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Shakespeare's Conception of Tragedy: The Middle Tragedies*

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I.

Shakespeare began writing tragedies very early in his career. Among the first plays he wrote, if we can depend on scholars' estimations of his chronology, was *Titus Andronicus*, a revenge tragedy. It was influenced most likely by Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* that appeared at the end of the 1580s. Both plays focus primarily on blood vengeance; both have a play within the play; both have a ghost; and both end with the stage littered with corpses including that of the protagonist. Sounds like *Hamlet*, doesn't it? But *Hamlet*, at least in the version we now recognize as Shakespeare's, came much later in the playwright's career. It differs significantly from *Titus* and has important links with the other "middle" tragedies, *Julius Caesar* and *Othello*. In some ways, furthermore, it very subtly anticipates crucial aspects of the tragedies that came afterwards.

Another early tragedy, *Richard II*, was grouped by Shakespeare's first editors, Hemminges and Condell, among the history plays in the First Folio of 1623. It differs in many respects from *Richard III*, yet another early tragedy grouped with the history plays. Because of Richard III's series of criminal actions, as Shakespeare dramatized them, this play is seldom regarded as a tragedy, although some of the early editions labeled it as such. The reason for this labeling probably derives from the medieval concept of tragedy, which defined the genre, unlike Aristotle, as simply the fall from high to low estate.

Richard II adheres to this medieval concept, too, but by this time Shakespeare's idea of tragedy was becoming much more sophisticated. We feel a good deal more sympathy for Richard II than for Richard III, certainly after the pivotal second scene of act 3, when Richard returns from Ireland to find Bolingbroke threatening his rule and

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ultimately his crown. In this play Shakespeare even gives us a hint, often disregarded, that suggests an important aspect of tragedy that he developed much more fully later on. Before he dies, this Richard has some idea of what went wrong, that is, of his responsibility for what has happened to cost him his crown. This insight, however slight, reminds us of the importance of *anagnorisis*, recognition or insight, as some commentators have understood Aristotle's use of the term—or misunderstood it, as my friend Tom Clayton reminds me. For high tragedy, the hero or protagonist must have some recognition or insight into his *hamartia*, his tragic error, before he dies. In his long soliloquy in prison before the murderers enter, Richard II glimpses this important aspect of his fate moments before he dies.

This insight is essential, I believe, for a right understanding of tragedy--essential not only for the tragic protagonist but for the audience as well. For in this way we grasp a major constituent of tragedy's effect, our sense of what might have been. This sense of "what if?" is, in my view, as significant a part of tragedy as the arousal of pity and fear, and the catharsis, or purging, of these emotions, which Aristotle defined as one of the main aims of tragedy. The sense of waste, as A. C. Bradley termed another part of the tragic effect, is also important. Let me put this another way, citing what the late Abba Eban said long ago in a different context, "Tragedy is not what men suffer, but what they miss."

Romeo and Juliet miss a very great deal in their tragic lives. Their parents miss perhaps even more, since Romeo and Juliet are their only children; their deaths bring about not only the end of the feud that has been going for no one knows how long or for what reason; their deaths also represent the end of the Montague and Capulet lines. Romeo and Juliet certainly know what they are doing and why they are doing it when they commit suicide. They know that the world they have been born into has no place for a love like theirs, and that their only recourse is to die in each other's arms. They may be wrong, but we feel deeply what they miss. If only Friar John had not been detained by the plague! If only Friar Lawrence had got to the tomb before Romeo killed Paris or before he swallowed poison! If only, if only . . . . There we have an essential aspect of tragedy. But in this tragedy, chance, or fortune, plays a large part—too large a part, we may feel. While Bradley allowed for the role of chance or coincidence in tragedy, he argued—rightly—that it cannot play a major role, as it apparently does in this one.

Some have argued that Romeo and Juliet are too headstrong, that their deaths are really a result of their impetuousness, and that is their tragic failing. If so, they certainly have no sense of that. Therefore, the protagonists' recognition is not a part of this tragedy which, moving as it is in other ways, does not compel an awareness of the protagonist's responsibility for the catastrophe that high tragedy demands. We feel pity, certainly; a sense of waste, of course; but fear in the way Shakespeare's later protagonists arouse it—a sense of dread, that what the protagonist experiences is something we too might experience—not hardly, at least not among those no longer in their teens.

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In his so-called apprentice years, Shakespeare continually experimented with the art of drama. We see this tendency to experiment quite clearly, I think, in another of his history plays. Like *Richard II* and *Romeo and Juliet*, *King John* was also written in the mid-1590s. This play reveals very well Shakespeare's sense of tragedy and its obverse, what Susan Snyder called in her excellent book, the comic matrix of tragedy. (As Socrates remarks in the *Symposium*, comedy and tragedy are really two sides of the same coin; hence, the alternative to tragedy—comedy—is implicit in the action of the former.) In act 2 of *King John*, the armies of England and France engage in a ferocious battle, or series of skirmishes, ending in a stalemate outside the walls of Angiers. A solution is proposed: let the Dauphin of France marry John's niece, the Lady Blanche, thereby binding the two kingdoms in a pact of peaceful coexistence. John and the King of France both see this proposal as a worthy resolution of their conflict and embrace it. Despite the outcries of Constance, who wants her son Arthur to unseat John and claim the throne of England, which she and others believe is rightly his; and despite the Bastard Falconbridge's fulminations, the two monarchs sign a treaty of peace. The Dauphin and his bride seem happily married. This, then, appears a comic outcome to what otherwise seemed heading for a tragic one.

But, unfortunately, this is not the end of the story or the play. In act 3 Cardinal Pandulph, an emissary of the pope, arrives and challenges the treaty. The pope was no friend of King John, whose anti-clericalism led some of Shakespeare's contemporaries to view him as a proto-Protestant. Through his emissary, the pope insists that the King of France must renounce the treaty of peace with England. Shakespeare stages this incident very strikingly. Cardinal Pandulph arrives as John and the French king are holding hands, a sign of their new-found amity. Pandulph demands, in the name of the Church, that the King of France let go of John's hand. Caught in a profound dilemma, the king hesitates. He knows that to accede to the cardinal's demand will result in resumption of the warfare just concluded. The moment is fraught with tension, but eventually France capitulates to the cardinal, and the war between England and France resumes.

In that moment of tension—and drama means nothing if not the conflict of moral choice—we see the alternatives of tragedy and comedy presented. True, Shakespeare had to follow the dictates of history: a comic resolution was not historically viable. But in dramatizing the King of France's dilemma and his choice, Shakespeare directly pointed to the delicate balance between a happy outcome and a disastrous one. Of course, in contrast to his treatment of the Lear story, he could not rewrite history, at least not recorded history of relatively recent date. But he could—and did, I maintain--show the alternatives to tragedy that underlie historical fact and much else in human experience, as he would later do very powerfully in his mature

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tragedies.[1]

In fact, just before embarking on what we call the middle tragedies—*Julius Caesar, Hamlet*, and *Othello*—or perhaps at about the same time as he wrote the first of these, Shakespeare wrote a comedy that, like *King John*, also dramatizes the alternatives of tragedy and comedy, but with a happier outcome. In act 4 of *As You Like It*, Orlando comes upon his wicked brother Oliver asleep under a tree in the forest of Arden. Oliver has been sent by the usurping Duke Frederick to find and kill Orlando, a command he has willingly enough embraced; for earlier in act 1 he had asked Charles the wrestler to kill Orlando in their bout. But something wonderful happens now. Orlando sees a snake curled around Oliver's neck, and a hungry lioness waiting for Oliver to awaken before pouncing on him. Poetic justice would seem to be operating, and Orlando walks away from the scene, not once, but twice. But blood is thicker than water; or rather, as the text puts it, "kindness, ever nobler than revenge," causes Orlando to return and do battle with the lioness, getting wounded in the process but saving his brother's life (the snake had already vanished at Orlando's approach). The event evokes a remarkable change in Oliver, who repents his wicked ways and embraces his brother at last. Thus, what could have been a tragic outcome turns into a happy, or comic, one.

These opposing episodes in *King John* and *As You Like It* emphasize the point I have been trying to make about the tragic and comic obverse. In *King John*, what might have been—and almost was, except for the pope's interference—turns into tragedy: warfare is resumed between England and France, Arthur is captured and later dies, the English barons revolt, France invades England, and John is poisoned by monks. In striking contrast, the enmity between the two brothers in *As You Like It* is resolved by a noble action on the part of one and the recognition of the deed by the other. Therefore, what might have become tragic, at least for Oliver, turns into a happy outcome for the two brothers, allowing them both to approach the marriage altar with their brides at the end of the play.

II.

Aware of these alternatives as he returned to writing tragedies at the end of the sixteenth century, Shakespeare subtly incorporated them in the dramas that begin with *Julius Caesar* in 1599. As in writing *King John*, he could not rewrite history, but he could interpret it in such a way as to reveal what he imagined as the alternatives to tragedy, however slim or remote they might appear. History held that Julius Caesar was

[1] For a fuller discussion of this play see my essay, "Alternative Action: The Tragedy of Missed Opportunities in *King John*," *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and the Arts*, 11 (Spring 1983), 254-269.

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assassinated by Brutus, Cassius, and the rest of the conspirators. Shakespeare carefully examines the various motives they had, especially those of Brutus and Cassius. But even before that, in the first scene of the play, he suggests, through his use of metaphor and puns in the dialogue between the tribunes and the plebians, that illness is curable. Just as a shoemaker mends soles, a human being's soul may be mended. The hint here is that Caesar's imperial aspirations—his illness, as Brutus and Cassius see it—might be cured.

In his dialogue with Brutus in 1.2, Cassius acknowledges that Caesar is only human and has his afflictions. But curing Caesar of the illness that Cassius and Brutus are most concerned about is nowhere considered. In fact, in his famous soliloquy pondering what to do, Brutus begins, not with a series of alternatives or rhetorical syllogisms, but with a conclusion: "It must be by his death." Using spurious arguments to justify this action, he rationalizes what he has already determined to do and meets with the conspirators.

What if, instead of acquiescing in Cassius's plan and joining the conspiracy, Brutus had taken another course? What if he had confronted his friend and benefactor, Caesar—an alternative he fails to contemplate—and tried to persuade him against his imperial ambitions? Would this approach have worked? Of course, there is no way of knowing. Part of the tragedy, as I elsewhere have argued, is this disastrous failure to attempt a personal confrontation. The result, which Shakespeare goes on to dramatize, is betrayal, Caesar's brutal death, and civil war. The tragedy ends with the deaths of both Brutus and Cassius, and the triumph of the triumvirate of Octavius, Marc Antony, and Lepidus. And after that, further tragedy.[2]

Interestingly, and unlike Shakespeare's later tragic protagonists, Brutus never recognizes his error. He remains to the end a high-minded but flawed individual. It is not for nothing that in the *Divina Commedia* Dante placed both Brutus and Cassius along with Judas Iscariot in the lowest circle of hell, gripped in Satan's jaw. Shakespeare treats Brutus more kindly, however, and in his eulogy Octavius proclaims him as "the noblest Roman of them all." Whether Shakespeare was here being ironic, who knows?

The next tragedy that Shakespeare wrote, or rewrote—we are not certain of the chronology—is *Hamlet*. A careful—no, a meticulous—analysis of the text shows once again how Shakespeare incorporated subtle hints of the alternatives to tragedy in this play. We can begin with Hamlet's feelings of impotence as expressed in his first soliloquy, "O that this too solid flesh would melt" (1.2.129-59). Before Hamlet even hears of the Ghost, he knows something is rotten in the state of Denmark; and when he meets the Ghost on the ramparts in 1.5, he learns what he has suspected all along, that Claudius is a "smiling, damned villain" (1.5.106). Earlier he thought about his mother's incestuous marriage to his uncle and concluded that "It is not nor it cannot come to

[2] For a fuller discussion of this play, see my essay, "*Hamartia*, Brutus, and the Failure of Personal Confrontation," *The Personalist*, 48 (1967), 42-55.

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good" (1.2.158). Then, after the Ghost tells Hamlet of Claudius's crime, he charges the prince to act to prevent worse from happening.

What is it exactly that the Ghost commands Hamlet to do? He first gains the prince's confidence and sympathy and tells him how his father was murdered. Hamlet's reaction is clear: "O my prophetic soul!" (1.5.40). In general terms, the Ghost demands revenge. He then tells Hamlet specifically what he must do: "Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.83-4). He follows this charge with two negative injunctions: "But howsoever thou pursuest this act, / Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother aught. Leave her to heaven. . . ." Although killing Claudius might well be understood in terms of the *lex talionis*, nowhere does the Ghost explicitly order Hamlet to do so. This is important, and directly relates to the first negative injunction, "Taint not thy mind." But during act 3, Hamlet violates both negative injunctions and fails to carry out the first one.

Immediately after his dialogue with the Ghost, Hamlet is convinced that it is an honest ghost and he tells Horatio and Marcellus as much. That is all he tells them, although later he apparently confides in Horatio everything the Ghost said. But what kind of action should Hamlet take to carry out the Ghost's commands? Beset with doubts and further troubled by Ophelia's rejection of him, Hamlet spends two months pondering his course of action. Only when the players arrive does he think of a plan to "catch the conscience of the king" (2.2.592). But even then, as his famous "To be or not to be" soliloquy indicates, he is unsure whether to take action or "to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (3.1.57-8). The nunnery scene, however, again arouses his fury against Claudius; but moments later, in his praise of Horatio in 3.2, Hamlet once more talks of forbearance, of one who "in suffering all, that suffers nothing" (3.2.62). These swings of his between calm and fury comprise the basic rhythm of the play.

"The Murder of Gonzago" gives Hamlet the evidence he needs that Claudius is indeed guilty as the Ghost maintained. The prince is so exultant that Horatio is hard pressed to calm him down. The summons to his mother's closet gives Hamlet a moment's pause: he will "speak daggers to her, but use none" (3.2.379), he says, but he is already on the brink of violating both of the Ghost's negative injunctions.

En route to Gertrude's closet, Hamlet passes Claudius attempting to pray. It is here that Hamlet violates the first of the Ghost's warnings. In an article on "*Hamlet* as a Christian Tragedy," Sister Miriam Joseph regards 3.3 as a crucial turning point in the play.[3] While I fully agree with her, I see further implications in what happens. Note: Claudius is on his knees trying to pray for forgiveness of his crimes. We know from his aside in 3.1 that his conscience stings him, so there is reason here to believe he sincerely wishes to repent. Then Hamlet enters, and does—what? Like any bloodthirsty avenger--Pyrrhus, for example, in Aeneas's tale to Dido (2.2.436-83)—he raises his

[3] Sister Miriam Joseph, "*Hamlet*: A Christian Tragedy," *Studies in Philology*, 59 (1962): 119-40.

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sword and is about to kill the king. But he hesitates. Concerned that Claudius may be in a state of grace and killing him would send him straight to heaven, Hamlet sheathes his sword. He prefers to kill Claudius when he is

> drunk asleep, or in his rage,
> Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed;
> At gaming, a-swearing, or about some act
> That has no relish of salvation in't;
> Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,
> And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
> As hell, whereto it goes.
>
> (3.3.89-95)

Is this any way for a Christian prince to behave? Unlike the source in Saxo Grammaticus, the play is full of Christian references. By wishing Claudius damned, Hamlet taints his mind and comes very close to damning himself.

His punishment for these thoughts comes in the very next scene, when he takes the offensive against his mother and, hearing someone cry out, he kills the wrong man. At first Hamlet merely dismisses Polonius as a "wretched, rash, intruding fool" (3.4.31); but later, after the last appearance of the Ghost, he recognizes the real significance of his deed:

> For this same lord
> I do repent, but heaven hath pleased it so,
> To punish me with this, and this with me,
> That I must be their scourge and minister.
>
> (3.4.156-9)

It seems clear that killing the wrong man is punishment for Hamlet's vicious thoughts against Claudius, and Hamlet recognizes this. But the juxtaposition of 3.3 and 3.4 suggests much more. By taking the offensive against his mother and trying to get her to abandon her incestuous bed, Hamlet violates the Ghost's command to leave her alone. Moreover, the juxtaposition of scenes has, in my view, other important implications. What if Hamlet had proceeded against Claudius in 3.3 as he does against his mother in 3.4? Admittedly, this kind of Christian action, helping someone to pray and win forgiveness, would require the virtue of a saint, and Hamlet is no saint. He is thoroughly unable to rid himself of his revulsion against his uncle and therefore cannot begin to think of shriving him, as he immediately does with Gertrude. Had he done otherwise, would Claudius, like Gertrude, admit his culpability and seek forgiveness for his sins by giving up all his ill-gotten gains: "My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen" (3.3.55)? A question to be asked.

The answer to that question is, I think, this: Had Hamlet succeeded in bringing Claudius to repentance, which Claudius at the moment seems genuinely to desire, the tragedy could have been averted, as it was in *As You Like It* and as it is later on in *The Tempest* when, prompted by Ariel, Prospero succeeds in getting Alonzo to repent. (Antonio and Sebastian's repentance is more problematic, but not, I think, Caliban's.)

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Does Hamlet ever glimpse this alternative? Through metaphor I think Shakespeare indicates that he may. When the "The Murder of Gonzago" ends in disorder and Hamlet exults, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern reenter and advise the prince that the king is "marvellous distempered" (3.2.189). Hamlet taunts them, punning on the word "choler":

> Your wisdom should show itself more richer to signify this to his doctor—for, for me to put him to his purgation would perhaps plunge him into far more choler. (3.2.291-4)

Here Hamlet momentarily recognizes his true role, as he does later at the end of the Closet Scene. He should indeed "purge" Claudius, not of his choler but of his spiritual distemper, his sin. For reasons already mentioned, this striking alternative to blood vengeance Hamlet does not consider. If he had, and if he were successful, he would have carried out all of the Ghost's commands, and tragedy might have been averted. However, after Claudius fails to purge himself through prayer, he rises and hardens his heart against Hamlet, devising a plan to get rid of the prince once and for all. And so the play wends its way relentlessly toward ultimate tragedy.[4]

Othello is the third among Shakespeare's middle tragedies. In this play the implications of alternatives to tragedy are, if anything, clearer than in the previous two.

In an article published in *Shakespeare Survey*, Ned B. Allen argued that, following his source, Shakespeare probably began writing *Othello* with act 3, scene 2, where Bandello begins the tragic story of the Moor and his wife.[5] Allen was interested in solving the problem of the double-time scheme in the play, a matter that does not concern me here, though his argument has other implications that I find far more important. If acts 1 and 2 were written after the last three acts, they could represent a kind of commentary on, or contrast to, the action of those acts. And this is exactly what I believe Shakespeare intended, whether or not he actually wrote the acts in the order that Allen says he did.

From 3.2 onwards Othello behaves in a manner quite unlike the way he behaved earlier. Seduced by Iago's scheming, he violates his own explicitly proclaimed modus operandi: to see before he doubts, and upon proof—act. In act 1 when challenged by Desdemona's father, Brabantio, Othello calmly gives an account of his relationship with Desdemona, beginning with his visits to Brabantio's home. While explaining this to the Duke and the council, he awaits the arrival of his wife whom Iago has been sent to fetch. When she comes in, she confirms everything Othello has said, and the matter is settled. The only "charms" or drugs that Othello has used to win Desdemona are the stories of his adventures. Moreover, she maintains that she saw Othello's visage in his mind; that is, she was not for a moment put off by racial considerations, unlike her father at present. Finally, she sues for the opportunity to accompany her husband to

[4] I discussed Hamlet's alternatives in "Hamlet's Alternatives," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 8 (1966), 169-188.

[5] Ned B. Allen, "The Two Parts of 'Othello,'" *Shakespeare Survey* 21 (1968): 13-29.

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Cyprus, where he is being sent to oppose a Turkish invasion and, seconded by Othello, wins her suit. Everything in the council chamber is done in an orderly and systematic way.

In the second act, another threat to Othello's and Desdemona's peace arises, when Iago tricks Cassio into getting drunk and subsequently fighting with Montano. A riot ensues; hence, Othello once again has to leave Desdemona to quell the disturbance. Now Othello is not someone who can rest easily in uncertainty. In act 1, knowing what he knows, he remained calm. Here he does not know what has happened; he demands to know without delay how the brawl began and who is responsible. What follows is a kind of drumhead court procedure, not unlike the procedure followed in 1.3. Since Cassio is too filled with shame and chagrin to speak, Iago gives his account of what happened. His story is true as far as it goes, but of course it is not the whole truth. After listening to Iago, and hearing nothing from anyone to contradict his account, Othello acts at once to cashier his lieutenant.

In these instances in acts 1 and 2, Othello behaves rationally. In act 1, he knows what he knows and is confident that the evidence will bear him out, and it does. In act 2, he does not know what has caused the uproar but acts immediately to find out, obtaining sufficient evidence, he believes, to justify his summary decision to demote Cassio. In act 3 he fails to carry out these rational procedures effectively, despite his proclamation:

> I'll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
> And on the proof, there is no more but this:
> Away at once with love or jealousy.
>
> (3.2.194-6)

Iago fills him with doubts and provides only the flimsiest of supposed evidence to back up his story of Desdemona's alleged infidelity. Othello, beset with anxiety to resolve his uncertainty, demands to know whether or not Desdemona has been unfaithful to him. As he says, "to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved" (3.2.183-4). He allows himself to be persuaded without sufficient evidence that his wife is disloyal. He has only Iago's words, and the charade of Cassio's conversation with Bianca about the handkerchief in 4.1. He is further persuaded by Iago that she must die. When the moment comes in act 5 for him to kill her, she pleads with Othello to send for Cassio--to get the truth from him about her innocence—just as she testified in act 1 before the council about Othello's innocence. Her plea, "Send for the man," echoes Othello's own demand in 1.3 that the court send for the lady. But Othello, under Iago's spell and no longer in command of himself as he was then, when he knew the truth firsthand, fails to follow his own declared procedure for action. He suffocates his wife—finding out too late how wrong he was. If only he had followed the very procedures he himself advocated and followed in acts 1 and 2, tragedy might have been averted.

More than either Brutus or Hamlet, Othello at the end does experience *anagnorisis*, the recognition of his error. It is this recognition that moves him, unlike Brutus, to suicide. Hamlet's recognition comes after his murder of Polonius—"heaven

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hath pleased it so / That I must be their scourge and minister." Thereafter he forms no plot against Claudius but lets heaven direct his course, as it does on the ship to England when he uncovers Claudius's plot against him. Had he placed his faith in the same providence he invokes in his talk with Horatio in act 5—if he had not resisted accepting his role as heaven's scourge and minister—everything might have turned out differently. But this is the stuff of tragedy.

III.

If the protagonists of the middle tragedies fail to see alternatives to disaster, which Shakespeare subtly includes in the drama, as I have tried to demonstrate, that cannot be said of his later tragic heroes. In this respect, *King Lear* is a transitional play. From the very first, Lear is told not once but twice—by Cordelia and Kent--that he is wrong and behaving rashly. His impetuous banishment of both of these loyal individuals leads directly to the problems he encounters almost immediately with his two elder daughters, Gonerill and Regan. He begins to see the error of his ways fairly early, if we accept his comment in 1.5, "I did her wrong," as referring to Cordelia and not Gonerill. By the end of act 2 he fully realizes what the Fool has been trying to point out to him, that both Gonerill and Regan are evil and cannot be trusted. But by then it is too late to undo the wrong he has committed from the first. Despite Cordelia's attempts and others' to save the king, Lear's tragedy runs its course. Similarly, the earl of Goucester, also blinded by passion, paradoxically begins to see reality more clearly only after the Duke of Cornwall brutally puts out both of his eyes.

Macbeth requires no one to point out to him that assassinating Duncan is wrong. He knows it, and knows all along what he is doing. He knows that he not only jeopardizes his eternal jewel—his soul—by committing the murder; he is also teaching "bloody instructions" to others. The revolt headed by Macduff in act 5 is a direct consequence of his murderous actions, which he has feared from the first might undo him. He pursues his destiny with his eyes open, unlike the earlier tragic heroes. In a sense, he chooses his tragic destiny, spurred on by his queen and, like Claudius, by his own ambition to wear the crown. Tormented by insecurity, he commits murder after murder, until Macduff finally brings him down.

Antony, too, knows what he is about when he at first tries to make peace with Octavius Caesar and marries his sister, only to return all too soon to Egypt—and Cleopatra. Like Macbeth, he chooses his destiny, and nothing he does to alter the inevitable succeeds. Timon of Athens is in many ways like King Lear insofar as he rejects the warnings of his loyal steward and plunges headlong into bankruptcy. But

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his cynicism at the end contrasts with Lear's sad conclusion. When the old king tries to revive Cordelia, his concern is only for her.

Coriolanus is Shakespeare's last great tragedy and a link in many ways to the late romances. It is a play that A.C. Bradley called Shakespeare's "tragedy of reconciliation." Willard Farnham has shown how these later tragic protagonists represent an important experiment in Shakespeare's composition of tragedy, for each of them is a radically flawed individual. It is as if Shakespeare were setting for himself a problem: Can a person so deeply flawed still emerge as a tragic hero?[6] Like everyone else, I believe Shakespeare succeeded. In his arrogance and pride, Coriolanus is certainly one of these flawed heroes. But he is different from all of the rest in finding a way to avoid disaster and therefore tragedy, if not for himself, then for his family and his country.

Banished from Rome, Coriolanus allies himself with his former enemies, Aufidius and the Volscians, who plan to attack Rome. Given what he has experienced, Coriolanus understandably is willing to exact vengeance and destroy his native country. But at the last moment, answering the appeals of his mother and family, he desists. He decides instead to make convenient peace with Rome, a just peace that will prevent unnecessary bloodshed for all concerned—except himself. He dies a truly tragic hero, but one, unlike the others, who sees an alternative to the destruction that accompanies tragedy, and he acts on it.[7] Similarly, the protagonists of the late romances, preeminently Prospero, see the alternatives to tragedy. "Kindness, ever nobler than revenge" leads Prospero to forgive the malefactors who cost him his dukedom years ago and, in the union of Ferdinand and Miranda, which he has engineered, offer harbingers of a new era of peace and happiness.

As I have tried to show, Shakespeare saw that tragedy is not inevitable, that alternatives to disaster exist, if we could but see them and, seeing them, act on them. But human beings, being human, often suffer from moral blindness, willful or otherwise, and fail to see those alternatives. When they do, as Orlando and Prospero, for example, surely do, tragedy is averted, and a comic, or happy, conclusion follows.

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[6] See Willard Farnham, *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963.

[7] For a full discussion of this play, see "*Coriolanus*: Shakespeare 'Drama of Reconciliation,'" *Shakespeare Studies*, 6 (1972), 289-303.

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論莎士比亞的悲劇觀：從中期悲劇看起

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莎士比亞從他創作的早期就已經開始對悲劇的形式做實驗。從歷史劇《約翰王》可以看出，他的興趣不僅在於展現人的苦難，也要展現人所錯失的（這是套用以色列政治家Abba Eban的說法）。在他中期的悲劇裡—像《凱撒大將》、《哈姆雷》、《奧塞羅》—悲劇主角對於其他可能可以避開悲劇的選項，都只有驚鴻一瞥。在晚期的悲劇裡，從《李爾王》開始，主角更完整地意識到對於自己行爲所要負擔的責任，也更意識到因爲他自己的種種決定，所導致的失落。

關鍵詞：莎士比亞悲劇　中期悲劇　認知

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Shakespeare's Conception of Tragedy: The Middle Tragedies

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Shakespeare began experimenting with tragedy early in his career. As the history play, *King John*, shows, he was interested in showing not only what men suffer, but what they miss (to paraphrase a remark by Abba Eban). In the middle tragedies—*Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello*—the tragic protagonist has only an oblique glance at the alternatives available to avoid disaster. In the later ones, beginning with *King Lear*, the protagonist becomes much more fully aware of his responsibility for his actions and what he misses by making the choices he does.

Key words: Shakespearean tragedy middle tragedies anagnorisis.

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