture or painting must grapple with the ‘given-ness’ of stone or colour or some other material, then the self-reflexive character of Shakespearean drama cannot ‘fall back’ on any natural medium (colour, texture, sound) in order to thematize its own expressive material capacities. Shakespearean drama does not and cannot rely upon any givens to determine its artistic form—not even the fact of the actors’ embodiment determines what unfolds (given the preponderance of ghosts, spirits, visions, or ‘unnatural’ sights and sounds that populate Shakespeare’s plays). Again, one of the tasks of the art of Shakespearean tragedy is to ‘work through’ the fact that there is nothing ‘given’ by God or nature that govern or determine our interactions, our dramatic activity.

painting or architecture because its medium—namely, speech and action—is from the start ‘spiritual’, human, relatively de-naturalized.¹⁴

Hence—and this is the point I want to underscore for my discussion of Shakespearean tragedy—drama is already ‘formally’ freer from nature, from external determination, than the other arts and consequently freer when it comes to choosing its content.

To avoid confusion, I do not want to deny that Shakespearean tragedy required for its formal viability, at a minimum, the concrete, material resources of early modern performance spaces—the physical capacities of the playhouse or the court, the lungs of the actors, the ‘imaginary forces’ of an audience prepared to receive and appreciate what they are seeing and hearing, the sensorial experiences afforded by the spatial and temporal limits of such performances, certain economic-financial conditions and so on. But these requirements, I would argue, amount only to something like a prehistory for the art form of Shakespearean tragedy: its initial material, socio-historical conditions of possibility. For, while these elements allowed Shakespearean tragedy to come into the world, they have not amounted to ongoing limitations on, or exhaustive explanations for, the vitality of this art form and its expressive possibilities. Once brought to life, Shakespearean tragedy has proven capable of flourishing even in the absence of these initial material conditions: on celluloid, in classrooms, in the reflections of solitary readers, in a variety of foreign settings, in performance spaces that bear little or no resemblance to those Shakespeare himself knew and in many other ways. In short, because the material circumstances of the early modern world set up the conditions required for the ‘formal’ viability of Shakespearean tragedy—but without governing or determining the course the art form has taken, once made viable—these original material conditions cannot be taken to wholly explain what Shakespearean tragedy ‘works with’ or ‘works through’.

Pushing this thought a bit further, I argue that the vitality of dramatic poetry as such is—when compared to, say, sculpture, painting, or music—less formally restricted by the sensuous conditions that make up its prehistory.¹⁵ That is, the expressive life and creative

¹⁴ Hegel’s apparent emphasis on ‘speech’ here seems to place him close to a view prevalent in Jena Romanticism—found especially in the thought of Lessing and Friedrich Schlegel—according to which poetry holds a privileged place among the arts because its medium (speech, language) places fewer material constraints on the freedom of the imagination. However, although Hegel apparently analyses drama in the *Lectures on Fine Art* under the heading of poetry, he does not reduce drama to linguistic or poetic expression. Drama, he writes, ‘also displays a complete action’, and it is this centrality of *action* (not just of the poetic free imagination) that, for Hegel, permits and requires drama to suture subjective experience and objective reality more fully than the other arts. Hence, dramatic poetry is, for Hegel, more self-reflexive than sculpture, painting or architecture not only because both its ‘medium’ and its content—namely, speech and action—are from the start ‘spiritual’, human, de-naturalized; drama’s self-reflexive potential is also tied to its resulting capacity to hold together both a first-person (subjective) and a third-person (objective) viewpoint. See Hegel, ‘Dramatic Poetry’, 57 and *passim*. For the romantic viewpoint, to which Hegel is responding, see Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, ‘Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry’, trans. A. W. Steel; and Friedrich Schlegel, excerpts from ‘Critical Fragments’, ‘*Athenaeum* Fragments’, ‘Ideas’, ‘On Goethe’s *Meister*’, ‘Letter about the Novel’, and ‘On Incomprehensibility’, in J. M. Bernstein, ed., *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹⁵ This is not to say that drama or art is thereby dis-embodied or non-sensuous, but—as Hegel puts it—such art is ‘not tied to sensuous presentation, as if that corresponded to it ... romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within its own sphere and in the form of art itself’ (Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 80).

possibilities of dramatic poetry are less determined by the concrete, material conditions that, initially, allowed it to become viable. In this sense, dramatic poetry in general is ‘freer’, more modernist—capable of a more capacious, or less inhibited, expressivity—than the other arts. Drama can *contain* music without being reducible to a musical performance, can *contain* dance without being confused with an occasion to move one’s body about, can *contain* spectacles of all sorts without being thereby reducible to mere show. Moreover, drama can purposefully *show* this containment—and, hence, supersession—of other media as essential to its *own* specifically expressive power. Hence, dramatic poetry enjoys a relatively broad formal freedom with respect to other artistic media. At the same time, this formal freedom that dramatic poetry enjoys with respect to other art forms is commensurate with its freedom to determine its own content. The vitality of dramatic poetry is tied—as is the vitality of all art forms—to the vitality of its content, to the vitality of what it is ‘about’, what it can take up and present to us. And the more that dramatic poetry decides *for itself* what it will or will not present, the greater its formal capacities for expressiveness, the less inhibited it is by this or that concrete-material prehistory.¹⁶

Think of it this way: once artworks no longer need (due to the restrictions of a particular social world’s self-conception) to be about this or that content ‘out there’ (a material purpose, an animal quarry, a ‘god’, a creation myth, a moral lesson, ‘epochal’ historical events)—they are freed up to determine *for themselves* their own content.¹⁷ And this ‘freeing up’ is perhaps most clearly manifested when artworks also start to be about themselves. Self-reflexive artworks and practices undeniably assert the autonomy of human artistry, of human activity. For all these reasons, Hegel not only ranks dramatic poetry as the highest (the freest, most prevalently ‘spiritual’) artistic practice; he also thought that among modern dramatists ‘you will scarcely find any ... who can be compared with Shakespeare’.¹⁸ And so, although Hegel does not say so explicitly, we can nevertheless infer—from the perspective of my highly condensed account here—that Shakespeare’s pre-eminence in Hegel’s account of the history of human artistic development should have something to do with the heightened self-reflexivity of Shakespearean tragedy, and its corresponding achievement of a kind of ‘formal’ freedom.¹⁹ And if this same kind of formal freedom is understood—as in Georg Lukàcs’ *Theory of the Novel*—to belong especially to novelistic

¹⁶ For more on these points, see my essays, ‘These Charms Dissolve’ in *Shakespeare and Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jennifer Bates (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), and ‘Duel’ in *The Oxford Handbook to Early Modern Theatricality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ Compare Hegel: In modern (romantic) art, ‘the scope of the subject matter is therefore also infinitely *extended* ... It opens out into a multiplicity without bounds’ (Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 1: 525).

¹⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 2: 1228.

¹⁹ Shakespeare’s pre-eminence in Hegel’s account—the fact, for instance, that Hegel’s discussion of Shakespeare comes at the culmination of his *Lectures on Fine Art*—would, of course, require some qualification. Hegel also seems to claim that Greek art is more fulfilled *as art* than modern art, and his high regard for Sophocles seems of a piece with that view. ‘There is,’ as Robert Pippin notes, however, ‘another sense in which he claims that the ethical life behind Shakespeare’s presentation and the kind of self-awareness visible in Hamlet, say, does represent an advance or moment of progress.’ Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 84 n. 12. See, further, the discussion of Hegel and Shakespeare in Henry and Anne Paolucci, *Hegelian Literary Perspectives* (Smyrna, DE: Griffon House (repr.), 2002).

writing, then we might remember Friedrich Schlegel's remark about Shakespeare's founding of the novel: 'there is so little contrast between drama and the novel that it is rather drama, treated thoroughly and historically, as for instance by Shakespeare, which is the true foundation of the novel.'²⁰

This formal freedom is moreover evident in the fact that—as Johann Gottfried Herder observed, taking issue with neo-classical objections to Shakespeare—'classical' rules are of no help for understanding Shakespearean tragedy, an art form that has had to solve, with each new work (and with each new interpretation or performance) what it is and what it might become. Hence, for instance, the sense of ongoing revisions in Shakespeare—the feeling that *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale* revisit *Othello* and *King Lear*, or that each new comedy is a self-critical vision of its predecessor. As Herder knew, at issue is not only Shakespeare's alleged lack of 'poetics'—for instance, his unravelling of 'plot' as a consequential separation of deed from recognition—but rather the way in which Shakespearean tragedy shows how the historical conditions of human activity (social, political, economic) have been wholly transformed, and must therefore be seen as transformable still. Which also means that our formal depictions of those activities must be seen as shifting and alterable. Think, for example, of the way that Hamlet's inability to furnish an answer to his own rhetorical question—'What is Hecuba to him, or he to her, that he should weep for her?'—necessitates and prompts Hamlet's reflection not on his or our connection to the events of the *Iliad*, but on the more self-reflexive question of how the sensuous performance of a mimetic action can (still) meaningfully grip a performer and an audience.

Along these lines, we should also recall the (often overlooked fact) that while earlier dramatic forms, like Greek and Roman theatre or English morality plays, were 'art forms' that were inextricable elements of essential social rituals—civic duties, liturgical practices, state-sponsored public entertainment, and so forth—Shakespearean tragedy cannot rely on (and thereby frees itself from) the essentiality of any such ritual culture. In this sense, Shakespearean tragedy shares the predicament of a great number of 'modernist' artistic practices: it must be self-justifying, self-legitimizing since it does not accomplish any other universally recognized cultural (social, civic, religious) task. All of this is evidenced, as so many have noted, in the precarious and ambiguous status of the theatrical practices in Shakespeare's London (and in the years since then). Shakespearean tragedy is forged in the collapse of a dominant, unified culture that can fully sustain or justify its existence.

3

Corollary to this, Shakespearean tragedy cannot take for granted just what exactly it is supposed to depict or represent, and why. If Aeschylus and Sophocles had, at least, some

²⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Dialogue on Poetry' in *German Romantic Criticism*, ed. A. Leslie Willson (New York: Continuum, 1982), 108. However—as Thomas Pavel has pointed out to me—Schlegel's observation might reveal his ignorance of the novelistic origins of Shakespeare's own drama (his debt to Italian *novelle*). Pavel's own history of the novel rightly shows how far back the history of the novel can be extended. See Thomas Pavel, *The Lives of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

sense of what the appropriate purview of tragedy was—the relation between family life and city life; or the struggle between ancient religious beliefs and (then) contemporary political values; or the choreography of protagonists and *polis* (or chorus)—then Shakespearean tragedy has far fewer productive limitations. So, even though Shakespeare of course continued to represent historically significant figures (Princes, Kings, Generals) as well as apparently ‘universal’ concerns (death, family life, sexual desire) he nevertheless leaves us with no sense that he could know, conclusively, just what exactly he was supposed to show us about any of these things. And by the same token this explains why we see Shakespeare as possessed (as *needing* to be possessed) of far more imaginative energy than, say, Sophocles. Indeed, Shakespeare continually expands his dramatic vision to include whores, merchants, beggars, children, spirits, and so on in a seemingly endless variety of worldly contexts—to the point where we (modern interpreters, directors, and actors) must also imaginatively *choose* how or where to present multifarious ‘Shakespearean’ works which seem suitable to so many domains and, hence, representative of no single, particular viewpoint on human life.

Recall that prior to Shakespeare, dramatic poetry by and large presented, or relied upon, a generic, standard, universalizing view of the connection between human actions and the natural, or social, or divine context for those actions and histories. That is, pre-Shakespearean drama worked with some vision of a natural or social (or divine, theological) horizon, against which human actions could be measured, weighed, determined.²¹ There is, for instance, the ‘moral-divine’ horizon of English morality plays, whose given-ness is taken to govern the significance of human acts and consequently determines both the expressive form and the dramatic content of morality plays. In Shakespeare, by contrast, there is no such governing moral order, no transcendent horizon of good and evil in relation to which we can make sense of what happens in the plays—a fact which explains, among other things, the interpretive liberties that might be taken when it comes to approaching both the dramatic content of Shakespearean tragedy and its formal presentation.²² Greek tragedy, too, presents a certain vision of the connection between human actions, human culture, and a set of natural facts, or ‘divine-natural-fated’ demands that challenge or limit human activity.²³ To compose the plot of a Greek tragedy meant, as

²¹ This is obviously a sweeping statement, one that would require more defence and qualification than I can give here. Still, I think it is a basically defensible statement—useful in this context, I hope, for getting at the distinctiveness of Shakespearean tragedy.

²² Samuel Johnson had it right when he wrote: ‘Shakespeare does not write with any moral purpose.’ Arthur Sherbo, ed., *Johnson on Shakespeare*, 23 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958–77), 7: 71. This does not, of course, stop anyone from trying to impose a moral order onto the interpretation of Shakespeare. But such impositions invariably do little more than beg all the interesting questions about, say, Macbeth’s fate, or Othello’s, or Lear’s.

²³ But what about Euripides, or Aristophanes—or, for that matter, Seneca or Terence—whose works have seemed to many (to Hegel and Nietzsche, for instance) to be more ‘Shakespearean’ or modern than Sophocles or Aeschylus? I do not have the space here to give proper consideration to these questions, but my suggestion would be that—leaving aside the ‘proto-modern’ individual-psychological complexity in Euripides, say—these ancient works still presuppose some way of connecting human actions, human history, to given ‘facts of the matter’ (whether natural, divine-given, or somehow fated). In Shakespeare, I am suggesting, there is no such way of suturing the purported ‘facts’ of nature (or God’s command, or fate) and what human beings do to, or with, one another.

Aristotle suggested, grasping the ‘unity’ of an individual’s time and place; it entailed supposing a view of the whole of someone’s relation to the natural or social world of which he is a part. Sophocles, for instance, saw—*had* to see—that Oedipus’ was *both* King of Thebes (hence, Jocasta’s husband) *and* Jocasta’s son (hence, Laius’ murderer) in order to show how Oedipus himself was brought to ‘see’ the whole picture, by means of the reversals and recognitions of which Aristotle spoke. So, while Oedipus’ view of things at the outset of Sophocles’ play is partial and subjective—*he* thinks that he is Jocasta’s husband, even as he is blind to the fact that he is also her son—events bring him to see the whole picture, to come to know everything that Sophocles (not to mention the audience, or the soothsayer Tiresias) already knows from the outset. And by finally seeing the entirety of his relation to his social world—the way, say, that ancient mythologies saw the cosmos as bounded by comprehensible horizons—Oedipus is brought to ruin, and the tragedy concludes. To compose a drama of this sort is thus to present a God’s-eye, a-historical view on the spectacle of humans beings in action—a perspective that allows us all (playwright, protagonists, audience) to perceive such-and-such a situation by coming to know the relationship between (subjective) individuals and their (objective) world.

Shakespeare, by contrast, shows us how different situations look from the standpoint of particular individuals (Hamlet, for instance)—as well as from other standpoints *on* those individuals and that situation (Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Horatio, each of whom has a subjective world-view of their own)—without ever showing how or whether these individual points of view truly coincide in a panoptic whole. In fact, the action of a Shakespearean drama is invariably motivated by the non-coincidence of these multiple points of view—the sheer lack of an objective view of subjective stances. Think, for example, of the way that differing perspectives on Hamlet’s behaviour drive much of what actually occurs in the play *Hamlet*. Or, of the way that what an audience perceives—about Macbeth’s response at the banquet to the murder of Banquo, for instance—does not correspond to how others in the play see things. Or, of how the Friar’s retelling of the lovers’ actions at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* necessarily misses so much of what mattered to the audience—the balcony scene, the morning aubade and so on. Or of how Horatio’s bald plot-summary at the close of *Hamlet* will hardly capture what we have just witnessed.

In this way, Shakespeare forces us to regard any perspective on human actions as deeply provisional, historically bounded, and contextually determined.²⁴ Which is to say that no character in Shakespeare—and no audience of a Shakespeare play—ever learns the ‘whole truth’, or gains a panoptic perspective on human actors in the world. Quite the contrary: in *King Lear*, for instance, Lear’s or Gloucester’s blindness to the standpoints of their respective children is never subsequently ‘reversed’ into insight by the unintended consequences of their deeds. Instead of moving from blindness to insight, we see how and with what implications an ongoing (and worsening) blindness can replace insight.²⁵ Even when events seem to be cleared up at the end of a Shakespearean drama—the way, for instance, that revelations come tumbling one after the other at the close of *Cymbeline*—we are left not with a sense of clarity and insight, but with more questions than ever. ‘Nor the

²⁴ Shakespeare-the-playwright invariably seems to know more than what any individual protagonist *in* the play, or any particular audience, comes to know.

²⁵ See my chapter on *King Lear* in *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare: Disinheriting the Globe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

time nor place | Will serve our long inter'gatories', admits the baffled King Cymbeline at the play's close (5.5.391-2). Our sense of 'closure' at the conclusion of a Shakespeare play is, moreover, belied by our sense that the fate of one or more of the characters remains deeply unresolved, or unexplained, by the actions we have witnessed. Even our clarity about what is wrong or broken is diminished. Whereas in Greek tragedy, it matters tremendously—to the city that watches, above all—that at least the terms of the crises, if not of solutions, are clear, in Shakespeare we are denied even that clarity. Will Iago confess once back in Venice? What will become of the broken kingdom at the end of *King Lear*? Why, if Shakespeare meant to invoke a legend according to which Banquo was King James' ancestor, is Malcolm (and not Fleance) crowned at the conclusion of *Macbeth*? And what is the connection between, say, this broader history and Macduff's role as Macbeth's assassin? One could go on and on with questions such as these, since no perspective in Shakespeare's work—neither the author's, nor the audience's, nor that of any individual character—is capable of presenting the events as a unified whole.²⁶ In Shakespeare, subjective-individual and objective-worldly points of view never fully coincide.

4

Having said all this, we can now begin to see how Shakespearean tragedy responds to the loss of any 'given'—nature, or God, or 'fate'—that might explain human societies, histories, actions, destinies, relationships and values. Shakespeare challenges us to understand tragedies not as responding to given-ness of existential facts (desire, or mortality) or historical situations (Henry V's invasion of France, or the fate of the Roman republic), but as responding to the fact that there are no givens that govern our dramatic activity. To say it all at once: Shakespearean tragedy displays our provisional self-determination, as subjects in the world—while at the same time asking us to see our actions as intelligible, as somehow meaningful, as something more than the vanity of 'so-and-so' doing 'this-or-that'. The loss of 'givens' (the death of old gods, the devaluation of our highest values) that Shakespeare 'works through' does not, I propose, leave us with a desperate nihilism—but rather with the sense that it is precisely this loss of 'givens' that, finally, allows us to see ourselves as provisionally free in the world, and as reckoning with the implications of this new self-understanding.

This is why, in Shakespearean tragedy, subjective freedom comes to light through (or, in some cases, *as*) the dissolution of the social bonds on which we rely—kinship ties, civic relations, economic dependencies, or political allegiances. The ritual practices that had sustained prior, traditional forms of social life—funerary rites, the performance of 'noble' or 'honourable' deeds, military service, conventional modes of language, ritual ways of bequeathing the material world, formal modes of punishment or retribution—appear in

²⁶ Such questions might be further extended in order to reconsider traditional generic distinctions between comedy and tragedy. We might ask about *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, whether Shylock is really 'content,' and whether he actually performs the acts he has pledged to perform. For a start in this direction, see my remarks on comedy and the comic in my Introduction to *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare*, esp. 4-5, 18-24, 31-3.

Shakespearean tragedy as perverse, inadequate or even irrational. As a result, the meaning our actions cannot derive from their recognizable adherence to, or transgression of, this or that norm.²⁷ Macbeth welcomes Duncan ‘as his kinsman and his subject ... and his host’—all of which should lead Macbeth to shut the door on any murderer, not bear the knife himself. And yet by killing Duncan, Macbeth becomes King! So, to what are we to attribute Macbeth’s actions and their outcome? Is not ‘ambition’ a name or placeholder for the breakdown of any other, external motivation or ethical horizon? (‘I have no spur | To prick the sides of my intent, but only | Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself | And falls on the other’ (*Macbeth* 7.1.25–8).) Shakespeare’s protagonists (like us) have undergone the collapse of a motivating way of life, of an inheritable set of norms by means of which to make what we do intelligible or acceptable or meaningful to ourselves (and others). Yet it is not just that these older ways of life collapse or fail, or cease to be sufficiently motivating—leaving only particular, naked, imperfect individuals. Rather, these limited, imperfect human beings turn out to be the bearers of these collapsed values. How they bear up under the weight *completes* the collapse. ‘Let Rome in Tiber melt and the wide arch | Of the rang’d empire fall!’ cries Antony, as he embraces Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.1.35–6).

Similarly, Hamlet’s can be identified with any number of deeds, and yet no one knows exactly how to understand his actions in view of collective norms or ‘reasons for acting’. What to make of his behaviour after his father’s death, or of his treatment of Ophelia, or of his slaughter of Polonius, or of his subsequent refusal to treat Polonius’ dead body with appropriate care? (Gertrude: ‘O me, what hast thou done? | Hamlet: Nay, I know not ...’ (*Hamlet* 3.4.25–6)). And whenever Hamlet seeks the meaning of his actions in the clarity of others’ responses, his social world seems incapable of answering him—beyond expressing incomprehension, or sending him away. In a sense, Hamlet is disinherited not only by Claudius’ election and the insufficiency of natural-matrilineal ties, but by the sheer vacuity of the social activities that remain open to him, such as revenge or life as a courtier. Hamlet’s task, it seems, is not to figure out how best to carry out what is ostensibly being asked of him—revenge, filial love, loyalty to the court—but to try to lead his own life, under the realization that none of these social demands, each of which is incompatible with the others, can be sufficiently motivating. Our interpretation of the play will express our sense of whether Hamlet succeeds or fails in this.

In his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel saw that Shakespearean tragedy ‘takes for its proper subject matter the subjective inner life of the character who is not, as in classical tragedy, a purely individual embodiment of ethical powers’.²⁸ In other words, the interests, aims and actions of Shakespeare’s characters are not fully absorbed or explained by those of the family, church, state, and so on—which is why even minor characters in Shakespeare stand out to us as individuals who might be ‘played’ by actors in radically diverse ways, with different ticks, passions, motivations, and so forth. But Hegel nonetheless wanted to hold to the belief that ‘in human action a basis of specific ends drawn from the concrete spheres of family, state, church etc. is never missing’. For Hegel, our actions invariably throw us into the ‘sphere of real world and its particular concerns’.²⁹ What Hegel means

²⁷ For a fuller defence of this, see my *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare*.

²⁸ Hegel, ‘Dramatic Poetry’, 73. ²⁹ *Ibid.*

is that tragedies show how our actions invariably implicate us in a broader social world, and by the same token the fate of a social world itself unfolds through our actions. If there are no worldly consequences to our actions, then they do not appear as actions at all; if our worldly ties are not transformed by what particular human beings do, then no tragedy would be possible, and individual human agents would not come to light as such.

This left Hegel somewhat puzzled about Shakespearean tragedy, since in Shakespeare—as just observed—the relationship between the actions of individual characters and objective ‘powers’ (substantial social demands, inheritable forms of social life) is far from clear.³⁰ Here is Hegel confessing his bewilderment: the ‘aims’ of Shakespeare’s characters, he writes, ‘are broadly and variously particularized and in such detail that what is truly substantial can often glimmer through them in only a very dim way’.³¹ This seems true, but also inadequate. After all, it seems impossible to account for—say—Regan or Goneril’s attachment to Edmund as (even dimly) expressing anything ‘truly substantial’, as revealing anything beyond the contingency of *their* passionate attachment to him, or their jealousy of one another. Think also of how Shakespeare’s frequent and diverse explorations of the vicissitudes of sexual love reveal attachments to which society is utterly blind, or by which social commitments cannot be explained. Desdemona’s father openly declares, for instance, that he cannot see the legitimacy or meaning of his daughter’s desire for Othello. And later, Desdemona’s dying words will refute Othello’s perception of himself as her murderer—challenging us to see her motivation as hers alone, as a form of self-expression: ‘Nobody; I myself. Farewell.’ So, too, because Romeo’s and Juliet’s aims are not immediately those of their families or of Verona, their tragic end cannot be seen as the consequence of their prior actions. This is why their suicides still need explaining, even when the consequences for the family or the city are clear (‘Go hence and have more talk of these sad things’ (5.3.306)).³²

It is as if Shakespearean tragedy shows how we can (and do) *lose* any external ethical or cultural reason, or explanation, for our actions—without, however, losing all ‘moral’ motivation, where by ‘moral’ I mean not a transcendent set of orienting values but a lived experience of ourselves as not utterly worthless, base, expendable. As if we are perhaps capable of finding some other way of justifying ourselves to one another, some way of *being* or *becoming* that justification. As if, therefore, the moral stakes of our actions were best glimpsed when conventional, ethical justifications for acting fail—when we have no other ‘reason’ to offer one another but ourselves.³³

³⁰ For an admirably clear and genuinely insightful exploration of the limits of Hegel’s view of tragedy with respect to Shakespeare, see A. C. Bradley, ‘Hegel’s Theory of Tragedy’ in *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/36773.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For more, see my essay, ‘Defying the Stars: Tragic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in *Romeo and Juliet*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63:1 (Spring 2012), and the chapters on *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* in my *Love as Human Freedom* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

³³ This formulation sounds close to Montaigne’s famous words about Étienne de La Boétie: ‘Si on me presse, continue-t-il, de dire pourquoi je l’aimais, je sens que cela ne se peut exprimer qu’en répondant: parce que c’était lui; parce que c’était moi’ (‘If urged to tell wherefore I loved him, I feel it cannot be expressed but by answering: Because it was he, because it was myself’). However, in Shakespeare’s beloved Montaigne there is not the same sense of broader ‘ethical collapse’—the disappearance, that is, of other possible ‘reasons’—that, I am arguing, is in Shakespeare. See Montaigne, *Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1993), bk.1, ch. 28.

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Shakespeare offers, so says Hegel, ‘the finest examples of firm and consistent characters who come to ruin simply because of this decisive adherence to themselves’.³⁴ Similarly Hegel’s contemporary, the English critic William Hazlitt (1778–1830)—who, with his friend Samuel Coleridge, had been influenced by the German enthusiasm for Shakespeare—emphasized the importance of character-type in his *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (1813). A. C. Bradley’s 1904 lectures on Shakespeare offer the most sustained and influential elaboration: in Shakespeare’s tragedies, Bradley writes, ‘action is essentially the expression of character’. I understand Bradley’s insight to be as follows: Shakespearean tragedy displays human beings not as representational figures acting on behalf of any way of life or ‘value’ greater than themselves—but as staging *themselves* as potentially valuable to us, as agents in the world *leading* their lives rather than just suffering whatever befalls them. Rather than ask us to grasp what Antony’s fate means for Rome, or what Hamlet’s fate means for Denmark, Shakespeare invites us to determine why (or if) Antony’s and Hamlet’s actions matter, without relying on any external values or norms to anchor that meaning. And if Othello’s fate seems reflected in the fate of Venice, in the structure of the republic’s ‘way of life’, then this is only because we also perceive Othello to be acting on his own when he lays his hands on Desdemona—only insofar as we witness Othello’s subsequent failure to explain the murder in terms that bear essentially upon Venice.

All of which forces us to ask: can we matter to one another not only in virtue of what we might represent, but also with nothing to offer but ourselves, our self-expressive deeds? Can we recognize one another, as individual actors in the world, in our very ordinariness, as of extraordinary worth?

These issues coalesce with particular intensity in *King Lear*. No other Shakespearean tragedy opens with a more firmly established and secure social world; and yet none finishes with a more profound sense of worldly loss—where the viability of any intergenerational social life is in question. At the same time, by the play’s end, our concern for the fate of the Kingdom has been replaced by our efforts to understand the state of the relationships in the play—and by the characters’ attempts to understand one another.

At the opening, Lear strives to outlive the necessity of his natural death for the transmission of the Kingdom—in order to definitively separate the intergenerational life of his society from its mooring in a natural cycle of life and death, growth and decay. By denying the necessity of his own ‘natural’ death for the transmission of the Kingdom, he would denaturalize society, and free intergenerational devolution from the claims of nature. (‘I will forget my nature’ (1.5.33).)

But to what end?

By liberating society from nature’s demands, Lear would freely bring about his own rebirth, his own re-entrance into the world. He would make clear that his presence among others is a self-determining social reality, not a natural fact. With sovereign autonomy, he would lay his natural life at the feet of others, for their approval or disapproval. For the sake of testing—*really* testing—his daughters’ love, he strips himself of accommodation in

³⁴ Hegel, ‘Dramatic Poetry’, 79.

order to see if he will be accommodated. For the truest test of love will lie not in rhetorical demonstrations, but in whether or not his daughters—without being legally, ethically or ritually required to do so—will take his aging body into their homes, tolerate its inevitable failings, and let Lear crawl unburdened toward death.

In thinking to set his rest on Cordelia's kind nursery, Lear not only desired the chance to be loved as himself—rather than just as King or father—but he also wanted his desire to be seen in his otherwise puzzling action: his self-divestment as a demand for loving recognition. For Lear, the possibility of loving Cordelia, and of being loved by her is something that neither nature nor the Kingdom, with all its prerogatives and wealth, can furnish. And yet it is a possibility that might be achieved by Lear's letting go of the Kingdom—and *that* can only be achieved if, again, the Kingdom's *durée* is no longer tethered to the natural cycle of birth and death. Freeing the Kingdom from nature's authority would give Lear the chance to see how Cordelia responds to *him*, to his desire for *her* recognition.³⁵

For this same reason, things go awry for Lear and Cordelia whenever they misguidedly turn to some external social or natural justification for their actions, for their demands of one another: *Because I am your father, a sovereign power, because 'I gave you all'* (2.4.252), or—on Cordelia's part—*Because I am your child, the fruit of your loins, because I know I am your 'joy'* (1.1.82). In thinking that they already have the 'right'—whether by natural or positive law—to be loved or respected or acknowledged, they set themselves up for the awakening that 'being loved' or 'acting on one's own' are not 'rights' to which one can be socially or naturally entitled. What they fail to see in such moments, therefore, is that they have nothing to offer one another, no 'reason' except themselves—and that 'they themselves' count as meaningful offerings only by being received, loved and recognized as such.

That loving and being loved make our worldly rights and social entitlements worth having, not the reverse, is something that can perhaps only be learned through the sting of finding oneself unloved, rebuked, put down—or, conversely, through the remorse that comes from having injured a loved one. This is why, as soon as he feels himself unloved by Cordelia, Lear throws the Kingdom away. The world he was about to bestow was meaningful to him only so long as he thought that, by bequeathing it on his own terms, he might bring about the possibility of finally leading his own life with Cordelia, on their terms.

It is as if the worth of our shared world, of our lives together, were determined by our success or failure in being—or in somehow becoming—worthwhile for one another.

Success in this enterprise demands that we somehow inhabit others' lives, and imagine for ourselves what they would do, what they want from us, and why they act the way they do. Shakespearean tragedy responds to this demand.

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³⁵ Again, for a fuller reading of *King Lear*, see ch. 3 of my *Tragic Conditions in Shakespeare*.

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