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“That perilous stuff”: Crime in Shakespeare’s Tragedies

Shakespeare’s works have been considerable sources of inspiration for crime and mystery writers. Authors have turned to Shakespeare for ideas about titles, plots or methods of murder, and even famous lines.¹ However, to consider Shakespeare’s tragedies themselves to be examples of crime writing is uncommon. Turning to Shakespeare’s texts, the reader is nevertheless struck by the great number of crimes of different kinds that are part of the tragic structure. It is also a fact that Shakespeare’s works contain a great many references to legal terms and allusions, revealing an interest in problems of law.² This paper will explore the nature and scope of crime as used by Shakespeare in his tragedies. What is considered a crime in Shakespearean tragedy? What types of crimes are included in the action, and what place do these crimes have in the tragic structure? As Shakespeare’s period of tragedy writing covered close to two decades, an additional question addressed will be to what extent there is a development toward more refinement in the way crime is presented in the later as opposed to the early tragedies.

The term “crime” as understood here covers criminal activity generally and may in more specific terms be considered “an act or omission constituting an offence (usu. a grave one) against an individual or the State and punishable by law.”³ This would be further understood as including evil or

¹ For more on the use of the crime motif in Shakespeare as a source of inspiration, see Rosemary Herbert (ed.): *The Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*. New York: 1999, 407–409.

² O. Hood Phillips: *Shakespeare and the Lawyers*. London: 1972.

³ Lesley Brown (ed.): *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*. Vol. I. Oxford: 1993.

injurious acts or grave offences that are regarded as punishable. It is problematic, however, that there is not necessarily agreement as to what constitutes an instance of negligence or deviance that is deemed injurious to individuals or the state. In the literary texts from the early modern period dealt with below, the penal system of justice is often disregarded by the parties in power. Much is left to the whims of the ruler or other representatives of the ruling class. Many outright crimes are thus not punished or objected to. Frequently, war scenes are described, involving exemptions from the laws of peace. However, the discussion will include references to overt criminal acts as well as to examples of criminal conduct not regarded as such by the individuals involved.

In the last couple of decades the study of crime has become one of the most exciting areas of social history. J. A. Sharpe's study of crime in early modern England is one instance of this.⁴ It describes the personnel and institutions that preserved and enforced social order and points to different types of crime and its treatment. First-hand views of rogue life and behaviour in Elizabethan England were presented by pamphleteers of the period.⁵ Additional insight into the underworld at Shakespeare's time can be had from studies such as that of G. Salgado. As he points out, the nobleman, positioned at one end of the social scale, was surrounded by "grace, luxury and ceremonious dignity," while people at the bottom often had to turn to begging, and when that no longer served, to thievery and cheating.⁶ Lisa Jardine refers to debt in the Renaissance period as "the price of magnificence".⁷ In her study of Shakespeare's criminals, Victoria M. Time observes that in addition to obvious criminal behaviour represented by thieves, rogues, and vagabonds, there were white-collar crimes such as "forgery, embezzlement, uttering, and false pretense," a result of increasing commerce.⁸ She furthermore points out that politically, England witnessed changes within the monarchy, and that "some of Shakespeare's works based on history were a true reflection of the order of government in his

⁴ James A. Sharpe: *Crime in Early Modern England 1550–1750*. London, New York: 1992.

⁵ For a collection of Tudor and early Stuart tracts and ballads "telling of the lives and misdoings of vagabonds, thieves, rogues and cozeners," see A. V. Judges: *The Elizabethan Underworld*. London: 1965.

⁶ Gamini Salgado: *The Elizabethan Underworld*. London: 1977.

⁷ Lisa Jardine: *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance*. London: 1996, 91.

⁸ Victoria M. Time: *Shakespeare's Criminals: Criminology, Fiction, and Drama*. Westport, CT, London: 1999, 13.

day – civil unrest, abdication, and regicides, as evident, for example, in *Macbeth*.”⁹

It is in the nature of the genre that tragedies tend to have a more limited emphasis than comedies. As a rule, this is suggested by the titles of the plays. In Shakespeare’s tragedies “the audience is invited to witness the misfortunes of charismatic and powerful individuals.”¹⁰ Although Shakespeare included characters such as Falstaff, in the Henry plays, to describe aspects of low life, the tragedies are primarily concerned with the misfortunes of spectacular heroes of power, typically ending their lives in misery, loss or annihilation. As is apparent in the works discussed below, the Shakespearean hero’s fall is great, for at the outset he generally belongs to the fortunate few. In what follows, Shakespeare’s tragedies will be discussed in the order that they appeared.

Titus Andronicus, although published in quarto in 1594, could have been written around 1590, possibly even earlier, and was Shakespeare’s first tragedy. T. S. Eliot’s dictum, that *Titus Andronicus* is “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written,” is not shared by all critics, for the play has received a fair degree of positive attention in recent years.¹¹ A perusal of the play shows that already in the first act two murders take place, in that Alarbus, the eldest son of Tamora, Queen of the Goths, is sacrificed off-stage to appease the spirits of Titus’s own dead sons, while Mutius, Titus Andronicus’s son, is stabbed by his own father for assisting in the abduction of Lavinia, Titus’s daughter. (1.1) Such deeds are rarely exempt from some form of revenge, and Bassanius, who is secretly pledged to Lavinia, is stabbed by Demetrius and Chiron, Tamora’s sons. (2.3) They rape Lavinia off-stage in the next scene, cutting off her hands and cutting out her tongue. Meanwhile, Aaron, Tamora’s Moorish paramour, manages to implicate the sons of Titus, Quintus and Martius, in the murder of Bassanius, and they are sentenced to death and executed off-stage, while another son, Lucius, is banished. (3.1) Titus, already overcome by the plight of Lavinia, is tricked into offering his hand to be cut off by Aaron as fruitless ransom for his sons. Act 4 includes only one murder, that of the nurse of Tamora’s illegitimate child, while the final act contains five killings, since the victims now get their chance. Titus kills Chiron and Demetrius,

⁹ Time: *Shakespeare’s Criminals*, 12.

¹⁰ Russ McDonald: *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*. Boston, New York: 2001, 85.

¹¹ The quote and the suggested dates are from David Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. New York: 1992, 938. Quotes from Shakespeare’s plays are from this edition.

and Titus even kills his own daughter, Lavinia, stating that “with thy shame thy father’s sorrow die!” (5.3) Furthermore, Titus stabs the Empress Tamora, while Titus himself is killed by Saturninus, the new Emperor, who in his turn is killed by Titus’s son, Lucius.

Titus Andronicus is thus “a veritable extravaganza of blood and revenge.”¹² Some viewers, such as T. S. Eliot, would feel revulsion at such multiple slaughters, while others might be attracted to the pattern of vengeance revealed in the play. This tragedy possesses many of the ingredients of Elizabethan revenge tragedy and “is very similar in construction to *The Spanish Tragedy*.”¹³ Just as in Kyd’s play, the revenge of the villains causes the blood revenge of the protagonist. Already by the end of the second act Tamora’s revenge of the murder of her son Alarbus has been almost completed and Titus has been left virtually helpless. The turning point comes at the end of the third act, when the final indignity starts affecting Titus’s mind. Titus vows revenge and is at first successful in his pursuits, but a number of faults in the protagonist’s character, especially his pride and haughtiness, necessitate a tragic ending. There are bloodstained lives on either side of the conflict.¹⁴

Virtually all the crimes committed in *Titus* can be considered to be what V. M. Time refers to as “illegal behaviour acknowledged universally as *mala in se*; that is, ‘wrong in themselves.’” This would include “murder, robbery, rape, and theft.” *Mala prohibita* offenses, on the other hand, would be judged differently from society to society and from epoch to epoch. A further classification of crimes could be made depending on their seriousness and form of punishment, according to which felonies are “serious or grave offenses, such as murder,” while “misdemeanors are less serious offenses.” Crimes can also be classified on the basis of the subject matter, depending on whether the crime is against the person or against habitation.¹⁵ In *Titus*, the rape of Lavinia is a typical example of a crime against the person. Homicides, of which there are a dozen in *Titus* should, by the modern system of state justice, be heavily penalized. For the most part the characters involved in this play act as if they are above the law, as if war and civil unrest justify any action, or else they seem to live according to an extreme form of Machiavellianism (Machiavelli’s name being an

¹² David M. Zesmer: *Guide to Shakespeare*. New York: 1976, 160.

¹³ Fredson Bowers: *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587–1642*. Princeton: 1971, 111.

¹⁴ Alan Sommers: “‘Wilderness of Tigers’: Structure and Symbolism in *Titus Andronicus*”. Philip C. Kolin (ed.): *Titus Andronicus: Critical Essays*. New York and London: 1995, 115–128.

¹⁵ Time: *Shakespeare’s Criminals*, 25.

English synonym for villain).¹⁶ Obviously the play to a great extent reflects Greco-Roman views on the question of the moral propriety of the duel, or of taking private revenge, according to the code of honour, a view not supported by Christian ethics.¹⁷

Shakespeare's second tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, contains less than half of the deaths found in *Titus Andronicus*, and this might indicate a different type of play than the first tragedy. Here the setting is not among warring factions in ancient Rome but among feuding "civilized" Veronese families. Furthermore, as David Bevington observes, "*Romeo and Juliet* is, in some ways, more comparable to Shakespeare's romantic comedies and early writings than to his later tragedies."¹⁸ As he points out, this love story, together with *Titus Andronicus*, is the only tragedy written in the first decade of Shakespeare's career when he otherwise concentrated on romantic comedy and English history. In *Romeo and Juliet* there are no killings in the first two acts, but when Romeo refuses to fight with Tybalt, a passionate Capulet who has become his cousin by marriage, the gallant Mercutio takes the challenge himself and is killed by mischance. (3.1) Romeo is enraged at the death of his friend and kills Tybalt. Additional tension is created when the Friar gives Juliet an opiate that will put her in a death-like trance for "two-and-forty hours", (4.3) but the tragedy's remaining deaths are postponed until the final act. First Romeo kills Paris, the Prince of Verona's kinsman, when he is surprised at the Capulet vault, where Juliet is to be found. Mistakenly thinking that Juliet is dead, Romeo drinks poison he has brought from a Mantuan apothecary, and dies by Juliet's side. On waking from her long drug-induced sleep and seeing Romeo dead, Juliet stabs herself. As the Prologue puts it, "A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life; / Whose misadventured piteous overthrows / Doth with their death bury their parents' strife."

Romeo and Juliet, according to Cedric Watts, "marks the beginning of an ever-deepening, ever-widening exploration of the nature of love and its tragic potentialities."¹⁹ A plot more influenced by romantic comedy than by revenge tragedy leads to criminal conduct involving fewer homicides than *Titus*. The murders of Mercutio and Tybalt might seem unnecessary, and

¹⁶ Bowers: *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 48.

¹⁷ See Curtis Brown Watson: *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor*. Princeton: 1960, esp. ch. 3.

¹⁸ Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 977.

¹⁹ Cedric Watts: *Romeo and Juliet*. Harvester New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare. New York, London: 1991, 31. The other plays that Watts refers to in this connection include *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

the same applies to Romeo's killing of Paris. These homicides seem influenced primarily by the heroic-chivalric custom of trial by combat. The other deaths in the tragedy are the suicides of Romeo and Juliet. Their deaths are a consequence of the senseless hatred between the two families, but ironically, it is misunderstanding and lack of knowledge that bring about the final disaster: the self-inflicted deaths of the two principal characters.²⁰ The attitude to suicide in the Renaissance revealed a divided allegiance between Christian and classical ethics. The Christian taboo against suicide is well known. In legal terminology suicide would be termed "non-criminal deviance".²¹ Even some classical philosophers protested against ending one's own life, while others, under Senecan influence, regarded suicide as an honourable act.²²

With *Julius Caesar* (1599) Shakespeare is midway in his dramatic career. He is leaving the great history plays and is on his way towards the great tragedies. The assassination of Caesar in 44 B. C. exerted a profound influence on Renaissance man. The civil war and popular unrest reflected in the play prepare the ground for the depiction of human savagery and murder. But for a tragedy of this type, the use of homicide is relatively limited and is exceeded by the number of suicides. Upon the Ides of March, Caesar is stabbed by the conspirators, (3.1) and later Portia, Brutus's wife, commits suicide. (4) In the final act Cassius, believing the final battle to be lost, orders his servant to stab him, while Titinius stabs himself, young Cato is slain by Antony's men, and in the final scene, Brutus, "the noblest Roman of them all" (5.5.68), falls on his own sword.

Julius Caesar "is a very satisfying play, as a play."²³ As a tragedy of order, *Julius Caesar* represents a play where the order-figure is killed by the rebel-figure.²⁴ *Julius Caesar* is structured around these two protagonists.²⁵ Caesar and Brutus, personally sharing some of the same abilities and weaknesses, may be viewed as representing victim and conspirator, the one being assassinated, the other, the criminal, finally committing suicide. But

²⁰ On views of death in Renaissance tragedy, see Theodore Spencer: *Death and Elizabethan Tragedy: A Study of Convention and Opinion in the Elizabethan Drama*. New York: 1936.

²¹ Time: *Shakespeare's Criminals*, 27.

²² Brown Watson: *Shakespeare and the Renaissance Concept of Honor*, 117–123.

²³ Harold Bloom: *Julius Caesar*. Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: 1988, 1.

²⁴ Northrop Frye: "My Father As He Slept: The Tragedy of Order". Harold Bloom (ed.): *William Shakespeare: The Tragedies*. Modern Critical Views. New York: 1985, 109–132 (118).

²⁵ Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1021.

balanced with this is the view that Caesar in fact was a tyrant: “Liberty! Freedom! Tyranny is dead!” (3.1.79) What in legalistic terms may be considered clear-cut might appear problematic in the world of the tragedy. Northrop Frye approaches this problem in *Julius Caesar* when he makes the following observation: “The ruler is not, like the judge, a mere incarnation of law: he is a personality, and in tragedy the personality takes precedence over whatever is conceptual or moral.”²⁶ Thus the head of state is no instrument of law or philosopher-king. In Shakespeare’s tragedies the world is governed by personal will rather than by wisdom.

In *Hamlet*, “the world’s most enthralling literary work,”²⁷ and “the most notoriously problematic of Shakespeare’s plays,”²⁸ the number of deaths about equals the number in *Julius Caesar*. Polonius is mistakenly killed by Hamlet, (3.4) and Ophelia drowns herself. (4.7) But the motif of concealed evil and disease keeps reminding us that the resolution may entail even more disastrous events. As the action is speeded up in the final scene, Hamlet is wounded with a foil poisoned by Claudius and Laertes. The Queen sips the poisoned drink intended for Hamlet, while Hamlet secures the poisoned foil and fatally wounds Laertes and the King. To make his revenge certain, Hamlet forces the poisoned drink into Claudius’s mouth. After killing Claudius, Hamlet collapses in Horatio’s arm, and “the rest is silence.” (5.2.360) At the point when Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are reported dead in England, the real drama is over.

What decides the dramatic action in *Hamlet* is the murder of Hamlet’s father, the former King of Denmark. Regicide is in itself an act of treason.²⁹ The crime is made even worse by being committed by the victim’s brother. Few persons know Claudius’s secret, namely Claudius himself, Hamlet, Horatio belatedly, and the audience. “Many ironies and misunderstandings within the play cannot be understood without a proper awareness of this gap between Hamlet’s knowledge and most others’ ignorance of the murder.”³⁰ A result of this is Hamlet’s overreaction to persons and events at court. He appears embittered, callous, and even violent towards individuals who flatter the sovereign that they depend on, and he may even be considered a threat to the state.

²⁶ Frye: “My Father As He Slept: The Tragedy of Order”, 127.

²⁷ Zesmer: *Guide to Shakespeare*, 185.

²⁸ Charles Boyce: *Shakespeare A to Z*. New York: 1991, 236.

²⁹ “It is worthy of mention that treason in Shakespeare’s England was a crime against the sovereign; the killing of a sovereign was treason.” Time: *Shakespeare’s Criminals*, 26.

³⁰ Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1060.

However, this fratricidal murder must in some way be avenged. Being the son of the dead king, Hamlet finds himself in a critical position, and according to the Ghost, being “thy father’s spirit,” he must “revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” (1.5.26) It is illustrative of Hamlet’s complex character that the revenge is postponed, for he recognises that revenge would involve himself in evil. First Polonius suffers an unfair fate, in that he dies for meddling, intending no physical harm to Hamlet. Caught between her lover, her father and her brother, Ophelia finds herself in a situation she cannot cope with. The distrust Hamlet feels towards Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern leads to his discovery of the documents asking for his execution in England and his plot to send the courtiers in his stead. Claudius, who mistakenly thinks “there’s such divinity doth hedge a king,” (4.5.127) finds Queen Gertrude a victim of his own plot, before he himself meets with Hamlet’s revenge. From the point of view of crime, an already committed regicide looms in the background from the beginning of the play, and it is towards another regicide that the action moves. Compared to these treasonous acts, Polonius’s death seems unnecessary as part of the revenge formula, but it is instrumental in bringing about Laertes’s swift return to Denmark and the ensuing duel. At the end of the play, however, the characters guilty of the crimes are dead, and there can be no prosecution or further revenge.

Just as in *Hamlet*, the drama of *Othello* is at least as much dependent on what goes on inside the main characters as on the outward action. To some extent, the visible signs of injustice or violence, which are in focus in this article, compare with the former tragedy in number, although the psychological landscape in *Othello* is quite different from that of *Hamlet*. In *Othello* the physical injuries among the principal characters do not appear until act five. In the first scene of the final act Roderigo is first wounded by Cassio and then stabbed by Iago, while in the final scene Desdemona is killed by Othello, Emilia is stabbed by Iago, Iago is wounded by Othello, and Othello stabs himself.

In structure *Othello* is simpler than *Hamlet* and the following tragedy, *King Lear*, but like them it describes “the way to dusty death.”³¹ *Othello* reveals one of the deadly sins, jealousy, and “the center of interest always returns in *Othello* to the destruction of a love through jealousy.”³² An inter-

³¹ Virgil K. Whitaker: *The Mirror up to Nature: The Technique of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*. San Marino: 1965, 241–242. Whitaker employs the phrase “The Way to Dusty Death” to head his chapter on *Othello* and *Macbeth*.

³² Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1117.

esting approach to the play is to consider it in the light of order versus disorder. Order is represented by the Venetian Senate, which holds the city together. Law and order secure the safety and well-being of the citizens. In opposition to the influences of justice and reason there are anarchic forces that represent a threat to traditional values. These forces are centred in Iago. His dissatisfaction with his military rank and his attempts to destroy Desdemona and Othello's marriage represent a threat to the social ordering of human relationships. And in the streets he tries to undermine the operation of law and justice by trying to start a brawl, first by angering Brabantio, and then by starting a quarrel with Roderigo.³³ In narrower terms, the play centres on Iago's efforts to destroy Othello's happiness. A view of discussions or theatrical representations of Iago reveals that in addition to his obvious functions as ensign, professional soldier and husband, he has been variously regarded as consoler, deceiver, devil, intellectual, homosexual, misogynist, racist and villain.³⁴ The connection between the arch-villain Iago and the devil is made overt when Othello says, "If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee." (5.2.295) Iago, having stabbed Roderigo and Emilia and masterminded the transformation of a great military leader from a noble lover to a raving murderer, will be punished accordingly. Lodovico gives precise instructions to Cassio: "To you, Lord Governor / Remains the censure of this hellish villain, / The time, the place, the torture." (5.2.378–380) But Othello, having killed his own wife, too late realises that he "threw a pearl away / richer than all his tribe." (5.2.357–358) Kissing his dead wife, he commits suicide.

The meaninglessness and brutality of human life in an indifferent universe are displayed through a variety of criminal activities in *King Lear* (c. 1605). Kent is put in the stocks, (2.2) but is soon released. (2.4) Cornwall gouges out one of Gloucester's eyes with his boot, and in the same scene Regan kills the First Servant and Cornwall puts out Gloucester's other eye. (3.7) Afterwards, Cornwall is reported killed by a servant. (4.2) The next major incident is that Edgar, Gloucester's son, fells Oswald with his cudgel. (4.6) In the play's final scene Edmund is killed by Edgar, Goneril poisons Regan and stabs herself, while the innocent Cordelia, upon Edmund's orders, has been hanged in prison. At the end of the play, with the body of Cordelia in his arms, Lear finds nothing left for him but to die. The

³³ The opposition between ordering and anarchic forces exemplified here is further described in Alvin B. Kernan: "Othello: An Introduction". Harold Bloom (ed.): *William Shakespeare: The Tragedies*. New York: 1985, 83–84.

³⁴ Virginia Mason Vaughan: *Othello: A Contextual History*. Cambridge: 1994, 240.

descending movement of Lear's story is quite striking. But Lear's sufferings, unlike those of Gloucester, primarily come from within.

Comparing *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, V. K. Whitaker sees them as representing "The Rack of This Tough World."³⁵ Discussing *King Lear*, David Bevington observes that "in no other Shakespearean play does injustice appear to triumph so ferociously, for so long, and with such impunity."³⁶ The evil forces in the play are primarily represented by Cornwall, Edmund, Goneril and Regan. Cornwall, the villainous husband of King Lear's arrogant daughter Regan, takes an active part in the evil exploits that trigger much of the play's action. He is responsible for ordering the execution of Edgar and for announcing as his follower Edgar's persecutor, Edmund. He also supports his wife and sister-in-law, Goneril, in their decision to expel Lear. Cornwall's putting out of Gloucester's eyes is a particularly nasty action. For these offenses he would in time have been heavily punished were it not for the fact that he is killed by a horrified servant, as reported by a messenger. (4.2) Edmund, the play's Iago, "a most toad-spotted traitor," (5.3.141) is characterised by unscrupulous behaviour. Being the illegitimate son of Gloucester, he conspires against Edgar, his legitimate brother, who is banished into the wilderness. He betrays his father to Regan and Cornwall, her husband, who blinded Gloucester. Furthermore, Edmund courts Lear's other daughter, Goneril, with whom he plans to murder Goneril's husband, Albany. (4.2) Leading Cornwall's army against the supporters of Lear's faithful daughter Cordelia, he is victorious and orders the execution of Lear and Cordelia. However, Edmund is charged with treason by Edgar, who challenges him to a trial by combat, at which Edmund is fatally wounded.

The remaining villains in *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan, prove their disloyalty to their ageing father in different ways. Goneril takes the lead in humiliating her father in the first scene of the play, and in scene four she is instrumental in making her father flee into the storm, where he ends up mad. In act four she commences the love relationship with Edmund, referred to above. The rivalry between Goneril and Regan over Edmund is part of the play's general atmosphere of moral decay. Regan, on her part, being chiefly a follower of her sister and her husband, supports Cornwall in his decision to put out Gloucester's eyes, and with Goneril and Edmund she constitutes an unsavoury love triangle. She is poisoned by Goneril, who commits suicide when her plot with Edmund against Albany is exposed.

³⁵ Whitaker: *The Mirror up to Nature*, 183.

³⁶ Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1167.

Thus at the play's end none of the villains has survived. The tragic symmetry of *King Lear* is emphasised by the fact that "the play begins with an old man and his three daughters, and ends with them, now all dead."³⁷

Turning to *Macbeth*, "Shakespeare's most profound and mature vision of evil,"³⁸ we find it surprising that a play so much associated with atrocities contains fewer overt crimes than many of the other tragedies. But already in the second act the ensuing tragic end of the protagonist is foreshadowed through Macbeth's murder of Duncan, King of Scotland. (2.2) Simultaneously, he commits the superfluous murder of Duncan's two grooms. In the following act Banquo is murdered on Macbeth's orders. (3.3) Then, in act four the son of Macduff is killed. Act five contains the reported killings of Lady Macduff and her son and Lady Macbeth's off-stage suicide, as well as the murders of young Siward by Macbeth and of Macbeth by Macduff. In this tragedy of vaulting ambition and overpowering conscience, Macbeth finally realizes that the glory for which he risked his soul is meaningless.

As *Macbeth* focuses on the human potential for evil, the play may also be seen as a version of the loss of Eden. It describes the triumph of evil in a character who possesses many good qualities. Through his worldly ambition, Lady Macbeth's influence and the arousal of a supernatural power, Macbeth's better self is crushed. There is a gradual narrowing of character in the hero that makes him become "fatally diminished".³⁹ At the end of the play his life seems "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." (5.5.26–28) In *Macbeth* evil is depicted in the nature of man but also in the supernatural world, in the world of black magic, represented by the Witches. Unlike evil influences from the supernatural world, the treasonous murder of King Duncan, and the ensuing massacre of Macduff's family are tangible crimes. Directly or indirectly, Macbeth is responsible for all the murders in the tragedy prior to his own death. In legal language, Lady Macbeth's position is that of accessory before and after the fact.⁴⁰ For the two villains these homicides are too much to bear. Lady Macbeth goes insane and commits suicide, while a desperate and disintegrated Macbeth is slain by Macduff, who becomes the play's agent of retri-

³⁷ John C. Trewin: *The Mitchell Beazley Pocket Companion to Shakespeare's Plays*. London: 1981, 100.

³⁸ George Wilson Knight: *The Wheel of Fire* (1930). Cleveland: (5th ed.) 1957, 140.

³⁹ On this see Eugene M. Waith: "Manhood and Valour in *Macbeth*". Terence Hawkes (ed.): *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Macbeth"*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1977, 63–66.

⁴⁰ Time: *Shakespeare's Criminals*, 26.

bution.⁴¹ Through their deaths, the villains escape trial or further vengeance at the play's end.

Among all of Shakespeare's tragedies *Timon of Athens* is the play that stands out from the rest with regard to criminal acts. It is an atypical tragedy in that no deaths occur in the play except Timon's possible suicide. In other respects it is also difficult to point to direct instances of crimes in the play that would be punishable in any society. It is Timon's tragedy that his so-called friends take advantage of this benevolent nobleman, who happens to be extravagantly hospitable and generous or, as one critic characterizes him, "good but stupid".⁴² But he fails to find the balance between benevolence and restraint. When his money is spent and he realizes that his creditors are clamouring for money, Timon is abandoned without getting any help from his friends and is completely stripped of his illusions. Withdrawing to the wilderness in frenzy and despair, Timon rages against humanity and dies in utter misery. A study in misanthropy, *Timon of Athens* shows a gullible main character surrounded by spendthrifts. There are a great many unwise people in the play, but no villains. The fact that Timon ends his days as an embittered hermit out in the wilderness is a personal tragedy, but hardly anything justifying criminal proceedings.

While in *Julius Caesar* Antony led the forces opposing the assassins of Caesar, in *Antony and Cleopatra* his love for the Queen of Egypt leads to his downfall and the military triumph of Octavius. *Antony and Cleopatra* may thus be considered a mixture of a war story and a love story.⁴³ The major focus and interest is on the two principal characters, Antony, one of the Roman triumvirs, and the Egyptian queen, their developing love story and their tragic end. The play contains other deaths, soldiers wounded or killed in battle, as well as the suicides of Enobarbus and Eros, Antony's friends. Hearing a false report of Cleopatra's death, Antony falls upon his sword and is carried, mortally wounded, to Cleopatra's "monument", where he dies. In the final scene, Iras, one of Cleopatra's attendants, dies, and Cleopatra manages to commit suicide by applying asps to her breast and arm. Shortly after, Charmian, another of Cleopatra's attendants, dies just like her royal mistress.

⁴¹ On the theme of disintegration in *Macbeth*, see A. P. Rossiter: "Macbeth's Disintegration". Terence Hawkes (ed.): *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Macbeth"*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: 1977, 123–125.

⁴² Francelia Butler: *The Strange Critical Fortunes of Shakespeare's "Timon of Athens"*. Ames, Iowa: 1966, 158.

⁴³ For a further discussion of this play, see Harold Bloom (ed.): *William Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra"*. New York: 1988.

The deaths in *Antony and Cleopatra* are partly those of men killed in battle, principally the deaths of Pacorus (3.1) and Iras. (5.2) The other deaths, with the exception of that of Enobarbus, who dies from a broken heart, are suicides. Eros's *felo-de-se* occurs with Antony's (4.14) and Cleopatra and Charmian's in the play's final scene. The fates of Enobarbus and Eros are especially interesting from a moral point of view. Enobarbus, Antony's chief lieutenant who later deserts him and joins Octavius, when learning of Antony's sympathetic reactions to the betrayal, prays for death, collapses and dies. As for Eros, a freed slave and Antony's devoted servant, when ordered by his master to take his sword and kill him, according to an earlier promise, he is unable to do so and kills himself instead. The fact that Antony settles for suicide as soon as he acknowledges his military defeat, is within the Roman code of honour. Seeing that Octavius "embodies most of all the ironic limits of political ambition,"⁴⁴ and thus is not as morally pliant as Antony, there is little else Cleopatra can do than to follow suit. Departing from the gloomy tone of his tragedies of evil, Shakespeare allows more comic scenes in *Antony and Cleopatra*, including perspectives from the other Roman plays as well as from the comedies and the late romances. This seemingly affects the tragic stature of the two principal characters.⁴⁵ Their relationship "can be seen as more tawdry than heroic."⁴⁶ Their deaths are appalling enough but misdeeds rather than offences.

Coriolanus (c. 1608) is considered Shakespeare's last tragedy. The play is about a proud, obstinate egoist and autocrat, Caius Marcius Coriolanus, and his clash with the Roman plebeians, led by malevolent tribunes. Underneath one senses the clash between the aristocratic rule of the patricians and republicanism, represented by the plebeians.⁴⁷ But *Coriolanus* is also a play about destructive envy. The only death among the principal characters is the murder of Coriolanus by Aufidius. The rival of Coriolanus and the leader of the Volscians, Aufidius vows that he will overcome Coriolanus by fair or foul means, seeing that he is virtually unconquerable in combat. From the time that Coriolanus deserts Rome to join the Volscians, Aufidius schemes to get rid of him. When Coriolanus is persuaded by his controlling mother to spare Rome, Aufidius accuses him of treason, and with his fellow

⁴⁴ Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1294.

⁴⁵ For more on this, see Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1293.

⁴⁶ Catherine Belsey: *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden: Construction of Family Values in Early Modern Culture*. Houndmills, London: 1999, 20.

⁴⁷ Anne Barton: "Livy, Machiavelli, and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*". Harold Bloom (ed.): *William Shakespeare's "Coriolanus"*. New York: 1988, 123–147 (128–129). See also Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1345.

conspirators he stages an execution “whereat valor will weep.” (5.6.139) The criminal act of murder has been committed, but under extenuating circumstances, for to the Volscians Coriolanus’s decision not to sack Rome appears traitorous. The chief contrasts of the play, then, are between two kinds of opposition: the hatred between Coriolanus and the masses and the enmity between Coriolanus and Aufidius.⁴⁸ Of the two, the latter confrontation proves disastrous.

Above we have considered Shakespeare’s tragedies in turn. The crimes revealed in the tragedies are felonies of different types, and homicide tends to dominate. Suicide, or *felo-de-se*, is very frequent. Misdemeanour is not the material for the tragic mode. It is further apparent that criminal conduct plays an important part in these plays, and that criminal acts tend to radically influence the movement of the plot. We may distinguish between Shakespeare’s tragedies of revenge and ambition, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* and his tragedies of love, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Othello* and his classical or Roman tragedies, *Titus Andronicus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus*. In addition, *Antony and Cleopatra* belongs to both of the latter two categories.⁴⁹ Not unexpectedly, tragedies of revenge, retribution and ambition tend to contain more criminal conduct than most other types. D. M. Zesmer categorically maintains that “Macbeth is the only criminal among Shakespeare’s major tragic heroes,”⁵⁰ and on second thought he may be right. Hamlet is not grouped among villains but may be considered a victim of the heroic-chivalric ideal whereby he is required to take vengeance on Claudius. But committing murder is by no means restricted to tragedies of retribution. In *Othello*, the title character murders his innocent wife, an action universally acknowledged as *mala in se*, but this is generally presented as an extenuatory act, since he is misled by Iago, the arch-villain. Another way of classifying Shakespeare’s tragedies is to single out some of them as tragedies of evil, applying this designation to *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, and seeing in them aspects or exemplifications of the seven deadly sins.⁵¹ Here Christian imperatives come in to complicate or problematize the moral conflict in the play as compared with the Roman plays, which tend to reflect political conflicts more than those of the soul. Furthermore, while the Roman group of plays

⁴⁸ Adrian Poole: *Coriolanus*. Harvester New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare. New York, London: 1988, 11.

⁴⁹ For extensive discussions of these groups, see Claire McEachern (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespearean Tragedy*. Cambridge: 2002, 160–223.

⁵⁰ Zesmer: *Guide to Shakespeare*, 351.

⁵¹ See, for example, Bevington (ed): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 1117.

leans towards reflecting the chivalric-heroic code of honour, the former type may embody a conflict between blood feuds and the modern system of state justice. As a striking example, Hamlet is caught in this double-bind between a medieval revenge pattern and the modern framework of the rules of law of Claudius's Denmark that he knows to be corrupt.⁵²

It is also relevant for this discussion to refer to the place of divine retribution in a consideration of texts that reflect medieval as well as Renaissance views of conflicts, violence and crime. Divine justice may be seen to play a part in cases where the reign of injustice is countenanced. In the tradition we are referring to, the revenge of justice is socially acceptable, being part of God's laws. The Edgar-Edmund duel, for example, is virtually a trial by combat, which leads to Edmund's defeat and imminent death. At this and the deaths of the sisters, Albany sees "this judgment of the heavens, that makes us tremble." (5.3.235) Another instance of a duel that functions as a trial by combat, and where divine justice is strongly felt, is Macduff's victory over Macbeth. This is a "necessary" event, because being King, Macbeth cannot be brought before an ordinary court of justice.⁵³ One more case, which may be viewed as resting upon divine judgment and which illustrates Hamlet's role as "heaven's scourge", is the Hamlet-Laertes duel, a fencing match that turns out to be a murder plot.⁵⁴ True, Hamlet must die, but with him Laertes and two additional characters.

From the point of view of the time at which the different tragedies appeared, it is striking, but not unexpected, that Shakespeare's first tragedy, *Titus Andronicus*, written when the playwright was thirty or less,⁵⁵ is the one that contains the most atrocities. At the other end of the scale, *Timon of Athens*, written toward the end of Shakespeare's devotion to the tragic mode, is the play that shows signs of outright crimes the least. This is explainable from the point of view of the degree of maturity expected in the playwright, but coincidentally, these two different tragedies are seemingly the ones that are most frequently considered unsatisfactory.⁵⁶ The very last of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Coriolanus*, contains comparatively few de-

⁵² Sean McEvoy: *Shakespeare: The Basics*. London, New York: 2000, 188. Similar ideas are discussed in Eleanor Prosser: *Hamlet and Revenge*. Stanford, London: 1967, esp. chapter 7.

⁵³ Robert Rentoul Reed, Jr.: *Crime and God's Judgment in Shakespeare*. Lexington, Kentucky: 1984, 52.

⁵⁴ Reed: *Crime and God's Judgment*, 53.

⁵⁵ Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 938.

⁵⁶ Bevington (ed.): *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 938, 1256.

scriptions of cruelty, and this strengthens the impression of a trend in some of the later plays away from an interest in physical manifestations of evil.

As this discussion has revealed, deciding what is a crime in Shakespearean tragedy is a complex matter. It partly depends on whether the felony is considered *mala in se* or *mala prohibita*, and whether the felony is judged according to classical or Roman (i. e. pagan) concepts of honor or according to Christian ethics. This creates a certain tension in the plays, for Renaissance views were colored by both classical and Christian ethical precepts. Tragedies typically end in misery, disappointment, separation and the loss of Eden. The dramatic irony is that it is frequently the tragic figure's talent, or tragic flaw, that is responsible for the downfall. Some characters in the plays we have considered are so closely linked with evil that they may be viewed as criminal types. August Goll placed Brutus and Cassius, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and Iago in this category.⁵⁷ Inevitably, crime creates victims, some facing a more tragic fate than others. Among innocent characters in the tragedies who are directly or indirectly victims of a crime-infected environment, we have seen Lavinia, Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia.⁵⁸ In a tragic world of violence, atrocities and injustice, few are greater losers than they.

⁵⁷ August Goll: *Criminal Types in Shakespeare*. London: 1909.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the plight of these characters, see R. S. White: *Innocent Victims: Poetic Injustice in Shakespearean Tragedy*. Newcastle upon Tyne: 1982.