
Pro Rege

Volume 11 | Number 3

Article 2

March 1983

Shakespeare's Tragic Vision

James Koldenhoven

Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Koldenhoven, James (1983) "Shakespeare's Tragic Vision," *Pro Rege*: Vol.

11: No. 3, 2 - 11.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol11/iss3/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Shakespeare's Tragic Vision

James Koldenhoven
Associate Professor of Theatre Arts



An original member of the Pro Rege Editorial Board, James Koldenhoven is a twenty-year veteran of the Dordt College Faculty. Senior member of the Theatre Arts Department, he is currently involved in teaching, directing and in completing a doctoral thesis supervised by the University of Minnesota.

This essay is an invitation to take a new approach to the drama of Shakespeare, particularly to those of his plays called "tragedies." This invitation is made especially to those who teach Shakespeare, and to students of theatre who will sometime be called on as artists to design for a Shakespearian tragedy or play such tragic roles as Macbeth, Hamlet, Cordelia, or Cleopatra. The Christian teachers and artists who have to deal with *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, or *Antony and Cleopatra*, are confronted with a formidable task. And the heart of that task is this, to know *why* these plays and their heroes and heroines are, or seem to be, tragic. It is one thing to design for or play out the human *agon* of these plays but another to under-

stand the fundamental *why* of the *agon*. A number of attempts have been made to treat the tragic-ness of Shakespeare's "tragedies" from a Christian point of view, but too often this narrows the plays and characters too much. On the other hand, Shakespeare's "tragedies" are too often treated by critics, teachers, and artists in terms of either Aristotle's *Poetics*, or in terms of modern skepticism. In these cases Shakespeare's heroes or heroines are treated as great people who fall to death or infamy by a tragic flaw (knowledge come too late), or as pathological animals. Neither of these approaches is better than the one which claims, for example, that *King Lear* is a Christian play. Preston T. Roberts, Jr. argues for the latter view in a very convincing essay, "A

Christian Theory of Dramatic Tragedy." Unfortunately, in order to do so he has to reduce Shakespeare's "tragedies" to a set of theological properties.¹

The thesis of this essay is that the tragic vision of Shakespeare is defined by the cultural transformation that characterized Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the space provided, I am able, after stating the problem, only to give the outlines of the transformation and to suggest some of the implications of the thesis. Little space is given to the plays themselves, but I have with some success begun to apply this thesis in the teaching of Shakespeare. While this thesis is advanced with some hesitation (since it is, to the best of my knowledge, innovative), it is advanced as an invitation to Christian teachers and theatre artists to respond.

Shakespeare wrote out of a tragic vision set apart from that of most of his contemporary playwrights and his classical mentor, Sir Philip Sidney. That is the opinion of A.P. Rossiter, who also shows that Shakespeare chose as his audience the "vulgar element."² Rossiter shows that Shakespeare did not use the term "tragedy" consistently. In fact, he rarely used the word in his later plays. The guess is that "by c. 1599 Shakespeare was aware that he was writing something different from what had been 'tragedy' at the time when he most used the word . . . ten years earlier."³ Rossiter supposes that Shakespeare, writing for a "vulgar" audience adapted whatever he knew about highbrow tragedy to appeal to *his* audience. Two of his contemporaries, Sir Philip Sidney and Ben Jonson, were well aware of highbrow tragedy, and both spoke to its form. It is inconceivable that William Shakespeare should not have known better. I have deliberately used the word "form," for form was the key issue with neo-classicists—represented by both Sidney and Jonson.⁴ The neo-classicists did not concern themselves with a larger horizon (vision). It is of little concern to modern readers or viewers of Shakespeare's tragedies that Shakespeare

ignored the neo-classical rules almost completely. Nor must we stop calling certain of Shakespeare's plays "tragedies." Yet it is interesting that Shakespeare used the word "tragedy" in his plays only eleven times, and only one of these references is clearly attached to what we would call a tragic play, "The Tragedie of Othello, the moore of Venice." The Stationer's Register in which this title is cited, enters the tragedy of *King Lear* as "the history of Kinge Lear."

If Shakespeare thought of his "tragedies" as histories or merely as plays, then by what right do we call his "tragedies" tragedies? Do we know something that Shakespeare did not know? The answer to these questions surely cannot be found in definitions of this word, even if applied to drama only. Aristotle meant one thing by "tragedy," Seneca another; and, if one examines the plays themselves, one must conclude that there were diverse opinions on what tragedy meant to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. M.H. Abrams correctly notes, "Many of the best tragedies in the brief flowering time between 1585 and 1625, by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Chapman, Webster, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Massinger, deviate radically from the Aristotelian norms."⁵ What complicates defining tragedy even more is the casual application of the term to literary and dramatic works which represent "serious and important actions which turn out disastrously for the chief character."⁶ In spite of our noting Shakespeare's almost complete indifference to the word "tragedy," and our noting the abundance of definitions for the word, Elder Olson feels no compunction in saying, ". . . the *art of tragedy* is the same for Shakespeare and for the worst playwright who ever lived. . . ." ⁷ The formula that Olson provides is basically Aristotelian, not something new and useful. He argues that Othello's death, for example, is necessary for the emotional effect, for purging, for the pity it demands. And so the problem of tragedy presents itself: Shakespeare chose not to use (rarely at least) the word "tragedy," but

everybody since 1600 insists on applying the term to certain of Shakespeare's plays. Why?

We defer the answer to the question for a passing look at one more problem. That problem may be posed this way. Is there such a thing as Christian tragedy? The question is pertinent in the study of Shakespeare's plays because of the Christian referents used in his plays. If, for example, *Macbeth* may be seen as a late-Medieval morality play, with Macduff the Christ figure and Macbeth the prince of darkness, where is the tragedy? Macbeth, the embodiment of evil, is defeated, after a final evangel, "Turn hell-hound, turn" (V, viii, 4). Macbeth chooses not to convert but to fight to the death. In another play Hamlet says to Horatio, ". . . let us know, / Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well / When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us / There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" (V, II, 7-10). References to providence appear regularly in Shakespeare's plays. The antagonism between Cleopatra of Egypt and Caesar of Rome (with Antony choosing between them) is cast in unmistakable Biblical language. Cleopatra is called "the old serpent of the Nile" (I, v, 25), and when Antony marries Caesar's sister, Antony chooses: "I will to Egypt; / And though I make this marriage for my peace, / I' th' east my pleasure lies" (II, iii, 38-39). Caesar says of Antony, "He hath given his empire / Up to a whore; who now are levying / The kings o' th' earth for war" (III, vi, 66-68), words which approximate those of Rev. 17:2, the apocalyptic reference to the great whore of Babylon. When central characters, such as Macbeth and Antony knowingly accept a damnable death, a reader of Shakespeare's tragedies is sorely tempted to define tragedy in such parochial terms. Armed with the archetypal critical techniques of Northrop Frye, the temptation is especially keen. Yet—and this is my personal experience over the many years of teaching Shakespeare—I am always reluctant to give to the theological patterns the weight needed to

define the tragic action. Lear's "salvation" is especially problematic, as is their fame which prompts Caesar to give Antony and Cleopatra a burial in "glory." Sooner or later theological patterns of tragedy run stuck.

That problem may be posed this way. Is there such a thing as Christian tragedy?

The earliest significant exchange over the use of Christian references to determine Shakespearian tragedy was between Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall. Michel argues that the Incarnation has removed the effects of sin, has, as he says, broken "the hegemony of the devil . . . once and for all."⁸ His argument is that tragedy is impossible in Christian terms. A Christian world view, he argues, has removed the moral predicament or dilemma from Western culture, so that tragedy is no longer possible. On the contrary, says Sewall, for such a character as Christopher Marlowe's Faustus, the "dilemma is real."⁹ The dilemma is one of belief and total dependence on the one hand, and doubt and freedom on the other. He finds a tragic paradigm in the ambiguity of Job's despair and certainty, or what Carl Jung called "the terrible ambiguity of an immediate experience."¹⁰ Roland M. Frye in *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine* (1963) and Roy Battenhouse, in *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Christian Premises* (1969), have carried the argument along, if not forward. David Bevington notes, regarding this debate, that the "controversy will doubtless long continue."¹¹

Thus far we have noted essentially two things. First, it appears to be a modern

predilection to want to call certain of Shakespeare's plays "tragedies," even at the risk of ignoring Shakespeare's own limited use of such a term. Second, we have said that there is a continuing debate over the question of whether or not we may legitimately apply the term "Christian tragedy" to such plays as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*. Now the question once again: Why? Why insist on calling these plays tragedies, when no self-respecting neo-classicist would have granted such a category to plays that violated all of the classical rules for writing tragedies? Why get into the question at all concerning Christian tragedy? What, if anything, is tragic about Shakespeare's "tragedies"? I ask these questions only because of the persistent application of the term, *and* because a reader or viewer of the plays senses that something quite terrible is happening and what is happening is greater, more cosmic, than, let us say, what happens in the lives of Ibsen's heroes and heroines. No serious drama since Shakespeare (Racine excepted, but for very different reasons) seems to demand the same kind of tragic perception. Again, Why?

The answer, I think, lies, not in a formal understanding of tragedy at all, but in a fundamental understanding of the cultural transformation that took place in Western culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The implications of this transformation have been profound and often devastating on both the environment and the human psyche, as well as man's spiritual separation from God. One may suppose that William Shakespeare saw into the "seeds of time" and with his prophetic insight and prescience beheld with terror and wonder the devastation to be unloosed in the approaching new world view. For our purposes we may call this a tragic vision.

To a modern, post-Medieval mind, such as ours, but also to many of Shakespeare's contemporaries, such as Sidney and Jonson, an empirical frame of reference does not seek entrance into the structural understanding of a world view. Sidney and Jonson were in-

terested in definitions. To ask about the nature of tragedy was and is to ask *how* a play is tragic. One asks, What are the rules that make a play fit the tragic category? Aristotle arrived at his definition of tragedy inductively. He had read the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, sorted out their similarities, categorized them, and come up with a definition. While his language remained descriptive, his method was scientific. It was Francis Bacon, one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, who articulated the process of empirical precision and set in motion the modern methods of analysis. To such men as Aristotle and Bacon, categories like tragedy eventually became, not merely descriptive, but prescriptive. The appeal to modern Western cultures since Bacon has been to the *how*, not the *why*.

Tragic vision is something altogether different, or so it should be, for anyone who can escape our mechanical world view long enough to grasp the *why* of tragic vision. Murray Krieger provides a limited distinction between tragedy and tragic vision: "'tragedy' refers to an object's literary form, 'the tragic vision' to a subject's psychology, his view and version of reality."¹² However useful this distinction might be to begin a new approach to the tragic vision of Shakespeare's "tragedies," Krieger gets caught in the trap of his own language. His subject/object categories are also shot through with modern, scientific assumptions.¹³ In fact, Krieger's unreflective use of subject/object categories illustrates, as we shall see, the essential break up of a holistic world view that was taking place when Shakespeare was writing his greatest plays, and this breakdown, or loss, including a breakdown of Christian values, is why there is debate today over the question of Christian tragedy. It is my thesis that Shakespeare's tragic vision, quite without a regard for formal requirements for tragedies, was structured by the cultural transformation that was taking place in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. I

might even go further, to say that the cultural transformation of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is the tragic vision of Shakespeare's "tragedies."

Morris Berman in a most remarkable volume, *The Reenchantment of the World*, gives a clear and compelling narrative on the breakdown of the Medieval holistic world view. He shows how the empirical principles of Bacon and Newton and the rationalism of Descartes provided Western culture with a singular way of perceiving reality. The empiricist says that the "laws of thought conform to the laws of things," while the rationalist says "always check your thoughts against the data so that you know what thoughts to think." Where Descartes found mathematics (because it was abstract) most suitable for epitomizing rationalism, Newton relied instead on experiment. Together, mathematics and experiment, says Berman, provided the tools for an objective viewing of reality. Galileo, yet another who helped shape a mechanical world view, could roll a ball down an inclined plane and with the newly-devised tools measure the distance and the time and conclude precisely "how falling objects behave." Berman places a stress on *how*, noting, "'How' became increasingly important, 'why' increasingly irrelevant." He goes on, "In the twentieth century . . . 'how' has become our 'why.'"¹¹⁴

The answer, I think, lies, not in a formal understanding of tragedy at all, but in a fundamental understanding of the cultural transformation that took place in Western culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The arrogance of the new world view is seen in a related assumption, that the world lies before man to be acted upon. Berman says,

"In the sixteenth century Europe discovered, or rather decided, that to do is the issue, not to be."¹¹⁵ To the premodern era Berman assigns the term "participation consciousness," and to the modern, "non-participation consciousness." In the mode of participation consciousness Shakespeare can mix ghosts and corporeal characters without being charged with unreality. Such he does in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Julius Caesar*. In the mode of non-participation consciousness Ben Jonson makes the alchemist in *The Alchemist* look like a fool in a fool's paradise. Attitudes towards the spiritual, the occult, and nature show up in either mode of participation. And Shakespeare in *Henry IV (I)* brings both modes together:

Glendower: I can call spirits from the
vastly deep.

Hotspur: Why, so can I, or so can any
man; But will they come when
you do call for them?

(III, i, 51-53)

Indeed, the language here shows precisely (a word I should abandon) Shakespeare's drama perched precariously between the two modes of relationships suggested by Berman.

While Descartes and Newton postdate Shakespeare, Francis Bacon was his contemporary. In 1605, just a year after Shakespeare had performed *Measure for Measure* before the new ruler, James II, Bacon published in the name of the king his *Advancement of Learning*. Bacon's lengthy treatise on the deficiencies of education, point by point, proclaim a new humanism, a humanism of nonparticipation. In the following words Bacon views the mind as a collector of data, a receiver/perceiver that is set apart from the total experience:

The knowledge of man is as the waters, some descending from above, and some springing from beneath; the one informed by the light of nature, the other inspired by divine revelation. The light of nature

consisteth in the notions of the mind
and the reports of the senses; . . .¹⁶

Almost everything that Bacon ever wrote is found in this treatise on education, except for an outright declaration concerning the purpose of his world view. That view he makes abundantly clear in *Novum Organum*. Here again is only one example: "Now the true and lawful goal of the sciences is none other than this: that human life be endowed with new discoveries and powers."¹⁷ Two correlaries attend this objective. The first is that scientific discovery and truth are united as one, and the second that "the secrets of nature reveal themselves more readily under the vexations of art [technology] than when they go their own way."¹⁸ In another place he speaks of "nature altered or wrought." Bacon's frame of mind is decidedly "other," "objective," separated from that which he proposes to "vex." That he sees himself in a period of cultural transformation is also clear when he cites three "revolutions . . . one among the Greeks, the second among the Romans, and the last among us. . . ."¹⁹

Berman illustrates the changing view with the aid of Galileo's experiments with falling objects. Before the advent of the mechanical world view, it was commonly accepted that objects fell to earth because that was their natural place. He shows that even today children up to age seven will say that objects fall to earth "because that is where they belong." Young children are satisfied with the "why" about falling objects. But that does not satisfy the adult. He wants to know the "how" of falling objects. Galileo combined rationalism and empiricism, says Berman, to achieve the objective perspective of "how" a phenomena occurs; that was his "trademark":

Consult the data, but do not allow them to confuse you. Separate yourself from nature so you can, as Descartes would later urge, break it into the simplest parts and extract the

essence—matter, motion, measurement. [Galileo and Descartes] represent the final stage in the development of nonparticipation consciousness, that state of mind in which one knows phenomena precisely in the act of distancing oneself from them. The notion that nature is alive is clearly a stumbling block to this mode of understanding.²⁰

The proposition I am setting forth is this, that the tragic vision of Shakespeare's "tragedies" is derived from the distortions, vexations, and splits being perpetrated on reality by the mechanical world view which was coming into its own just as Shakespeare was writing his great "tragedies," and that the transformation itself is at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision.

This vision is what makes the play *Macbeth* tragic. Macbeth personally and systematically separates himself from everything else. His early soliloquies set him apart, "rapt withal," as Banquo describes Macbeth's musing on the predictions of the witches. Lady Macbeth arms him with the most modern of psychological devices: "let the false face hide what the false heart knows." When Duncan is murdered and Macbeth is insecure with the prophesies of the witches, he plans the mass murder of Macduff's family. To Lady Macbeth's inquiry about these plans which are only alluded to, he says, "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck." The Macduffs are mere objects, and Lady Macbeth, the great strategist, is cut out of the planning. Even nature itself goes out of whack at the murder of Duncan—hardly realistic by modern systems of thought, but quite in tune with the tragic vision that feels the passing of an age of holism. In this mode of viewing Shakespeare's "tragedies," a moral critique, as well as a theological one, is out of order. While both the moral and theological paradigms satisfy a limited viewing of Shakespeare's "tragedies," they do not account for asides, confidantes, nature's par-

ticipation, or the multiple-levels of separation that end in death and destruction. *King Lear* is a play about separations. Three daughters are brought out to make public demonstrations of their love for King Lear, and on the quantitative basis of their love they will be given a proportional quantity of land. Lear has separated himself so completely from his family that tragedy is already afoot. Lear, blinded by his own submerged self and his ego projection, cannot recognize the quality of Cordelia's love for him. Only nature, beating his old bare back with a pelting rain storm, can restore the man to the reality of his being. His "salvation" is not theological at all, nor his problem a moral one. His is a problem of separation, as the Fool knows: "thou hast par'd thy wit o' both sides, and left nothing i' th' middle" (I, iv, 184-185).

The proposition I am setting forth is this, that the tragic vision of Shakespeare's "tragedies" is derived from the distortions, vexations, and splits being perpetrated on reality by the mechanical world view which was coming into its own just as Shakespeare was writing his great "tragedies," and that the transformation itself is at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision.

One of the implications of this view of dramatic tragedy is that no further tragedy can be written. After c. 1600, or after the mechanical world view reached hegemonic proportions, the tragic vision of Shakespeare's drama could never again be repeated. Western culture had made its formal break with a holistic world view and at best could only long for a return to a "participation consciousness." The possibility for

tragedy died when the mechanical world view was fully instituted. What follows historically is a sentimentally bathetic (romantic) wallowing in self-pity. Only the more perceptive writers of quasi-tragedy point backward to a holistic world view, a paradise lost. But there can no longer be a tragic vision which is aware of a breaking community: God, man, nature. After c. 1600 Western culture, living out of a mechanical world view, can only be aware of an *a priori* loss, but can not give an experiential resonance to the breakdown. Time, progress, and measurement fail as tools to express the breaking down of a "participation consciousness."

Contemporary viewers of drama have recognized that tragedy, if not tragic vision, is impossible. Their explanations, however, have seldom been adequate. George Steiner explores the demise of tragedy in his *The Death of Tragedy*. Looking to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Steiner says that the neo-classicists built their tragedies on myth "emptied of active belief."²¹ What they claimed for tragedy could not be tragic because there was no belief in the form or the content. There was no common ethic and no common myth. Furthermore, he says, the tragic world-view of the Greeks was invalidated by the Judaic-Christian world view. Steiner observes that the tragedy of the Greeks depended on a capricious and unknowable fate outside themselves against which they contended, and that with the advent of a Judaic-Christian world-view the Greek view of the unknowable was invalidated by the certainty provided in the doctrine of sin and salvation. He writes:

The Judaic vision sees in disaster a specific moral fault or failure of understanding. The Greek tragic poet assert the forces which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the government of reason or justice. . . . To the Jew there is a marvellous continuity between knowledge and action; to the Greek an ironic abyss.²²

And in the modern drama tragedy is impossible, too, but for different reasons than those found in the Judaic-Christian world view. The modern man, says Georg Lukacs, cannot be tragic because he is common man. He is not a great man capable of falling to death or infamy by outside forces; he has been objectified, democratized, egalitarianized, and, ironically, separated from the community to which he is democratically chained. The forces which gave him his individual freedom are the very forces he created through the empirical/rational. He is at once master of technology and its slave; he is identified by what he has made. His *how* has become his *why*. Modern man, says Lukacs, is "merely the intersection of great forces, and his deeds are not even his own." He is the "hieroglyph" of the intersection, not tragic but pathetic.²³ While the pathology of Ophelia in *Hamlet* is what makes her tragic, says Lukacs, the modern hero or anti-hero of drama is pathological from the beginning, beyond tragic dimensions.²⁴ Comparing the Greek tragic hero and the modern, Steiner says:

This is crucial. Where the causes of disaster are temporal, where the conflict can be resolved through technical or social means, we may have serious drama, but not tragedy. More pliant divorce laws could not alter the fate of Agamemnon; social psychiatry is no answer to Oedipus. But saner economic relations or better plumbing can resolve some of the grave crises in the dramas of Ibsen. . . . Tragedy is irreparable.²⁵

Steiner's thesis is repeated throughout his book: "Where the classic and Christian world order entered into decline, the consequent void could not be filled with acts of private invention."²⁶

While Steiner and Lukacs provide rich insights into the problem of tragedy, they provide only partial explanations for the

demise of tragedy. Steiner's view applies the Judaic-Christian premise across the board; that is, he assumes a kind of universal application of Jahweh salvation to Western man. Both the Jewish and Christian traditions take serious issue with his universalism. Both would limit atonement. With a limited idea of salvation, and the parallel option of damnation, it would seem that tragedy might be defined in these terms. But salvation and damnation do not account for all phases of life—only destiny after life. Tragic vision can not be built on such a limited view of destiny. Lukac's view is also inadequate. He gives a social explanation of tragedy that is premised on the Aristotelian idea of a great man fallen. Again, tragic vision is more than a matter of social concern. Somehow, it seems to me, tragic vision must be accounted for in terms of relationships, and these relationships must include the triad: God, man, and nature. When these relationships are taken seriously, responsibly, then life is whole. A break between any two in the triad will introduce a tragic situation of cosmic proportions. And the greatest cultural breach in the triad, I am suggesting, took place in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western culture. And I am also suggesting that this breakdown is at the heart of Shakespeare's tragic vision.

Consequently, there is but one recourse for the modern artist-playwright if he wishes to make any kind of connection with the lost participation consciousness. He can merely point backward to the lost Eden, or what Stanley Burnshaw calls the "seamless web of relationships."²⁷ Burnshaw, like so many others concerned about the loss sustained in a Baconian-inspired, technological society, is seeking a way back to an Edenic reality. He is searching for that holistic world view that Shakespeare and the medieval society knew experientially, a world view that Shakespeare watched dissipate and that defined his tragic vision. Burnshaw speaks much like Berman when he writes about modern man:

And the more civilized this world, the greater its demand that he think himself as "subject" and all other creatures and things as "object." . . . Each of us *owns* a self, an "I," about whom we sometimes think, with whom we converse, for whom we plan, and so on. More often than we realize, each of us watches this self as it behaves, observer and observed. Phrases of this sort do more than describe our thinking. They testify to the concomitant divisiveness within each individual that arose as the species gradually divided itself from the environment, rupturing the seamless web.²⁸

The artist's job, suggests Burnshaw, is to reunite the estranged individual with himself, his society, and his environment. Burnshaw fails, however, to make a case for reunion with the creator, without which all other reunions are so much pie in the sky.

A broken society is a tragic fact, but the breaking of society, as witnessed envisioned by William Shakespeare, is itself the tragedy—hence, the tragic vision captured once as we were ushered into a modern way of life.

In summary, Shakespeare did not think of his "tragedies" as tragedies. He intuited that his way of dealing with (seeing/living) humanity was not traditional. At the same time he could not ignore the religious dimension of humanity. That is why his "tragedies" appear to be Christian. The role of Christian theology in his plays, no more than the psychology of the characters, is part of a full accounting of life which is, holistically speaking, spiritually natural. Likewise, social structures and the environment are perceived co-terminously. The peace and order (together-as-one) that so often suggests itself at the ends of his "tragedies" is existentially comprehensive. Peace and order *is* the experiential testimony of a holistic vision. The disorder which precedes peace and order is the sundering of

the whole, the tragic vision. Modern explanations of the turmoil (tragedy) of Shakespeare's "tragedies" are themselves broken and atomistic, products of the modern world view. These explanations are consistently reductionistic. One is a formal (classical) formulation, another a psychological (often Freudian) formulation, another particularly philosophical (Comtarian, Existential, etc.), another social (Marxist), and yet another "Christian" (theological). Each of these formulations is itself conditioned by the modern, empirical (non-participation) frame of reference. Each is dichotomous: subject (critic) and object (the play or corpus of plays). Even those who recognize that tragedy is no longer viable in a mechanical, technological, and individualistic society are victims of the very thing they cite as *cause* for the demise of tragedy. And it is quite likely that this essay falls short for the same reason. We are all terrorized by history²⁹ and by the language that shapes our discourse.³⁰

Shakespeare did not think of his "tragedies" as tragedies. He intuited that his way of dealing with (seeing/living) humanity was not traditional. At the same time he could not ignore the religious dimension of humanity. That is why his "tragedies" appear to be Christian. The role of Christian theology in his plays, no more than the psychology of the characters, is part of a full accounting of life which is, holistically speaking, spiritually natural.

Nevertheless, many perceptive viewers (itself an objectifying word) sense in the sanctuary of their essential, creaturely being that 1) what Shakespeare wrote was definitively tragic, and 2) that without an accounting of the Christian properties in his plays, something very significant is missed. A

teacher or theatre artist who can find a way to live into the tragic vision of Shakespeare's "tragedies" and see with a measure (culturally pejorative words) of clarity *out* of the inner life of the "tragedies" will have done his or her task. Seeking entrance into the structural and erotic (sensual) relationships of Shakespeare's cultural tragic vision is no simple matter. However, it is only from this inner, holistic perspective that we may hope to gain access to both the vision of William Shakespeare *and* to our own modern, contingent existence. From this perspective a *why* may again become a *why*, and a participation consciousness again be possible. In fact, it is this non-objective attitude (seeing from within the life of art—but especially Shakespeare's "tragedies") that might be the only way to be responsible as a Christian teacher or theatre artist. It might even be that only the Christian has the wherewithal to *know* (Biblically, erotically) Shakespeare's tragic vision.

Notes

¹Preston T. Robert, Jr., "A Christian Theory of Dramatic Tragedy" in *The New Orpheus; Essays Toward a Christian Poetic*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), pp. 255-285.

²A.P. Rossiter, "Shakespearian Tragedy," as reprinted in *Tragedy: Modern Essays in Criticism*, eds. Laurence Michel and Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 181. The reference is to "vulgars Elements"; I have modernized the phrase.

³Rossiter, p. 183.

⁴The most debated formal issue was the issue of the "unities." The neoclassicist insisted—some more rigorously than others—that a play must not cover more than a 24-hour period, be given only one setting, and have no more than one plot. The use of the chorus, though still part of the classical rules, was losing its force as a requirement in tragedy.

⁵M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971), p. 175.

⁶Abrams, p. 173.

⁷Elder Olson, *Tragedy and the Theory of Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1966), p. 197.

⁸Laurence Michel, "The Possibility of Christian Tragedy," *Thought*, Vol. XXXI (1956), p. 428.

⁹Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 59.

¹⁰Sewall, p. 14.

¹¹David Bevington, ed. with introduction, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1980), p. 95.

¹²Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1960), p. 2.

¹³See Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 211-254. Lentricchia demonstrates rather clearly that Krieger's method of criticism is divisive. As a neo-romantic, Krieger has given to literature a privileged position, denying any real access by the reader. Lentricchia writes, Krieger "has remained a prisoner to the kinds of thinking and terminology that can be traced to romantic isolationism. . . (p. 217).

¹⁴Morris Berman, *The Reenchantment of the World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 28.

¹⁵Berman, p. 29.

¹⁶Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning in Selected Writings of Francis Bacon* (New York: Modern Library, 1955), pp. 264-265.

¹⁷Francis Bacon *Novum Organum in Selected Writings of Francis Bacon* (New York: Modern Library, 1955), p. 499.

¹⁸Bacon, *Novum Organum*, p. 516.

¹⁹Bacon, *Novum Organum*, p. 496.

²⁰Berman, pp. 37-39.

²¹George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 37.

²²Steiner, pp. 6-7.

²³George Lukacs, "The Sociology of Modern Drama," trans. Lee Bax Andall, in *The Theory of the Modern Stage* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, Inc., 1968), p. 430.

²⁴Lukacs, p. 448.

²⁵Steiner, p. 8.

²⁶Steiner, p. 323.

²⁷Stanley Burnshaw, *The Seamless Web* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1970), p. 167.

²⁸Burnshaw, p. 167.

²⁹Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History; The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1959). Time, progress, and history, says Eliade, are the conditions imposed on the western culture by the empirical mode of mind. Freedom, he says, is found only in faith, the only defense against the "terror of history": "In fact, it is only by presupposing the existence of God that he [western man] conquers, on the one hand, freedom . . . and, on the other hand, the certainty that historical tragedies have a trans-historical meaning. . ." (p. 162).

³⁰See *Textual Strategies; Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, edited and with introduction by Josue V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979). The assumptions of the structuralists and post-structuralists are that there are layers of cultural sediment in language. Their deconstructive techniques in literature are intended to "stir up and expose forgotten and dormant sediments of meaning which have accumulated and settled into the text's fabric" (p. 37).