# Tragedy Without Awe: A Rationalist View of an Irrationalist Form

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Tragedy, like farce, has suffered at the hands of the critics of genre and for similar reasons. Our understanding of both genres has been distorted by judgments passed off as definitions. Our view of the one has been colored by scorn and our vision of the other obscured by reverence.

Although comedy and tragedy are linked together as if they were a symmetrically balanced pair of complementary opposites like yin and yang, night and day, or black and white, when critics actually get down to cases they treat the two genres quite differently. It is true that such complementary definitions of comedy and tragedy were standard throughout the middle ages and the Renaissance, but that fact is generally regarded by moderns as just another symptom of a superficial approach that substituted formulas for genuine understanding. The neoclassical definition of tragedy is particularly subject to scorn; for how could presumably intelligent people have been so dense, we think, as to reduce the most sublime product of the Western literary genius to such a simple and conventional formula. We applaud ourselves that we understand tragedy so much better than did the Renaissance critics; and yet, we are not sure that we can create any tragedies of our own. We are appalled at the triteness of the neoclassical way of defining tragedy, for, to us, tragedy is a thing so very special that we are disinclined to apply the label to any but masterpieces and are apt to believe that the capacity to create tragedy is granted only to a few special epochs—perhaps only to two ages in history. One of those periods, of course, was the Renaissance.

Why is it that an age so clever in the production of tragedy should be so clumsy in its definition? The fault, I think, lies more in the unreasonable demands that we have placed on tragedy than on any lack of sophistication on the part of the Renaissance critics. When comedy is discussed, we may differ

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about its nature but we are agreed that individual comedies might range from the most brilliantly sublime to the most wretchedly inept. We do not grant the same freedom to tragedy. Tragedy must be sublime or we will drum it out of the corps. We will not tolerate a second-rate tragedy. However it may superficially resemble tragedy, if it is bad, then it must be something else: melodrama, tragicomedy, or domestic drama are permitted categories, but the second-rate drama must never presume to be tragic.

However flattering this might be to the muse of tragedy, it is unfortunate from the point of view of our understanding. Our propensity to rank categories unnecessarily obscures them with all of the difficulties attendant on providing objective criteria for value judgments. Genre studies may well have fallen into disfavor because of the unspoken assumption that such categories should be at least loosely ordered into a hierarchical Great Chain of Being. When we insist that our categories of drama have an assigned rung on the ladder of our esteem as well as clearly defined and objectively determined distinctions, we have hopelessly muddied the issue. The forms at the extreme ends of the value system suffer the most from the rating scale; farce, on the one hand, is dismissed as unworthy of study, and the demands of tragedy are so great that our difficulty is simply to create a definition that will retain only masterpieces, ruthlessly excluding all lesser works.

Thus we get endless and unresolvable discussions about whether or not Anouilh's *Antigone* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are really tragedies. The reason such discussions are unresolvable is that while they pretend to be about the applicability of certain objective criteria of tragedy, they are really about admission to an elite club. Thy are concerned with the question of whether such plays deserve to be admitted into the company of *Hamlet, Oedipus,* and *King Lear.* If, however, that were the only question, most people would probably have a clear, unambiguous opinion: that they indeed do not. Yet we may still be able to find a significant family resemblance among these plays that will increase our understanding of all five.

I suggest that we attempt the experiment, that we admit the possibility of a bad tragedy just as we do of a bad comedy and see if that helps us to better understand a significant portion of our dramatic heritage. I wish not to present here a complete new theory of tragedy but to show how a value-free definition of tragedy can clarify and focus already established notions about tragedy and eliminate much unnecessary confusion.

I should make it clear at the outset that my approach to genre is that of strict, no-nonsense nominalism. I do not believe that there is such a thing as a perfect tragedy somewhere in the realm of ideas. General categories are useful to the extent that they call attention to significant patterns of similarity between individuals. They are a way of observing the forest without forgetting entirely about the trees. Genre classifications are significant because they reveal fundamental patterns in the way we organize experience through art; those basic patterns can be endlessly varied to reflect infinite individual visions.

I also insist on being prosaically clear and unambiguous about the terms of our definitions. Let us attempt to define the genre in terms, not of its "essence," but of its boundaries, lest we arrive at a definition so narrow it

embraces but a handful of exemplars. I see no need for poetical or metaphysical definitions of tragedy. Joyce's "secret cause" is wonderfully evocative, but it represents what might be called "poetic criticism" as opposed to criticism *qua* criticism (239). Likewise, any appeal to the arousal of "true tragic feelings" or the like must be rigorously excluded. Imagine what a waste of time it would be to argue about whether *Barefoot in the Park* allowed us to experience true *comic* feelings. We can certainly compare Neil Simon to Molière, and even rank them, without having to resort to such hopelessly subjective criteria of the genre we call *comedy*.

Let us, just to see what will happen, try a fresh approach to the task of defining tragedy. We obviously cannot ignore what others have said about tragedy; language, as de Saussure observed, is a product of the group rather than the individual. We wish not to create an idiosyncratic (and thus effete and useless) definition of this important term. Rather we must attempt to remove the value judgments and the attendant mysticism that engulf our notion of tragedy to see what lies within. We should look for defining characteristics that have two qualities: they should be generally recognized as diagnostic by major critics, and they should be relatively unambiguous. They should be part of the common understanding of what is tragic, yet capable of distinguishing one play from another. The defining characteristics of tragedy should be such that we can generally agree whether they exist in any particular play. I insist on this last point because so many things said about tragedy do not meet it. It is usually very difficult, for example, to determine with certainty whether a given protagonist has achieved "true understanding" of himself.

What then are the themes or traits that recur in discussions about the nature of tragedy? Essentially there are two major fields excavated by the definers of tragedy. Many attempt to define tragedy in terms of its world-view or philosophy, especially with respect to the question of theodicy or the problem of evil. Others focus on the nature of the protagonist, usually either in terms of something that might be called her or his stature, or in terms of the moral characteristics of the hero.

There are major differences of opinion among those who look to define the *Weltanschauung* of tragedy. The extremes are marked: on the one hand there are critics like I.A. Richards, who insist on a bleak and stark vision. "Tragedy," says Richards, "is only possible to a mind which is for the moment agnostic or Manichaean. The least touch of any theology which has a compensating Heaven to offer the tragic hero is fatal" (246). At the other extreme is Walter Kerr, who declares that "tragedy is the form that promises us a happy ending. It is also the form that is realistic about the matter" (36). The mere fact of such diversity of opinion would by itself suggest that tragedy might not best be defined by its world-view, but there is a deeper reason for avoiding the "tragic view of life" as a defining characteristic, one well illustrated by the extraordinary debate that raged a few decades ago over the compatibility of tragedy with the Christian view of life.

Numerous critics felt compelled at that time to publish their conviction that the tragic and the Christian views are incapable of reconciliation. Michel and Sewall gathered a fair sampling of these opinions in their collection of

essays on tragedy, the flavor of which may be had from a few quotations. According to Clifford Leech, "the tragic picture is incompatible with the Christian faith. It is equally incompatible with any form of religious belief that assumes the existence of a personal and kindly God" (Michel and Sewell 172). David Raphael says that "the religion of the Bible is inimical to Tragedy . . . because it is optimistic and trusts that evil is always a necessary means to a greater good . . ." (51). And likewise Richard Sewall: "In point of doctrine, Christianity reverses the tragic view and makes tragedy impossible" (50). And Karl Jaspers (often quoted by such critics) declares: "Christian salvation opposes tragic knowledge. The chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without chance of escape. Therefore no genuinely Christian tragedy can exist" (Michel and Sewall 13). Michel sums up: "In whatever theological, philosophical, cultural, or pragmatic terms Christian optimism expresses itself, it is grounded in enthusiasm not for the natural powers of man but for the supernatual fact of redemption. At the root of the question of living in a vale of tears, then, there is a basic incompatibility between the tragic and the Christian view" (223). Many specifically cite Shakespeare as presenting the tragic (non-religious) point of view. Thus Jaspers declares that Shakespeare "moves across a purely secular stage" (7) and "under every possible aspect he shows man as he really is. But the specifically religious—and only this—escapes him" (14).

Most (although not all) of these critics seem unaware that scholars like Lilly B. Campbell and Willard Farnham had demonstrated that Renaissance tragedy had developed out of a Medieval Christian tradition that saw tragedy specifically as demonstrating the impermanence and unreliability of worldly things (cf. Doran 125). In that tradition, the "tragic view" held that it is precisely because, in this world, the great and powerful fall and the innocent suffer that we should put our faith in the next. This is not exclusively a medieval view; it is exactly what Schopenhauer understood by "the tragic" (2:433-34). While Elizabethan, and certainly Shakespearean, tragedy went beyond such a viewpoint, it did not (and this is the essential point) exclude it.

Ellis-Fermor presents a more inclusive view when she says that the "tragic mood is balanced between the religious and the non-religious interpretations of catastrophe and pain" (17), but even this misses the point. The point is that no philosophy, either optimistic or pessimistic, is the *defining* characteristic of Shakespearean tragedy. Even if we look at the play most often cited as evidence of Shakespeare's bleak pessimism, we notice that although Cordelia as well as Lear is "more sinned against than sinning," the major sinners—Edmund and his various allies—are thoroughly defeated. It is true that there is no suggestion in *King Lear* of "a compensating Heaven," but it is also true that Lear's Britain, unlike Hamlet's Denmark, has been made by Shakespeare explicitly pagan. *King Lear*, often thought to be the most tragic of tragedies, looks unblinkingly at innocent suffering. Christian philosophers may have had trouble answering the question, "Why do good people suffer?," but the tragic view is incompatible only with the view of those persons, Christian or not, who deal with that question by refusing to think about it. The fact is that it is possible for a confirmed atheist and a devout Christian to sit side by side at a performance of *King Lear*, for each to be

profoundly touched, intellectually as well as emotionally, without either having been in the least shaken in his religious or philosophical convictions. Tragedy—"great" tragedy, if you will—looks hard and searchingly at pain and suffering; we must make of that what we can, according to our own lights.

It is really quite hopeless to try to establish a characteristic world-view, philosophy, or attitude to life as a defining trait of tragedy. Unless, that is, when we give up trying to determine whether tragedy is pessimistic or optimistic, we conclude that it is always neither or both. Certainly when tragedy ends on a clearly optimistic note (like the *Oresteia* taken as a whole) we wonder whether it is really tragic. And a thoroughly pessimistic play, strangely enough, is usually called a tragicomedy; Duerrenmatt's *The Visit,* and Ionesco's *The Killer* are good examples, but almost any "Absurdist" play will serve.

This characteristic ambiguity is part of a pattern that has its origin in the other major concern of tragic theorists—the nature of the tragic protagonist. It is a pattern that can be observed in the remarks of nearly everyone who comments on the nature of tragedy. There is a tendency for the theorists of tragedy to use words like "dividedness," "ambivalence," "paradox" and "conflict" to describe what they take to be its essential nature. Aristotle suggests something of the sort by asking for a hero who is neither wholly good nor wholly bad. Hegel claims tragedy is the conflict of good with good (4: 295-98, 319-22), and Bradley, following him, broadens the concept to include more than strictly moral issues (85-88). Robert Heilman suggests that the "dividedness" of the hero is the hallmark of tragic drama, which he contrasts to the wholeness of characters in melodrama (14-19). Richard Sewall says that the suffering of the tragic hero is not just physical but also "mental or spiritual anguish as the protagonist acts in the knowledge that what he feels he must do is in some sense wrong—as he sees himself at once both good and bad, justified yet "unjustified" (47). To Northrop Frye, "tragedy is a paradoxical combination of a fearful sense of rightness (the hero must fall) and a pitying sense of wrongness (it is too bad that he falls)" (214). Kierkegaard suggests a moral ambiguity about the tragic hero, contrasting genuine evil with "truly tragic guilt in its ambiguous innocence" (117). Max Scheler sees the essence of tragedy as a conflict between a "positive value and the very object which possesses it" and goes on to say that "'tragic guilt' is a kind for which no one can be blamed and for which no conceivable 'judge' can be found" (Michel and Sewall 31, 39).

There are two other characteristics usually associated with this special dramatic form: sacrifice and punishment, which are somewhat confusingly and paradoxically brought together under the heading of expiation. I say confusingly, because, as Bernard Shaw points out in the Preface to *Androcles and the Lion,* sacrifice requires the suffering of the innocent—the more spotless, the better—while punishment is the retributive suffering of the guilty. Although they are equally the product of, in Shaw's words, "the notion that two blacks make a white" (4: 470), they require precisely opposite types of victims. Yet these incompatible concepts of sacrifice and suffering often appear mixed together in discussion of tragedy and the tragic hero (e.g. Krook 17, Brereton 73); a fact which suggests that the dividedness seen by Frye in our

attitude to the tragic hero is related to the ambiguous moral status that Kierkegaard sees as central to the nature of the protagonist.

The attempt to rationalize this divided attitude has confused even the most insightful of commentaries. A good example is Max Scheler's excellent and provocative essay, "On the Tragic" (Michel and Sewall 27-44). One of Scheler's major concerns is the question of guilt in tragedy. Although the fatal catastrophe of tragedy is the inevitable consequence of the actions of the characters, he says that it is not possible clearly to assign guilt. "We may use the term 'tragic' " he asserts, "only when we feel that everyone concerned in the story has hearkened to the demands of his duty with the utmost of his capabilities, and yet the disaster has had to occur" (38). Yet he insists on using the term "tragic guilt," which he links to the idea of a "noble" man whose vision of a higher morality than that discernible by his own age brings him into conflict with the morality of his own time. "He must necessarily appear 'guilty' even before the fairest judge, when he is in fact guiltless and is so seen by God alone" (42). Now if we objectively apply this standard as I have presented it so far it would appear that *Saint Joan* is the quintessential tragedy. In fact Shaw defends his play as a tragedy on much those same grounds in the preface (6: 72). Scheler seems to sense the difficulties that this position raises, because he qualifies his argument—but qualifies it in ways that produce confusion and contradiction. Even while exonerating such tragic heroes, he refers to their "tragic guilt," which he sees as necessary and "guiltless guilt" (42). While the type of tragic hero who is endowed "with moral awareness," writes Scheler, "is obviously essentially the opposite of a sinner, he can not be distinguished from a sinner by the age in which he lives." At first glance *Saint Joan* appears even more clearly as Scheler's perfect tragedy, but he concludes that "there are no present tragedies—there are only tragedies of the past" (42). Now I find this to be rather peculiar. It means that a certain kind of moral blindness is required to produce tragedies, or at least is required of the age in which tragedies are produced. It means that *Saint Joan*, by these standards so perfect a tragedy in every other way, must finally be excluded from that class by the fact that author and audience are fully aware of its tragic qualities; it means that Shaw, by insisting on the Epilogue because he demands that we see the "canonized Joan as well as the incinerated one" (6: 75)—that is, because he insists on pointing up the very qualities of his play that Scheler finds essentially tragic—is by the very same stroke irrevocably excluding his play from the realm of the tragic.

Unfortunately, Scheler is entirely innocent of conscious irony. A few paragraphs later he denounces the common notion that tragedy is the consequence of "moral guiltiness" by affirming that "only total blindness for the phenomenon of tragedy could hatch out this silliest of theories" (43). Perhaps the theory is wrong, but can it really be so "silly" if it must be held by any age that produces tragedies, as indeed it was nearly the only theory thinkable in the centuries of Shakespeare and Racine.

An alternative to this kind of confusion in the way we regard tragedy is the recognition that tragedy inevitably contains such illogical and ambivalent morality, that it embodies an archetypal pattern containing not only what Frye calls a "mimesis of sacrifice" (214), but also what we might call a mimesis of

"just retribution." Frye himself suggests that there are two "reductive" views of tragedy which "represent extreme or limiting views" of the genre. One is the view of tragedy as representing the "omnipotence of an external fate" and the other is that it depicts a downfall brought about by the violation of a moral law. Frye concludes that they are limiting views because while each is "almost good enough" they are contradictory (209-10). Another conclusion is possible: that the form itself is inherently contradictory because it actually combines both views. This is what is implied by Racine when he defends his Phaedra as a truly tragic heroine by saying that "her crime is a punishment of the gods rather than an urge flowing from her own will" (145). Cairncross, in the introduction to his translation of the play, develops Racine's view of the heroine—that she was "doomed" to be guilty—as the foundation for his assertion that "there is no more profoundly tragic work than Racine's masterpiece" (141). Observe also how the theorists of tragedy slip into oxymoron when discussing the ethical qualities of the hero. Hegel insists that tragic heroes are as much guilty as innocent and are even proud of their guilt (320-21); Kierkegaard refers to "truly tragic guilt in its ambiguous innocence" (117); and Scheler says that tragic guilt is "guiltless guilt" (42).

"Guiltless guilt." Like other epithets of "true" tragedy, it is a phrase that summons up echoes of Sophocles first tragedy of Oedipus. But such ambivalent—or contradictory—mythic patterns are common outside, as well as within, the Western tradition. It will be instructive to examine a legend which is similar to the myth that our tradition finds seminally tragic, yet has marked differences that reflect its cultural origin.

Bronislow Malinowski recounts a legend of incest and death in the tales of the Trobriand Islanders, who inhabit a group of small islands off eastern New Guinea. Malinowski was interested in Freudian psychology and tried to discover what significance the Oedipus complex could have in this culture—a culture in which fatherhood does not exist because these people do not recognize a causal relationship between the sexual act and pregnancy. Marriage is exogamous and there are incest taboos against mother-son relationships, but the most important taboo prohibits the relations of brother and sister. Violation of the mother-son prohibition is a serious breach but is not thought at all probable; it is consequently not invested with much emotional energy. The brother-sister taboo, on the other hand, is greatly feared and accompanied with an entire array of social codes aimed at its reinforcement. Brothers and sisters are not even allowed to be in each other's company except under highly controlled circumstances, and they are expected to be exceedingly circumspect even in talking about each other. In short, violation of the sister-brother incest taboo is seen both as a terrible sin and a great temptation. There is accordingly a very popular story about a brother and sister who become lovers, die, and become the source of sacred magic. The guilty act comes about against the will of the two young people, when the sister accidentally brushes against some love potion the brother had prepared to gain the love of another woman. She pursues her horrified brother until he, as Malinowski relates it, "exhausted and overcome, allowed his sister to catch hold of him, and the two fell down, embracing in the shallow water of the caressing waves. Then, ashamed and remorseful, but with the fire of their love

not quenched, they went to the grotto of Bokaraywata where they remained without food, without drink, and without sleep. There also they died, clasped in one another's arms, and through their linked bodies there grew the sweet-smelling plant of the native mint." The myth goes on to tell of the discovery of the bodies, the magic of the plant, and the taboos and ritual that arose from these, now almost sacred, events (127-28).

Here we have the same confusion of guilt with innocence, the same "guiltless guilt," the punished shame which becomes a noble sacrifice, the expiation of innocent sin which sanctifies yet fills the hearers with sympathy, horror, and awe—the same elements, that is, that we find in the stories of Oedipus, Tristan and Isolde, and dozens of other tragic tales of our own culture.

Now there is nothing particularly mystic, majestic, or sublime about all of this, but it is important all the same. It dramatizes the conflict of will and morality. It represents a way of coming to terms with that conflict, of acknowledging those desires we passionately believe to be shameful, yet of somehow freeing ourselves from the guilt that desire implies. If we turn now to *King Oedipus* with this rather cold and clinical light, we find it loses some of its luster. Raphael quotes a doubltessly often-made observation, that "no member of Sophocles' audience was likely to suppose himself in any danger of murdering his father and marrying his mother through the extraordinary chances that brought such a fate to Oedipus" and thus would have no reason to experience "fear" as Aristotle defines it (16). That is true only if you insist on perfect literalness; as a symbolic, dreamlike acknowledgement and repudiation of guilty desires, the stories as Freud suggests, might well hit home. Even if Freud was wrong about the *universality* of the Oedipus complex (it seems unlikely that our society fears patricide with the intensity of Greek society), we seem to be fascinated by the very irrationality of the Oedipus story—the undeniable fact of the terrible deeds combined with absolute innocence of intention. Thus the discussions of the tragic hero as a "great man who struggles against his fate" dissolve in this prosaic light into a matter of the projection of guilty desires onto something outside oneself, a pattern of thought E.R. Dodds finds to be characteristic of the Greeks of an earlier period (30-31). And the action of the play actually supports this view, for despite the assertion of Fergusson, endlessly repeated in freshman classrooms, that the action of the play is "the quest for Laius' slayer" (36), that is not what we actually see Oedipus doing. It *is* his announced intention, but the words are hardly out of his mouth when we are told who the slayer is. He spends most of the rest of the play futilely denying his guilt and asserting his innocence. *King Oedipus* is the symbolic mimesis of the vain denial of guilt. This play—so atypical in nearly every other way—is indeed the quintessential tragedy, because the necessary and defining characteristic of traditional tragedy is a protest against guilt. Its appeal is that it allows us to repudiate our sins—while accepting the judgment that declares them to be sins—by divorcing them from our wills. It protests for us: "My sins are my misfortune, my doom, my fate; I am a good and noble person despite them."

Now we return to my original insistence that our definition of the tragic be "value-free." Our insistence on seeing the action of *Oedipus* as somehow

sublime or elevated *in terms of our own values* has seriously distorted our view of it. Why else could we so easily swallow the notion that Oedipus' objective throughout the play is "to find the slayer" when that interpretation flies so plainly in the face of fact—the fact that Oedipus' real objective, the one that truly interests us, is his heroic, pathetic, and terrifying attempt to deny culpability? Because we want to see the protagonist as pursuing a noble goal and sacrificing himself in the process; because we share with Oedipus the desire to deny guilt. People acknowledge this irrational aspect of tragic heroes, especially Oedipus, by speaking of them as "divine scapegoats," implying that the irrational in tragedy takes us into some form of sublime metaphysics. Perhaps that makes sense in certain religious interpretations of experience, but I, from my rationalist standpoint, can find nothing sublime about the dumping of one's burdened conscience onto a scapegoat, and the awarding of the "divine" epithet seems to me but meager compensation. What I do find is ethical irresponsibility, but I do not condemn the play on that account, for it is ambiguous on that point as on many others: Oedipus is both innocent and guilty; he both denies and then accepts his guilt. I do insist that the play first reaches us on a fundamentally and unresolvably nonrational level. It speaks to our divided souls. Like Oedipus, we strive mightily to be good and to insist on our innocence; like him we are also forced to admit and feel the pain of guilt. The pagan, the Christian and the rationalist will interpret that mythic action in different ways, but the experience is universal. Freud was essentially right, but his scope was too narrow. The hypothesis of a universal Oedipus complex (which would not in any case explain the response of women to the play) is unnecessary.

Recognizing the irrationality of Sophocles' play helps us out of another difficulty, involving the nature of Oedipus' "tragic flaw," which stems in part from the assumption, itself questionable, that Aristotle saw the *Oedipus* as the "perfect" tragedy. The attempt to rationalize *Oedipus* as an Aristotelian tragedy has led some to the absurd notion that *hamartia* refers in the *Poetics* to an innocent mistake. It is absurd for two reasons. First, whatever Aristotle's exact meaning, the context makes it unambiguously clear that the term is morally mixed but not morally neutral. Second, it implies that a story of a man who fails to watch where he is going and dies in a chariot crash is as tragic as one about a man who kills his father and beds his mother. It is also unnecessary to resort to explanations about the Greeks having had different theories of moral responsibility from ours; we too can feel guilt without having had evil intentions, as anyone who has accidentally harmed a loved one must know. *Oedipus* is about the pain of guilt, not willful responsibility; about human feeling, not about moral theory.

If *Oedipus* is representative of tragedy, we might tentatively venture a definition: Tragedy presents the downfall of someone whose own actions have in some way produced that downfall. Those actions are presented as in some sense or some degree morally wrong, yet the protagonist is presented in such a way as to invite us to enter empathically into his or her experience; we are made to see the protagonist as, in Aristotle's phrase, "like us," rather than as a guilty "other" whose presence is a threat and whose removal is a relief. That is all that is necessary: a hero who vicariously expiates our guilt while

simultaneously affirming our worth. Tragedy affirms guilt when it acknowledges the need for expiation (otherwise it would be mere wrongful suffering—the stuff of melodrama), yet somehow denies that very guilt in the purity of its hero. It is from this single trait that all the other characteristics of tragedy are derived; it is the entire justification for the nobility of the hero and the unhappy ending, and it is the reason for the inevitably ambivalent world-view.

Let us test this definition by applying it to *Macbeth* which has been used before as a test case since it is a rare, if not unique, instance of a generally accepted "tragedy" that portrays the downfall of a villain (Bradley 87-90). The usual rationalization of the plight of Oedipus—"a great man who struggles vainly against his destiny"—breaks down rather thoroughly in the case of *Macbeth*, but our definition does not. Shakespeare's notable achievement in *Macbeth* is to allow us to enter sympathetically into the mind of a villain and never to permit us totally to forget the "milk of human kindness" in his veins, even in the face of his bloodiest deeds. *Macbeth*, although recognized as extreme, is almost always acknowledged as a tragedy; the status of *Romeo and Juliet* as a tragedy, on the other hand, is often questioned. The usual reason given is that the unhappy ending lacks inevitability, that it is contrived and fortuitous, yet such objections are never raised about the equally accidental series of circumstances that produce the pile of corpses concluding *Hamlet*. I suggest that the real difference in our attitudes to these two plays is dependent on our ethical valuation of the protagonists. Hamlet's guilt, however qualified, is still perceptible (however much we may admire him, he is directly or indirectly responsible for most of the deaths in the play), but the "star-crossed" lovers have been purified by time, and we now reserve all our censure for the quarreling families. That this is a crucial distinction can be seen when we notice how perception changes depending on where we look: if we focus on the lovers themselves we are apt to think of their deaths as contrived and accidental; if we concern ourselves with their parents, we are inclined to see them as responsible for—the causes of—their children's deaths. Our perception of causality is influenced by our perception of guilt.

It is easy to see why tragedy has appeared at crucial times in history, times when values are being reassessed. It is also easy to see why tragedy has provided great dramatists the opportunity to create great drama. Tragedy is a natural framework for the exploration of profound moral questions and for searching investigations of the causes of suffering. But drama need not present a particular point of view to these questions in order to be "tragic." "Great" drama is, after all, typically characterized by its asking questions for which there are no simple answers. And tragedy need not be great. In fact, there are a number of such tragedies—as we have defined tragedy—that are apt to appear quite bad, even repugnant, to our taste, but which were greatly successful in their own time. They may also have served an important function, the success of which resulted in their present disfavor. For if we honestly and objectively examine the notion of the "tragic," in its special, "sacred" sense, full of "guiltless guilt" and the sacred nobility of the guilty-innocent tragic hero, we will find that this notion of tragedy, although fundamentally dishonest and illogical, has the incalculable value of pointing out to us the points at which our moral imperatives have become obstacles to

moral progress. And this sacred yet mundane quality inheres as much in *The Octoroon* and *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* as it does in *Othello* and *Oedipus*. Zoë and Paula are fully tragic heroines, in this sense, for they are guilty of transgressing deeply felt taboos, yet are strangely and sympathetically innocent. Fictional, guilty, and sacrificial victims, they are yet pioneers who point the way to a future in which they will no longer be seen as guilty, no longer needed for sacrifice, and thus no longer in need of fictional justifications. Their tragedies are important for us, as the heirs of the Western tradition, because they have provided the necessary prelude to moral revolution and a prologue to moral enlightenment—which is to say that they served as a covert forum for the discussion of taboos still too strong to bear much honest examination by ordinary people, and thus tentatively prepared for the destruction of the very principles upon which their "tragic stories" were based.

But that does not make *The Octoroon* great art, nor its author a great artist. What, then, is the difference, if tragedy can be so high and yet so mean, between the most ordinary varieties of the form and the most noble? I think that the real difference is one of poetry, profundity and purpose rather than of genre and form. Great tragedy is great because it still is capable of interesting us in some dimension of the great moral struggle which it portrays. Second-rate tragedy—although I must insist upon its inestimable value as a beacon of moral progress—is second-rate because it no longer interests us in the moral questions that it raises. We no longer regard it as an open question whether a woman of mixed race should be allowed to marry whom she chooses or whether a "woman with a past" should be eternally ostracized. There is perhaps another crucial element: the tragic protagonist who lacks genuine moral complexity, who is all purity and goodness except for that single damning flaw, is particularly apt to appear to a society that does not accept the validity of that damning judgment as a mere scapegoat, a receptacle for the guilty conscience of the age. On the other hand, Sophocles can still interest us in Antigone's struggle of religious conscience against the demands of civic loyalty even though we do not share her specific beliefs. Perhaps all tragic protagonists serve partly as fictional scapegoats, but if we cannot empathize, either with the protagonist or her moral struggle, we will tend to see her fate as an embarrassing injustice committed by art as well as by society.

The nineteenth century produced scores of such second-rate (and by that I do not mean merely poorly written) tragedies, mostly about the fates of "tainted" women, but tragedy of any sort has become, for our age, a peculiar genre. It is not surprising that Shaw was incapable of conventional tragedy, if tragedy demands (however covertly) expiation of guilt. Shaw quite explicitly and emphatically rejected the idea of expiation, regarding it as a moral horror. Shaw is not alone; the notion of retributive justice, the idea that one can "pay" for one's misdeeds through suffering, although by no means extinct, is far less popular now than it once was. Supernaturally ordained retributive justice is an inevitable part of the background in all of the plays we have traditionally classed as great tragedy. Even if that is not the element that concerns us now, we sense its importance when we talk about the "inevitability" of tragedy in spite of the fact that most of our esteemeed tragedies could have easily turned out differently. In fact, the tragic outcome is

inevitable only when we accept the notion that guilt exacts punishment, it is satisfying because release from guilt is satisfying, and the real "tragic fallacy"—the belief that separates the ages of tragic writing from our own—is faith in the efficacy of expiation.

So tragedy and farce are linked not merely as opposites on our scale of values; they are joined by their obsession with our guilty desires. The one repudiates guilt and vanquishes it with expiation while the other glories in the desire and extinguishes guilt with laughter. Stark Young once suggested a connection between poetic tragedy and farce in the abstract, heightened quality of each (177). There are other similarities. Both thrive in an atmosphere of absolute moral values and allow us to acknowledge sinful desires by denying them at the same time. Farce in effect declares "I'm only joking," and tragedy protests with Lear that "I am . . . more sinn'd against than sinning." Thus both provide a means of expressing the conflict of duty and desire before it is acceptable to openly question that duty. Tragedy, whether that of Phaedra or Paula Tanqueray, is in the extreme and wonderful position of stretching moral definitions to the limit. There is yet another connection, symbolic and archetypal, between the two forms in the primitive power whose hold on us we acknowledge every time we "touch wood." Greek tragedy is associated with the concept of *phthonos,* the jealousy of the gods, and *hubris,* the pride that tempts providence; Renaissance tragedy was born out of a similar concept, the turn of the wheel of fortune which inevitably brings down the high. The fool, the symbol of farce as the king is the symbol of tragedy, gains the protection of kings because he has the magic property of warding off the Evil Eye, the jealousy of the gods. Having nothing to lose, he triumphs over fortune and is impervious to bad luck. But the proud king, when he attracts and is destroyed by fortune's divine lightning, is reduced to the condition of the fool, acquires the fool's sacred invulnerability to fortune, and is himself sought by kings. Like the eternal myth, like the fabulous snake swallowing its own tail, tragedy meets farce and consumes it in a region beyond reason. Perhaps that is why Erasmus, counselor to kings, addressed a royal lecture with the title:

*Aut fatuum aut regem nasci oportere.*
*Adages* I.3.1.

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