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**Affective Interests: Ancient Tragedy,
Shakespeare and the Concept of Character**

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Affective Interests: Ancient Tragedy, Shakespeare and the Concept of Character

Introduction

Contemporary narratives about the tragic genre invariably make the point that it is impossible to evaluate whether an individual text merits designation as a tragedy without an explicit discussion of the grounds for that designation. This applies as much to texts from ancient Greece as to later works, since arguments about what constitutes a tragedy go back at least as far as the fifth century BCE, arguably to the re-workings of Aeschylus by Sophocles and Euripides, and certainly to the antics of Dionysus in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Provocative new versions of well-known myths and the satirical treatment of style and content thus form part of the earliest responses to tragedy and demonstrate the inseparability of creative and critical practice when it comes to evaluating its quality. Add to this the embryonic literary critical formulations of Aristotle a century later and their hugely influential reception and it becomes clear that the parameters of future debates about effective tragic drama are already in place: analyses of the development, mutation and decline of the genre will circulate around the relative merits of the three great tragedians in terms, especially, of plot and character and the emotional impact on audiences. And the two poles in relation to which broad sweep accounts of 'the tragic' will be routinely plotted are the dramatic productions of Classical Greece and Elizabethan England, with occasional detours via 17th Century France. None of this needs much rehearsing.

Recent scholarship, however, has reinvigorated debates about the idea of the tragic and shifted them away from generic boundaries and performance texts by focusing on the centrality of the discourse on tragedy to formulations of modernity. This shift has had a double aspect: on the one hand, the philosophical texts associated with German Idealism which utilise tragedy to model ethical and political problems have been scrutinised anew and classicists keen to develop a dialogue with specialists in German intellectual thought utilise their expertise to trace a more continuous and complex pattern of influence from the ancient to the modern world; on the other, the relation between the time-bound and the time-less when it comes to theories of tragic form and content is being closely interrogated: In the words of Billings and Leonard whose recent volume characterises the philosophy of tragedy as a uniquely influential phenomenon of classical reception: 'Understanding the modernity of

our antiquity (and the antiquity of our modernity), then, requires considering the role of tragedy in forming and expressing historical consciousness.’¹

One of the claims Billings and Leonard make is that ever since Aristotle, tragedy has had a privileged relationship to universalism, a relationship which many classicists have struggled to accommodate; they also point to the way that various modes of historicist criticism still tend to dominate the way that tragedy is evaluated. Their overall project aims to develop the dialogue between modern approaches and ancient texts in order to establish the value of a more interpenetrative approach and it also explores a broader range of philosophical texts than has previously been explored in this context. However, although on the philosophy side the canon is substantially expanded, on the literary side the focus remains resolutely on ancient Greek tragedy, with *Hamlet* the only text from another period to receive extended attention. This focus leads Michael Silk to comment as follows in his overview of the collection in the final chapter:

Once one lets Shakespeare in, as one must, two large literary-theoretical questions (and/or aesthetic-existential questions...) come to the fore: where should we draw the limits of ‘tragedy, pure and simple’ (George Steiner’s phrase)? And, given that many, like Samuel Johnson, have seen Shakespeare’s genius as not ‘purely’ tragic, but as tragicomic, should the quest initiated by the philosophers of the tragic, and properly foregrounded by the editors, be widened to a comparative assessment of contrasting world views, tragic, tragicomic, and comic too?²

This article seeks to engage both with the broad scope of the collection and with the specific questions posed by Silk by focusing on the relationship between ancient Greek and Shakespearian drama in the context of modernity as evidenced, in particular, by ideas about character. For it is not only the case that Greek tragedy has cast a long shadow over the reception of Shakespeare’s plays and influenced their evaluation, but also that judgments about the singularity and power of the Shakespearian corpus have retroactively shaped and determined responses to the ancient texts. And, as we shall see, arguments about temporality and tragic effect are sharpened by the spiky issue of the representation of character and the

¹ Billings & Leonard (2015) 3.

² *Ibid.* 311.

vocabulary associated with it, a vocabulary which tends to provoke a sense of discomfort about potential anachronism perhaps more than others.

Models of Reception

The challenge of balancing readings of particular literary texts with analyses of the relationships *between* texts from different periods lies at the heart of the project of classical reception. Early theoretical models which developed the dynamic Eliotic concept of tradition unashamedly argued for a radically revised emplotment of literary history. However, quite quickly, these models were largely replaced by those which both reasserted the importance of more traditional models of history and sought to complicate them; this resulted in a body of work firmly grounded in contextual detail and invested, above all, in the density and convolution of traceable patterns of influence in the direction of past to present. This kind of approach, in both its more and less sophisticated forms, is still characteristic of much of the work in the field of reception: issues of temporality, where the historical situatedness of a text is regarded as of primary importance, vie with issues of worth, where a text is evaluated against different kinds of criteria, including, for example, the political or the aesthetic. The former tend to come out on top, but scholars are urged to keep in mind both an awareness of the historicity of the act of reading and a sense of the value of ancient Greek texts to a broadly-configured reading community whose sense of engagement with the ancient material transcends the merely historical.

Negotiating these tensions, tracing their history, and devising metaphors and modes of reading to do them justice is a preoccupation of some of the more innovative scholars who recognise the theoretical implications of engaging in interpretative acts. So, for instance, Brooke Holmes in *The Symptom and The Subject* uses symptom as metaphor to demonstrate the possibility of keeping the historical and the timely in play together, thereby challenging ‘the givenness’ of both ancient and modern concepts. As she explains, ‘if a book about the symptom cannot escape ideas of rupture and historical difference, it is also the nature of the symptom to foster interpretative complexity: symptoms remind us that there is always something subjective about what counts as rupture and how to make sense of it.’³ Bonnie Honig in *Antigone, Interrupted* argues for a model of ‘conspiring with the canon’ which allows us to ‘let ourselves in on its secrets’⁴ and insists that the new readings thus generated

³ Holmes (2010) 40.

⁴ Honnig (2013) 88.

should not be regarded merely as presentist self-confirmations but rather ‘the hard-earned products of new perspectives, alien genres, and innovative interpretative resources.’⁵ Ika Willis in *Now and Rome* draws on a similarly Benjaminian understanding of history when she argues that:

...no context can ever fully enclose or exhaust a word, a sign or an act: the very force of delocalization which enables our actions to take place in history also means that sovereignty can never fully determine the trajectory of history. Practices of citation and re-contextualization – the concrete re-deployment of words – can always produce new contexts, by blasting open the sovereign continuum of history.⁶

The challenge posed by these formulations and others like them is that we must interrogate our own complacencies and preconceptions about the role of history in our reading as rigorously as we interrogate other kinds of frames. Even those models of reception which emphasise the mutual dependency of past and present have a tendency to leave untouched the idea that conceptions of past and present are themselves self-evident rather than complex and contestable. But Willis warns us against the smugness of a knee-jerk charge of anachronism, as well as the lack of rigour in committing to a sense of history that is grounded merely in what we perceive to be common sense.⁷ When we examine the scholarly traditions of writing about character, we shall see that all too often particular kinds of models of understanding are dismissed with just the kind of rapidity and ease that she criticises. Responding to the *people* in tragic texts as though they were in some way *like us*, rings a particular set of alarm bells about the neglect of historical perspectives; on the other hand, the reassertion of an uncritical paradigm of history does little to help us account for the continuing potency of tragic affect so much of which seems to depend on moments of identification however partial, ill-informed or downright illusory they may be. Human beings responding to the choices and actions of other human beings lies at the heart of the experience of tragedy, however we choose to configure and make sense of those transpersonal dynamics.

The question of the human has been reinvigorated in recent years, not least by those who seek to develop a renewed basis for community. So, Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* argues for a sense of a ‘we’ based upon a shared understanding of loss and embodied vulnerability. And

⁵ Honnig (2013) 190.

⁶ Willis (2011) 20.

⁷ Willis (2011) 2.

Kwame Anthony Appiah ends a chapter of *Cosmopolitanism* with an assertion that the human connection forged ‘not through identity but despite difference’ depends above all on an act of imagination.⁸ In the realm of the literary, there has been a renewal of interest in the capacity of fictional texts to immerse and transform their readers and in what that capacity suggests about the ‘near-universals’ of the human condition⁹: although there can be no return to the certainties of the narratives of an earlier age, there is a reinvigoration of debate about the role of literature in the world. Concepts of empathy and identification and conversely of estrangement and rupture are important to these debates and there is an emphasis on the potential for shared responses which transcend individual people, texts and moments. At the same time, their grounding in a Levinasian ethics demands a respect for ‘the otherness of the other’ which confounds collusive readings. The ‘trans’ in the transcultural, transhistorical and transpersonal aspects of these responses is the repository of both the identity and difference which need somehow to be held in play simultaneously in order to do justice to the seriousness of the project. Ranjan Ghosh describes this as follows:

With trans comes the cognitive shift, conceptual inflections, the linguistic transfers and the unease of “profit” and “loss” in cultural translation. Transcultural spaces, thus, inform our experiences—literary, aesthetic, and cultural—with affect, a different set of sentiments and interpretive values. These spaces, generative of an “unpeace,” challenge the organicist notion of culture and the tendencies to return to the security of the universals of the human condition and specific cultural codifications.¹⁰

For Ghosh, the need to reject the easy security both of old-fashioned universals and specifically contextualised interpretations is the basis of a methodology which, like those of Holmes, Honig and Willis, seeks to do justice to the question of how texts can stay meaningful to diverse communities even if some of those communities would not recognise the meanings generated by others. It also seeks similarly to retain the capacity to be surprised and unsettled by the new. What is distinctive here is the emphasis on affect, the emotional impact of texts on readers which roots the methodology in the shared cognitive processes and emotional investments that enable individuals to respond to literature. This cognitive turn, evident throughout the humanities, has been especially influential in the rehabilitation of thinking seriously about character, underpinning the idea that engaging in this kind of

⁸ Appiah (2006) 135.

⁹ See the discussion in Mousley (ed) (2011) 12-15.

¹⁰ Ghosh (2012) 260.

thinking is neither sentimental nor naïve. If it is the term ‘character’ more than the cognate terms ‘subject’ and ‘person’ that causes hackles to rise, it is worth spending some time considering how that came to be the case and why it is now that sub-disciplinary formations like cognitive psychology and anthropology are seen as more innovative and acceptable.

The Term ‘Character’

Like any literary critical term, character has a history which can be emplotted in various ways and ancient Greece provides two possible starting points: first, Homer, the idealised poet who stands pre-eminent at the forefront of what comes to be a literary tradition and is a source for other later genres, notably tragedy and historiography. Homer is an interesting figure in terms of these discussions because at times he is represented as belonging to an irrecoverable era of human history, on the other side of a profound evolutionary and psychological divide and yet at others, his works are claimed to contain all of human experience, a capaciousness he shares with Shakespeare to whom we shall turn shortly. Second, Aristotle, the progenitor of so many debates, who developed a discourse of moral philosophy within which character, or *ethos*, has remained a potent term. In the contexts of moral philosophy, ‘personality’ often replaces ‘character’ as the preferred expression for opening up debates about the particular qualities of a human being these days, although when both terms are employed, personality tends to describe more superficial aspects of the self than character. Within this tradition behaviours associated with virtue and vice tend to be described in abstract and general terms rather than projected onto figures who behave like real people. However, of course, Theophrastus who was a pupil of Aristotle’s, wrote the earliest work commonly referred to as the *Characters*,¹¹ but more properly translated as *Behavioural Types (charakteres ethikoi)*, consisting of 30 (or 31 or 32) short caricatures of individuals as they might be met in the streets of Athens in the late fourth century B.C.¹² In this work, each of Theophrastus’ sketches opens with the phrase ‘ho toioutos tis hoios’ ‘theman is the kind who...’. and the formulaic repetition of the phrase focuses attention on the way that the person described is emblematic of a type: he is an individual, we must imagine, whom we could bump into, and yet he is also representative

¹¹ This is the case so far as we can tell, even though it is possible to identify burgeoning of interest in the character-type in earlier texts (e.g. descriptions of the cowardly and the bold man in *Iliad* 13: 278-86; the distinction drawn between the *dikaïos logos* and the *adikos logos* in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*; the lists of moral virtues and vices in the *Nichomachean Ethics* 1107a32-1108b6; Semonides’ satires on/of women as animals).

¹² The etymology of the Greek word Charaktēr describes the stamp or imprint on a coin, a distinguishing mark of type or value. It is also used figuratively by e.g. Herodotus to describe the ‘stamp’ of facial or bodily features, by which kinship or race are distinguished and the ‘stamp’ of speech as marked by a local dialect.

of a kind of man – there are others like him in our world. Each figure is anonymous and recognizable only by his behaviour (not by his physiognomy or his internal qualities) and in this respect he may be positioned at the other end of a spectrum from Homer’s Achilles whose singularity is frequently commented upon, or the eponymous protagonists of Shakespeare’s plays. But Homeric heroes do take on an exemplary function for later audiences and readers (and we might think, indeed, about the use of Clytemnestra as representative of ‘the untrustworthy wife’ in the *Odyssey*) and Dr Johnson it was who commented ‘In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual: in Shakespeare it is commonly a species.’ This tension between the particular and the generic is one that the concept of character might be said to mediate, and arguably, as we shall see, it performs this function in our daily lives as well as in the contexts of literary representation.

The rich reception of Theophrastus, particularly in seventeenth century England and France, inaugurated the ‘character-genre’ as a recognizable type of writing which consciously aimed to fill in the perceived moralizing gap in Theophrastus. But in terms of literary criticism, the concept of character has most often been associated with a realist mode of criticism and with the novel. Within this tradition E.M.Forster’s famous distinction between ‘flat’ and ‘round’ characters mirrors the distinction between character types and individuals that we have already observed.¹³ The practice of alluding to a literary character as a mimesis of a real person brings it into disrepute with those who prefer to work with a concept of the divided self or the self-in-process of (post) modernity; for these critics its textuality, its status as literary *effect* is significantly underplayed and restricted if it is confined to a mimetic role. On the other hand, if a character within a narrative is regarded predominantly as a set of codes, and any continuity between it and a real person is effaced, an important potential point of contact between the narrative and the reader is denied and the question still remains of how to explain the differentiation between this particular kind of code and others. The displacement of the term character does not of itself solve interpretative problems, but it does provide a focus for evaluating both narratives about literature and narratives about ourselves.

John Frow argues in his magisterial book *Character and Person* that ‘Our recognition of the kind of thing fictional characters are depends on our prior knowledge of the kind of things persons are...But the modelling goes the other way as well: our understanding of persons is, in part, shaped by our experience of dealing with fictional characters.’¹⁴ So how does this

¹³ In *Aspects of the Novel* (1962).

¹⁴ Frow (2014) 107.

work in practice? Any attempt to pin down what is authentic and what distorted about any kind of representation presupposes collusion between reader and author in terms of shared knowledge and values: the reader must use that knowledge to interpret what is not described as well as what is, to ‘fill in the gaps’, as it were. When it comes to the representation of a person, we rely to a greater or lesser extent on our sense of what a human being is like in order to do this. We might try very hard to nuance our contemporary sense of personhood with a historically charged sense of, say, the differently constituted boundaries between the private and the public in 4th Century Athens, but nonetheless at the heart of the endeavour lies a perceived similarity that is the basis for comparison and interpretation. The choice of whether or not to read a Theophrastan or a Dickensian sketch as grotesque is not different in kind from other interpretative choices, but the stakes may seem higher because of our greater investment in the category of the human and our disciplinary sensitivities about the role of history. To what extent when we are reading a literary work do we, or ought we, take into account the formations of the self that were influential at the time of the text’s production? To what extent, contrarywise, are we free to ignore such considerations and to focus instead on the relationship we develop with a character during the process of reading on our sofa, on the train, in the theatre, in our bed? Can we adopt the former position and still remain open to the perspective of difference that is so often one of the benefits of a historical sensibility? Does an espousal of the latter inevitably entail blindness to alterity that leads only to a solipsistic encounter with some already present (even if barely-acknowledged) aspect of ourselves?

Reading the *Characters* of Theophrastus can be seen as paradigmatic of reading character more generally: the process involves both a degree of recognition (the person described exhibits qualities, expresses emotions, performs actions that we ‘understand’) and yet also an encounter with alienness that may provoke a response of incomprehension or bafflement. The experience of ‘understanding’ may be illusory, and the contact with another world uncomfortable, upsetting or uninteresting. Yet the potentially transformative nature of such a strange, half-comprehensible encounter may be one of the greatest benefits of reading: literature trains the imagination ‘the great inbuilt instrument of othering’ as Spivak has described it.¹⁵ Consideration of character presses us to consider not only *how* but also *why* we read: here we are reminded of the agenda of commentators like Butler for whom establishing a sense of global community is an urgent concern.

¹⁵ Spivak (2003) 13.

Readers frequently experience themselves as being transformed by their intimacy with a literary text. And transformative relationships with a variety of literary characters may continue to have a role in the non-literary world as the boundary between the literary and the non-literary becomes permeable, with readers moving between the two, or, sometimes, inhabiting them simultaneously. Another way of putting this is that the literary world becomes part of our non-literary world so that the two become inseparable. We might think, for example, about the way that characters' names are often used to describe dominant personality traits: someone is a Scrooge, a Pollyanna, a Walter Mitty, a Cassandra. Or about the way we sometimes turn to literature to provide the means of expressing our experience of another person. Could there be a more potent expression of the disappointment, disbelief and alienation that comes from observing someone we love do something we would not have thought them capable of than Troilus' anguished 'This is, and is not, Cressid!'¹⁶ At times literary characters may articulate our concerns more clearly than we can articulate them ourselves and it is in these kinds of moments that we experience our clearest perception of the permeability of real and fictional worlds so that any idea of a literary character *not* being like a person seems counter-intuitive: historical difference becomes much less significant than the comforting and immediate sensation of being understood and our emotional understanding transforms our historical understanding.¹⁷

Although there is a tendency to speak about the 'dangers' of naïve readings which too easily conflate ancient and modern constructions of the self, one of the consequences of the cognitive turn is that it legitimises the attempt to pay more attention to the emotional power of a literary or performative text. The use of the latest technology allows the brain to be scanned using functional magnetic resonance imaging so that emotional reactions and mental states can be directly correlated with brain activity. This then allows for states such as empathy and processes such as identification to be awarded empirical status as never previously and for the transformative potential of literature, long since acknowledged by readers and critics, to be validated by contemporary scientific method. Different models of this kind of theory are in operation: some emphasise the stable nature of the brain from the remote past to the present day; others prefer to focus on its evolution in response to natural and cultural stimuli. Both these roughly formulated models offer a means of connecting the

¹⁶ Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, V.2.149.

¹⁷ In an article in *New Literary History* Suzanne Keen pertinently asks what we lose when we insist on the merely textual nature of fictional character: 'When we suppress the experience of having characters come to life in our minds, what questions do we omit to ask about them, and about ourselves?' (2011) 204.

experience and reactions of human beings across time and place and hold out the promise of near universal recognition and understanding. Such optimism obviously has resonance for the value of engaging with literature in a fragmented world: whether we conceive of these interpretative manoeuvres as innovative and revelatory or merely as the latest iteration of, for example, the preoccupation with empathy demonstrated by critics such as Shelley and Hazlitt, they clearly offer a new way of articulating an answer to the question of why different human beings are so often captivated by the same fictional people. In the words of Blakey Vermeule, a proponent of this method, ‘The simplest reason that we care about fictional characters is that our minds have evolved that way.’¹⁸

Tragic Characterisation

Let us now consider the relevance of all this to the criticism and appreciation of tragedy. In his most recent book on Sophocles, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy*, Simon Goldhill points to the way non-specialist discussions of ‘the tragic’ seldom take sufficient account of the rhetorical force of the term *tragikos* in antiquity, even as they gesture towards the origins of the genre of tragedy in classical Greece.¹⁹ He makes this point, not in order to support any kind of claim that modern definitions of tragedy have no validity, but to show that the extrapolation of a general theory of tragedy from the texts of the ancient Greeks is not a project with which the ancient Greeks themselves ever engaged. His is by no means an unsubtle argument and his purpose in making it is to demonstrate the need to keep in play a sense both of the time-bound and the time-less when considering the value and impact of ancient Greek texts. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which the separating out of the response of the ancient Greeks from later readers and critics promotes the idea that the former is unproblematically identifiable as discrete from the latter, an idea which can be contested. And, perhaps more importantly, the prising apart of the two readerly positions gives the impression that these too can be maintained as discrete categories when scrutinising the way that the history of the tragic genre has been emplotted, despite the way in which it is easy to demonstrate, for example, how what is considered to be distinctive about Sophocles’ use of irony, is inflected differently depending on the historical perspective of a reader.

The bi-part structure of Goldhill’s book, the first half focusing on the formal qualities of Sophocles’ plays, and the second on their modern reception, testifies to the unresolved nature

¹⁸ Vermeule (2010) xiii.

¹⁹ Goldhill (2012) 142.

of the questions he asks: in his introduction he advises that ‘the second half of the book designedly poses a challenge to the first’²⁰ and he concludes with the claim that it is the very movement between the two positionalities he has outlined [an awareness of the historical contingency of reading and a sense of transhistorical value] that ‘creates the space of contemporary critical debate.’²¹ It may be that this space is more sharply defined within Classics than in other disciplines because of the way that the idea of the Classical permeates later culture to such a great extent. But, arguably, whenever an act of reading occurs, there is an irresolvable tension between the sense of a particular moment and a broader expanse of time, reaching back into the past but also unfolding into the future. This expanse can be configured as the domain of history, the public world of writers, performances and publications, but it can also be regarded as the territory of the imagination, the internal life of the individual, a space where considerations of historical propriety hold no particular sway. And within this space considerations of meaning and value ebb and flow with the vagaries of life experience, altering the significance of textual encounters and their transformative possibilities. In the words of Ali Smith:

Great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives. You can’t step into the same story twice – or maybe that stories, books, art can’t step into the same person twice, maybe it’s that they allow for our mutability, are ready for us at all times, and maybe it’s this adaptability, regardless of time, that makes them art, because real art (as opposed to more transient art, which is real too, just for less time) will hold us at all our different ages like it held all the people before us and will hold all the people after us, in an elasticity and with a generosity that allow for all our comings and goings.²²

Literary history, then, is constituted by both public and private narratives and by contingent as well as institutional factors. The project of developing any kind of continuous narrative about the nature of tragedy involves not only an ability to think about particular contexts of production and interpretation, but also about the ways in which we come to recognise a tradition as a tradition, sometimes by means of powerful individual textual interventions, sometimes via synthesising narratives that retroactively shape our sense of the literary world,

²⁰ Goldhill (2012) 9.

²¹ Goldhill (2012) 263.

²² Smith (2012) 31.

and sometimes because of more personal experiences which coalesce around an understanding of what the tragic might mean. It is within this overall nexus of ideas that the comparison of ancient Greek and Shakespearian tragedy comes to make most sense.

When the term ‘tragedy’ is abstracted from any specific explanatory setting, it is easy to overlook how complex its associations and entailments are. For not only does it refer to a literary genre whose parameters can be contested in terms of both form and content, but also to different traditions of performance, reading, scholarship and reception which are equally multi-formed and contestable. If the originary status of ancient Greek tragedy endows the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides with an unassailable cultural authority, it does not erase the appetite for debate about the relative merits of individual plays and the overall trajectory and vitality of the genre during the course of the fifth century and beyond into the fourth when Aristotle makes his appearance. For Aristotle, for whom tragedy was an affective phenomenon, the civic context of the first productions is no more significant than the formal qualities of the plays he explicitly discusses, and his early acts of canon formation privileged works whose plots met his criteria for inspiring pity and fear in their audience. The discussion of the potentially beneficial effects of tragedy which forms such a major strand of the reception of the *Poetics*, was taken up within the German idealist tradition, as mentioned previously, and via this tradition, and in particular via Hegel, debates about Greek tragedy became debates about ‘The Tragic’ and the ideas thus extrapolated were extended to other texts and eras.

In the case of Shakespearian tragedy, the scholar widely regarded as having been most influential in conflating Idealist philosophy with the established English critical tradition is A.C. Bradley, the Chair of Poetry at Oxford, whose highly influential 1904 work *Shakespearian Tragedy* is still in print. Bradley was on the one hand committed to a Shakespeare who was primarily a dramatist and recommended to lovers of his work that they should read the plays ‘as if they were actors who had to study all the parts’,²³ but he was also interested in the ethical entailments of the playwright’s vision and his oft-quoted belief that ‘what imagination loved as poetry, reason might love as philosophy’ formed the basis for a critical practice which combined a rigorous analysis of individual plays with a broader theorising about Shakespeare’s conception of the tragic, heavily indebted to Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics*. In one of his own *Lectures on Poetry* Bradley explicitly discusses Hegel’s

²³ Bradley (reprint 1991) 19.

theory of tragedy and outlines what he perceives to be its significance as it pertains both to ancient and modern drama. The key issue is the nature of the conflict Hegel saw as lying at the heart of tragedy and the ways that this is reconfigured within the context of modernity. Here is Bradley explaining why, for Hegel, it is not suffering, but the conflict which is the cause of suffering, that is centrally important and impacts upon our deepest sensibilities:

The reason why the tragic conflict thus appeals to the spirit is that it is itself a conflict of the spirit. It is a conflict, that is to say, between powers that rule the world of man's will and action – his 'ethical substance'. The family and the state, the bond of parent and child, of brother and sister, of husband and wife, of citizen and ruler, or citizen and citizen, with the obligations and feelings appropriate to these bonds; and again the powers of personal love and honour, or of devotion to a great cause or an ideal interest like religion or science or some kind of social welfare—such are the forces exhibited in tragic action. . . . And as they form the substance of man, are common to all civilised men, and are acknowledged as powers rightfully claiming human allegiance, their exhibition in tragedy has that interest, at once deep and universal, which is essential to a great work of art.²⁴

We see here quite clearly that the scrutiny of the ways tragedy gains its effects moves swiftly from factors derived from individual plays (most obviously, here, the *Antigone*) to claims about experiences shared by humanity that remain vital and consistent regardless of time or place. It is this movement that above all else characterises the legacy of the philosophy of tragedy as it becomes a phenomenon of classical reception: the debate shifts away from historical particularity towards the end of the interpretative spectrum which privileges common value. Differences between texts of different periods, say, ancient and modern as very loosely defined, become significant only in so far as they allow for the tempering of the overall picture and Bradley points out that because Hegel finds 'something modern' even in Euripides, he makes little use of Euripides in his analyses, apart from for 'purposes of contrast'. Bradley's account of Hegel on the contrast between Greek tragedy and its modern counterparts emphasises the translation of the non-character-based conflict between opposing ethical principles into a conflict that is mostly regarded as internal to an individual character. This internalisation represents comes to represent the defining feature of modernity:

²⁴ Bradley (1965) 71.

.....he observes, in regard to modern tragedy, that in a large number of instances such public or universal interests either do not appear at all, or, if they appear, are scarcely more than a background for the real subject. The real subject, the impelling end or passion, and the ensuing conflict is personal – these particular characters with their struggle and their fate. The importance given to subjectivity – this is the distinctive mark of modern sentiment, and so of modern art; and such tragedies bear its impress.

Whereas we are interested in the personality of Orestes or Antigone, it is only in so far as we identify it with a particular ethical relation; this is not so with Hamlet, whose position, Bradley argues, so closely resembles that of Orestes. In Hamlet's case we are gripped by the contradictions which define his whole personality, with 'the difficulties in his own nature.'²⁵

The defining feature of the tragic effect remains the same – the conflict at the heart of the drama – but it is nuanced to allow for modern sensibilities, the focus of which is regarded as the representation of the inner workings of the self, here articulated as the concept of 'personality', but elsewhere, as 'character'. Bradley's 'restatement' of the Hegelian position is his most original contribution to the debate and its subsequent elaboration had a huge impact on the focus of narratives about the development of the genre from antiquity to the present day and, in particular, on arguments about the crucially defining qualities of ancient Greek versus Shakespearian tragedy.

Today Bradley is perhaps most famous for being the spokesperson for the kind of character-based criticism caricatured in L.C. Knights' 1933 extended essay *How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?*²⁶ In this piece Knights attacks Bradley and scholars like him for a naïve response to Shakespeare's protagonists which treats them as though they are 'independent of the work in which they appear' and as if they 'go on living in our imagination, as real to us as our familiar friends.'²⁷ For a large part of the twentieth century Bradleyist criticism was generally treated as a by-word for the unsophisticated analysis of dramatic texts which paid

²⁵ Bradley (1965) 77.

²⁶ With the renewal of interest in psychologically-grounded modes of reading, however, there has been a reappraisal of earlier forms of character-based criticism as well as of Bradley himself. So, for example, in a piece in *Shakespeare Studies*, Edward Pechter satirises what he calls the 'discontinuity-centred historicism' according to which 'no one may be said to possess individualized interiority until the idea is summoned into existence by the discourse of Enlightenment.' He argues that within this narrative, a whole range of categories including sexuality, literature, the human and indeed 'Shakespeare' can no longer be taken for granted. 'Only materialism itself,' he says, 'seems secure against this materialist critique: *no people in Shakespeare, just paper and ink.*' (2014) 208.

²⁷ Knights (1933) 17.

no attention to considerations of form and used the word character anachronistically and in cavalier fashion. He was also accused of ignoring the theatrical dimension of Shakespeare's work and thus 'the artistic illusion of reality in which the dramatist and the audience both acquiesce.'²⁸ If he paid very little attention to the protocols of the Elizabethan stage and the ways in which its inhabitants were often interpreted allegorically rather than in terms of naturalism, his accounts of the plays, it was argued, could only be indecipherable to those first-night audiences for whom they had been written and by whom they were intended to be comprehensible.²⁹ Similar debates were raging about the appropriate contexts for the evaluation of ancient Greek theatre. Gilbert Murray, a close friend and regular correspondent of Bradley's, chose to devote the Annual Shakespeare Lecture of 1914 to a comparison of the 'two great tragic characters' Hamlet and Orestes, and to address the question of why there should be such similarity between protagonists of tragedies written in different circumstances and with different audiences in mind. Given the intellectual legacy of F.M. Cornford, Jane Harrison and Miss Spens of Lady Margaret Hall, all of whom he credits in his introduction, he concludes unsurprisingly that the reason the Greek tragedians and Shakespeare produce such comparable plays is that they are drawing on stories the power of which appeal to very deep-rooted human instincts and which pre-date any surviving textual representation of them. In the fashion of his time, he is not afraid to articulate a theoretical position which is not grounded in history:

The things that thrill and amaze us in *Hamlet* or the *Agamemnon* are not any historical particulars about Mediaeval Elsinore or Prehistoric Mycenae, but things belonging to the old stories and the old magic rites, which stirred and thrilled our forefathers five and six thousand years ago...I am not for a moment questioning or belittling the existence or the overwhelming artistic value of individual genius. I trust no one will suspect me of so doing. I am simply trying to understand a phenomenon which seems, before the days of the printed book and the widespread reading public, to have occurred quite normally and constantly in works of imaginative literature, and doubtless in some degree is occurring still.³⁰

²⁸ Cooke (1972) 130.

²⁹ Empson (1951) 231.

³⁰ Murray (1914) 25.

Aeschylus' Conception of Character

Contemporary discussions of the reception of ancient Greek tragic drama often stress the civic context of its performance and the collective nature of its realisation; by contrast, Shakespeare's reputation became inseparable from the discourse of the unique creative genius and this mode of emplotment continues to be persuasive, despite the alternative accounts which locate his achievement more precisely within the contexts made possible by Elizabethan theatrical culture; whereas the reconstruction of Greek tragedy depends on a kind of enabling fantasy involving actors, chorus, and audience members, in the case of Shakespeare, the sense of connection with an audience is much more fragmented and complicated by the separation of the textual transmission of the plays from their performance history. In both cases, in the former because of a lack of evidence about the actual behaviour and predilections of the earliest audiences, and in the latter because of the way a textual, scholarly tradition of interpretation has tended to dominate discussions about the meaning of the plays, the discourse of the philosophy of tragedy has been enormously influential in privileging an emphasis both on the idea of conflict and on its modern instantiation in the idea of the tormented individual. This emphasis can clearly be identified not only in commentaries on Shakespeare, but also in some of the work by the most influential scholars working on Greek tragedy throughout the twentieth century. The mutual influence of these traditions, which come together precisely because of 'the idea of tragedy', can be seen in other areas too: for example, in Bradley's comments about the idea of fate in *Shakespearean Tragedy* when he surmises that if Greek tragedy had never been written, no one would be interested in discussing the idea of fate in relation to Shakespeare.³¹ But for the purposes of this article, character will remain the case-study.

Let us take, for example, a pair of articles by the professors of Greek in two British universities, written in the 1970s in dialogue with each other, both of which tackle the question of how Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* achieves its tragic effect and both of which draw on Bradley in the course of their analysis. The first, by Pat Easterling entitled 'Presentation of Character in Aeschylus' begins by surveying what she describes as the two current orthodoxies with respect to character: the first treats Aeschylus' protagonists in the same way as the protagonists of modern playwrights and regards his plays as 'building up unique human portraits in which every detail of language adds subtle touches to an elaborate and

³¹ Bradley (reprint 1991) 44.

consistently drawn personality, which is assumed to be a major focus of the dramatist's interest;³² the second rejects this idea and argues instead that nineteenth-century and modern criticism attached too much importance to the tragic hero, and hence to character study, and too little to the action', thus attributing to the tragedians 'notions alien to Greek thinking and to the habits of the Greek theatre.'³³ Attempting to square the circle, Easterling moves through analysis of several Aeschylean passages in order to demonstrate her sense that relying on ideas of dramatic effectiveness' rather than on psychology does not 'solve' interpretative problems but rather leaves us asking the question 'What are the dramatic effects for?'³⁴ She stresses what she describes as 'the simple but vital consideration that Aeschylus wishes us to believe in his characters in a deep and serious way', suggesting that although 'he may not have been interested in the exploration of personality for its own sake....he was profoundly interested in his characters, whom he saw as *paradeigmata* of the human condition'. Attempting to combine a respect for the non-naturalistic conventions of the ancient Greek theatre with an explanation for the enduring potency of one of Aeschylus' most famous dramatic scenes, she argues that any great dramatist or novelist must be possessed of a depth of insight into human experience:

We surely cannot be in any doubt that Aeschylus belongs to this class: the people and events—the doing and suffering—he portrays convince us with the same kind of blinding authenticity as we find in Shakespeare or George Eliot. So in thankfully dispensing with the concept 'the character of Agamemnon' we must not go on to dispense with an awareness of Aeschylus' profound and subtle insight into human motivation. It is this that gives him the power to command our response, so that believing in what Agamemnon does and suffers, we are able to sense its significance.³⁵

In the end for Easterling this cross-temporal sense of 'human intelligibility' becomes a *sine qua non* for the project of drama, regardless of its origin.

Written in direct response to Easterling's piece, the second article by John Gould is entitled 'Dramatic Character and Human Intelligibility in Greek Tragedy' and it explicitly sets out to challenge Easterling's position by reasserting the uniqueness of the context of the production

³² Easterling (1973) 2.

³³ Easterling (1973) 3.

³⁴ Easterling (1973) 3.

³⁵ Easterling (1973) 6.

of ancient Greek plays. Gould states in the opening paragraph 'I am not at all sure, for example, that it is true, as Mrs. Easterling suggests, that 'the people and events of Aeschylean drama ... convince us with *the same kind* of blinding authenticity as we find in Shakespeare and George Eliot'. We may have to distinguish between very different modes of authenticity.'³⁶ For Gould the central question is how our perception of dramatic personalities from different eras is *determined* by the verbal and physical medium in which they exist: although he agrees that the characters of Aeschylus and Shakespeare and indeed of Eugene O'Neil exist on a spectrum of what Easterling might call 'human intelligibility', the specific formal qualities of the theatre, the conventions of language, the stage directions, the vocabulary of costume, gesture and movement, are to him all more significant for the interpretation of the *Agamemnon* than any more generalised concept of personality. Querying the validity of domesticating the experience of the ancient theatre, Gould asserts the importance of remaining alert to the 'the newness of the new experience' (and here we might be reminded of the methodological imperatives of Holmes, Honig and Willis above):³⁷

I would not wish to deny that we believe in the characters of Aeschylus 'as fully as we believe in Hamlet' but I would deny that *the way* we come to believe in the dramatic persons of Greek tragedy is in all respects quite like the way in which we come to believe in Hamlet. Here we come back to the question of language and form. In important respects the whole texture of dramatic speech and theatre action is differently conceived and differently presented. There is nothing in Greek tragedy, I would argue, like that self-analytical, self-exploring mode of language which is the distinguishing mark of Shakespeare's soliloquies, and without which our sense of the personality of Hamlet or of Macbeth, for example, would be quite other than it is..... The language and the stagecraft of Shakespeare's theatre are not those of Greek tragedy, and our response to dramatic personality in the two theatres must be correspondingly different.

Both these essays are intelligent and subtle and engage with the fundamental question of why audiences in different periods continue to respond to Aeschylus' plays; the extent to which such a response can be regarded as '*the same*' kind of response elicited by Shakespeare and by other writers of the modern era, is pushed into sharp relief by the central issue of the representation of character and the vocabulary associated with it. But criticising particular

³⁶ Gould (1979) 1.

³⁷ Gould (1979) 5.

uses of the term and concept of ‘character’ does not of itself solve the problem of how to evaluate the enduring imaginative power of the chief protagonists of the stage, and despite their best efforts, none of the rightly esteemed scholars I have mentioned (Bradley, Murray, Easterling, Gould or Goldhill) manage quite to achieve an interpretative position from which it is possible to combine a judicious sense of historical perspective with an explanation of tragedy’s continuing power to move.³⁸ We could deduce from this that any attempt at such a position is doomed to failure (and indeed unsympathetic commentators sometimes caricature it as an indecisive strategy, designed to evade tough interpretative decisions), but given that the sharpest critics and the most imaginative readers keep returning to the problem, could we conclude instead that the irresolvability of the issue is itself important? The shift from the particular to the more general proposition, as per the examples of Hamlet and Orestes, has played a major role in the testing of hypotheses about the nature of the tragic and the enduring potency of canonical tragic texts. On this model, then, character criticism functions as a synecdoche for interpretation more generally and the movement between acutely experienced moments of outlandishness and the comfortingly familiar becomes recognisable as constitutive of literary study, of the ‘singularity’ of literature itself.³⁹

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³⁸ I am very grateful indeed to the anonymous reader for *Arion* who encouraged me to sharpen up my ideas on the implications of this point.

³⁹ See Attridge (2004). Throughout this work Attridge talks persuasively about the inclination of readers and dominant modes of reading to process any novelty in terms of the familiar (18), to accommodate the other as part of the same (138). He asserts, however, that the singular power of the idea of literature, above and beyond any particular cultural formation, is its resistance to domestication by any theory, its capacity to remain open to change.

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