CHAPTER - II
A BRIEF STUDY OF SHAKESPEARE
AND HIS TRAGEDIES

This chapter tries to provide a brief introduction to Shakespeare and to the Tragedies. Shakespeare’s early life, his works, themes and influences are briefly discussed in the chapter. The concept of tragedy as understood by the early thinkers and philosophers up to the modern writers has also been described in the chapter. An exhaustive list of Shakespeare’s works, the approximate year in which they were staged and printed has also been provided.

Early life of Shakespeare

The exact date of William Shakespeare’s birth is uncertain. It is believed that he was born in April, 23 1564, at Stratford-on-Avon in the country of Warwick. His mother Mary Arden descended from nobility and his father John Shakespeare was a prosperous businessman of the village and town official of Stratford. John and Mary had eight children- four sons and four daughters. William the third child who was the first son was baptized on 26th April 1564. The only member of this group to endure was the poet and his younger sister, Joan. Due to combination of political and business reasons his father lost much of his wealth, and was in all probability a man of very modest means.

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Under a bond dated November 28, 1582, William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway entered into a marriage contract; she was the daughter of an old family friend. The baptism of their eldest child, Susanna took place in Stratford in May, 1583. In February, Only a year and nine months later, they had twins, the parents named them for the poet's friend Hamlet and Judith Ladler. Hamlet and Judith were christened in the same church. Some historians say that Shakespeare was an ignorant youth and was driven from his careless rustic existence to a very different career in London.

Shakespeare probably arrived in London in 1584, though no certain date can be given of his arrival; The first reference is found in the words of Robert Greene who, frustrated with his own failure to make a living, lashed out at his employee, and perhaps also at the prodigy, the young William Shakespeare, challenging his ability as a young actor as well as an actor-dramatist whose success had made it more difficult for Greene to earn his living. Shakespeare began by rewriting the plays of others, among them those of Robert Greene. This transformation from rustic of Stratford to a literary figure of London has been left unexplained and looks highly improbable on its face value. Why the works of a writer like Greene who boasted of a degree from both universities should have been turned over to an

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illiterate new comer, is hardly comprehensible. But by 1594 he had to his credit the quantum of work which could only have been possible through a considerable number of years. There is evidence that he was, for a time, at least member of Lord of Pembroke’s company.

Shakespeare was already highly thought of and this was strengthened by his publication of *Venus and Adonis* in 1593 and *Rape of Lucrece* in 1594. *Venus and Adonis*, though his first work, was published after his reputation and success had been established on stage. There is a conflicting view as regards his work, but it is now established with considerable proof that Shakespeare started his career as a dramatist a few years earlier than 1590.

In 1594 Shakespeare acted before Queen Elizabeth and in 1594 and 1595 his name appeared as one of the shareholders of the Lord Chamberlain’s Company. Francis Mere’s in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598) called Shakespeare “mellifluous and honey-tongued” and compared his comedies and tragedies with those of Plautus and Seneca in distinction.

Early in 1596, William Shakespeare in his father’s name, applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. Although affirmative evidence is deficient, there is basis to consider that the Heralds
granted this appeal, for in 1599 Shakespeare again made appliance for the right to quarter his coat of arms with that of his mother. Permitted to her father's coat of arms, Mary had lost this advantage when she married John Shakespeare before he held the authorized status of gentleman.

In the May of 1597, Shakespeare purchased New Place, the marvelous housing property in Stratford at that time. Since John Shakespeare had suffered monetary reverses previous to this date, William must have achieved success for himself.

Court records confirm that in 1601 or 1602, William Shakespeare began rooming in the family circle of Christopher Mount joy in London. Succeeding disputes amid Shakespeare's landowner, Mount joy, and his son-in-law, Stephen Belott, over Stephen's wedding settlement led to a string of legal proceedings, and in 1612 the court scribe recorded Shakespeare's authentication of acknowledgment involving to the case.

In July, 1605, William Shakespeare paid four hundred and forty pounds for the charter of a large part of the tithes on assured real estate near Stratford. This was an arrangement whereby Shakespeare purchased half the annual tithes, or taxes, on certain agricultural harvest from sections of land in and near Stratford. In
addition to receiving approximately ten percent income on his investment, he almost doubled his principal. This was possibly the most important and successful venture of his life span, and it paid solid returns for many years.

Shakespeare is next mentioned when John Combe, a resident of Stratford, died on 12 July, 1614. To his friend, Combe bequeathed the sum of five pounds. These account and parallel ones are significant, not because of their financially viable significance but because they prove the existence of a William Shakespeare in Stratford and in London through this period.

These are the most exceptional facts about Shakespeare the man, as distant from those about the dramatist and poet. Such pieces of information, spread from 1564 through 1616, affirm the existence of such a person, not as a writer or actor, but as a private citizen. It is illogical to think that anyone would or could have fabricated these details for the purpose of deceiving later generations. In a similar fashion, the evidence establishing William Shakespeare as the foremost playwright of his day is positive and persuasive. Robert Greene’s *Groatsworth of Wit*, in which he attacked Shakespeare, a mere actor, for presuming to write plays in competition with Greene and his fellow playwrights, was entered in the Stationers’ Register on
September 20, 1592. Shakespeare’s continued association with Burbage’s company is equally definite. His name appears as one of the owners of the Globe in 1599. On May 19, 1603, he and his fellow actors received a patent from James I designating them as the King’s Men and making their Grooms of the Chamber. Late in 1608 or early in 1609, Shakespeare and his colleagues purchased the Black friars Theatre and began using it as their winter location when weather made production at the Globe inconvenient.

Other specific allusions to Shakespeare, to his acting and his writing, occur in numerous places. Put together, they form irrefutable testimony that William Shakespeare of Stratford and London was the leader among Elizabethan playwrights.

One of the most impressive of all proofs of Shakespeare’s authorship of his plays is the First Folio of 1623, with the dedicatory verse which appeared in it. John Heminge and Henry Condell, members of Shakespeare’s own company, stated that they collected and issued the plays as a memorial to their fellow actor. Many contemporary poets contributed eulogies to Shakespeare; one of the best known of these poems is by Ben Jonson, a fellow actor and, later, a friendly rival. Jonson also criticized Shakespeare’s dramatic work in *Timber: or Discoveries* (1641).
Certainly there are many things about Shakespeare's genius and career which the most diligent scholars do not know and cannot explain, but the facts which do exist are sufficient to establish Shakespeare's identity as a man and his authorship of the thirty-seven plays which reputable critics acknowledge to be his.

Shakespeare's supreme gift is his universality. He was not of an age but for all times, because his characters are true to the eternal aspects of human life and not limited to any contemporary society. He created characters with burning intensity in every play which a lesser man could only have portrayed if he had suffered or enjoyed the circumstances of his characters. Shakespeare saw and understood too much, could pierce the heart with too many passions, could realize the actual play of life, without falling in bondage to any power. Yet there is no moral philosophy, conduct of life that he has not touched upon, any mystery that he has not probed. He excelled in the perfect naturalness of the dialogue. In all his impassioned dialogues, each reply is a mere rebound to the previous speech. Every natural interruption, lack of restraint due to tempestuous passion, hasty interrogative, ardent reiteration to evade a question, scornful repetition of hostility are as alive in Shakespeare's dialogue as in itself.
On 25 March, 1616, William Shakespeare revised his last will and testament. He died on April 23 of the same year. His body lies with a Chancel and before the altar of the Stratford church. A rather wry inscription is carved upon his tombstone:

*Good Friend, for Jesus' sake, forbears*

*To dig the dust enclosed here;*

*Blest be the man that spares these stones*

*And crust is he that moves my bones.*

The last direct descendant of William Shakespeare was his grand-daughter, Elizabeth Hall, who died in 1670.

Shakespeare’s plays can be grouped in the approximate order of their Composition
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- 1592 March 3, *Henry VI Part I* is produced. First printed 1594

- 1592-93 *Henry VI, Part II* first performed. First print 1594

- 1592-93 *Henry VI, Part III* first performed. First printed 1623

- 1594 January 24 *Titus Andronicus* first performance. First print 1594
• 1594 December 28, Confirmed performance of *The Comedy of Errors*. First printed 1623

• 1593-94 *Taming of the Shrew* first performed. First print 1623

• 1594-95 *Two Gentlemen of Verona* first performance. First printed 1623

• 1594-95 *Love's Labour's Lost* first performed. First print 1598

• 1594-95 *Romeo and Juliet* first performance. First printed 1597

• 1595-96 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* first performed. First print 1600

• 1596-97 *The Merchant of Venice* first performed. First printed 1600

• 1597-98 *Henry IV, Part I* first performed. First print 1598

• 1597-98 *Henry IV, Part II* first performance. First printed 1600

• 1598-99 *Much Ado about Nothing* first performed. First print 1600

• 1598-99 *Henry V* first performed. First printed 1600

• 1599-00 *As you like it* first performed. First print 1623

• 1600-01 *Julius Caesar* first performance. First printed 1623

• 1601 February 7 First Recorded production of *Richard II*. First printed 1597
• 1600-01 *Richard III* first recorded performance. First print 1597

• 1600-01 *Hamlet* first performed. First printed 1603

• 1600-01 *The Merry Wives of Windsor* first performance. First print 1602

• 1602 February 2 First recorded production of *Twelfth Night*. First printed 1623

• 1602-03 *All's Well That Ends Well* first performed. First print 1623

• 1604 February 7 First recorded production of *Troilus and Cressida*. First printed 1609

• 1604 December 26 First performance of *Measure for Measure*. First print 1623

• 1604-05 *Othello* first performed. First printed 1622

• 1606 December 26 First recorded performance of *King Lear*. First print 1608

• 1605-06 *Macbeth* first performance. First printed 1623

• 1606-07 *Antony and Cleopatra* first performed. First print 1623

• 1607-08 *Coriolanus* first performed. First printed 1623

• 1607-08 *Timon of Athens* first performance. First print 1623

• 1608-09 *Pericles* first performed. First printed 1609
• 1611 November 1 First Recorded production of *The Tempest.*
  First print 1623
• 1611-12 *Macbeth* First recorded performance. First printed 1623
• 1611-12 *Cymbeline* First recorded performance. First print 1623
• 1611-12 *The Winter's Tale* First recorded performance. First printed 1623
• 1612-13 *Henry VIII* first performance. First print 1623
• 1612-13 *The Two Noble Kinsmen.* First printed 1634

**Introduction to Tragedy**

The idea of tragedy as a dramatic art to life came from ancient to the modern world or it would be more appropriate to state that it came from pagan Greece to Christian Europe with the renaissance. The main concern of the tragedy is with truth and pleasure of knowledge. Plato used the word ‘catharsis’ to mean purification or sublimation. Aristotle accepts that tragedy arouses pity and fear but ultimately refines and raises the spectator to a state of understanding. Pity and fear in that nakedness distort our vision of truth taking through various rational responses culminating in intellectual purification. Marlow had some feeling for the tragic rhythm of life but lacked the pattern and vision of tragic essence.
It was Shakespeare who brought tragedies a distinct perspective towards existence. Each tragedy is a new beginning a ‘fresh raid on inarticulate’ for although there is a new development but no repetition with marked differences of manner, intention and approach. Othello is a revelation of character which focuses on individual, Lear is a universal allegory, Macbeth defines evil that results from a lust of power and Anthony and Cleopatra bring out conflict in moral bearings. The action of the tragedy ought to appear genuine to the spectators so that its excitement or sensation is heightened and the conclusion brings release from the passion.

In the British Academy Shakespeare Lecture for 1958vi, there evolved one advanced but an unorthodox notion that there was no such thing as Shakespearian Tragedy: there were only Shakespearian tragedies. A few weeks later another eminent scholar reported to have said that ‘there was no such thing as Greek Tragedy: there were only Greek tragedies’.

Both the statements were in contention that the differences between plays were more significant than the resemblances, though these were understandable: and if the differences even between the plays of a single dramatist can be as great as those which separate Racine’s Berenice from Phedre, it follows that when the whole array
of tragedy is considered, from *Aeschylus* to *Anouilh*, an overall definition would seem to be impractical. A definition adequate for a single play of Sophocles would seem irrelevant to Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*.

There is an added threat; that a definition may be used to denigrate a masterpiece to which it does not apply. Shakespeare was so used by *Stendhal* when he wished to criticize *Racine*, and Voltaire vi spoke of *Hamlet* as the work of a drunken savage because it was dissimilar to French classical tragedy.

There is another point to be borne in mind. When Aristotle wrote his *Poetics* he knew, he was not laying down convention or definition for tragedies, instead, he merely analyzed the qualities and defects of the plays under discussion. Contrarily, it was primarily a work that studied the technique of tragedy and extracted a social morality with a vision of life and world. He accomplished that even though the action of some tragedies could proceed from despair to happiness, the more effective tragedies went in contradictory directions.

The Greeks were highly civilized and could see with ease the unifying simplicity in the baffling variety of human emotions and suffering in relation to an established set of principles. They could
present in their dramas all the tenors of living and their clear vision of life and world order that helped them put things in their proper order and was basically religious, it was a narrow religion which provided broad base on spiritual adequacy and moral sufficiency to a civilized race of men. So Greek tragedy was myth, ritual and drama all in one, their view of tragedy was not at all encompassing the tragic and gloomy, their dramas justified the ways of gods not in the ethical sense but in terms of cosmic law and order that their gods stood for. But Shakespeare found the existing world more definitely theological than mysteriously cosmic. His justice was sometimes poetic, tragic, and wild but always given an impression of being sufficient to serve his tragic cause of arousing pity and fear in the audience and finally bringing about sublimation.

_Alcestis_ viii, in which the heroine agrees to end her life in place of her selfish husband and is brought back from the grave by Heracles, or Iphigenia in _Tauris_ ix, in which the heroine saves the life of her brother, would be regarded as Tragi-comedies by most of the modern critics where as Shakespearean tragedy may be stated as a story of exceptional calamity and sorrow leading to death of the hero in high estate. Shakespeare’s tragic vision was thus almost similar to that of Aristotle and was intellectual but not physical as that of Plato;
catharsis to him was the culmination of the intellectual response to
the tragedy. Aristotle would have categorized Cymbeline and The
Tempest as tragedies.

‘Shakespeare blended the ludicrous and serious characters in a
magnificent way that the audience alternated between despair and
happiness. He freely cajoled tragic and comic elements defying the
classical writers’ rigid classification. This made his tragedies
vigorously and intensely spiritual.’ (Harvison, 52) Even in critical sense
his plays are neither tragedies nor comedies but a composition of a
distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature,
multiplicity of proportion and numerous modes of combinations; and
expressing the course of the world, in which the defeat of one is the
growth of another. He clearly depicts that men are masters of their
own fate. It is futile to dogmatise on Shakespeare’s views on life.

Shakespeare merely depicts the frailties, weakness, strengths
and flaws of his characters within the dramatic rationale of his play.
His is an artistic point of view and every single aspect of the play is
to reinforce a certain effect in the play itself. ‘It is an upshot of a
premeditated strategy, because he does not want to take sides and
leaves it to ethical judgement of his audience to accept what appears
to them.’ (Raleigh, 128) The experiments in creation of plot are
numerous and exquisite. *King Lear* has a fully developed under plot along with a main plot and Shakespeare manages to unify the two amicably without a single loose end, in comparison *Othello* has a very rigid plot which may be considered ideal. There is exposition, and then escalating anticipation which rises to an unknown culmination till the very end, where the audience is not sure whether good or evil would prevail. Thus Shakespeare’s plays have been termed as tragic-comedies or comic-tragedies depending on pity or contentment that exists in profusion in the play.

**The Tragic Hero**

It is the tragic hero who dominates the action in a tragedy. It is the hero who fails to successfully meet the travails to which he is subjected, which consequently leads to disaster or death. As the hero battles towards destruction, there is a strong undercurrent of destiny, Aristotle believed that tragic heroes should be neither ‘absolutely evil’ nor ‘extremely good’. Further he believed that the hero of the tragedy must never be humdrum and inspite of his faults must never be innately awful. The hero must not be depicted in such a manner that when he comes to his fated end spectators get only to be thrilled and think it has been a good radiance. The disaster should arouse feelings of pity and terror in the minds of the audience: terror
because of the terrible consequence of our weakness and the formidable authority which prohibits even a person of hero’s reputation to encroach against its decrees; pity at his downfall despite his nobility and splendor. Since a hero is a man of exceptional intelligence and sensibilities, his sufferings due to his tragic flaw and forces of nature that propel on him owing to that tragic flaw are also more acute than what may be suffered by ordinary men. This is also applicable to Shakespeare’s plays where we should rejoice in the obliteration of a villain, such as Richard III, but we are able to sympathize with a character who commits as many murders, such one as Macbeth. Since, even at the end of the play we feel that he is not irredeemably evil, but appears to be man of nobility because Shakespeare brings enlightenment and wisdom at the end of the play to his tragic heroes.

‘This expiation and retribution is not something which Shakespeare developed since it had been accepted by the Greek classicists including Plato and Aristotle.’ (Harrison’ 122) Aristotle would have thought that audiences might be dismayed by Saint Joan or Murder in the Cathedral; perchance both protagonists could have saved themselves by the sacrifice of their integrity. Aristotle concluded that the tragic hero should be good, but flawed.
Shakespeare had a fatalistic view of life in which men are born to die by the adverse forces which are extraneous and too powerful to be resisted. This makes it appear as if Shakespeare’s tragedies are dramas of destiny and they closely resemble the Greek works, who too conceived a tragic hero as a worthy and aberrant soul, who is led by merciless deity whom he has inadvertently snubbed. The hero of a Greek tragedy is scrupulous, while Shakespeare’s tragic hero is not since, he has a tragic flaw or hamartia. It is this tragic flaw from which the tragedy of the play erupts. This tragic error (Hamartia) is well described by Hamlet in Act I, Scene I of Hamlet. It may be a dreadful tendency, such as drunkenness, or as a result of birth, or due to appalling luck, that a man has the pound of one defect. Despite his merits, Hamlet continues, this minor defect which spoils his reputation and, Aristotle would append, brings about his ruin. Because the tragic hero is like ourselves, we feel that, but for the grace of God or by the lack of the same, we might have met with a similar catastrophe. We might have dithered like Hamlet, believed Iago’s lies, been bullied into murdering Duncan. Aristotle insisted that he should be a person of some eminence, whom we could normally look up to, so that his fall would be more disgusting and have greater repercussions on the society in which he lives.
“The Shakespearean hero is thus a man of aristocracy; he is even an exceptional man since Shakespeare never chose a man from the lower strata of society, but gives him one weakness in his character and it is due to destiny. This weakness, if had remained submissive the tragedy would not have erupted.” (Daiches, 101)\textsuperscript{xi} Othello has an intellectual weakness, Hamlet has irresoluteness, Lear has a vanity and Macbeth is a victim of inordinate ambition. Lear, despite his weakness, could easily be solved. It is his own problem and his lamentable judgement of character that brings him to his cruel fall. This is a cardinal error head strong passion. Yet it is not correct to accept that Shakespeare modeled all his plays on the lines of character and destiny. His plays also revealed myriad and varied material considerations and human failings. In his earlier and lighter plays Shakespeare believed in poetic justice as the good was pleased and the evil punished. Once he returned to the tragedies, he seemed to have altered his concept of justice as he switched from poetic to tragic and even wild justice. Goodness did not come to the rescue of Desdemona or Cordelia as Shakespeare did not believe in a compassionate God who secluded the innocent and virtuous. “Thus each tragedy ends with a note that transcends human life and elevates the dead hero to a high plane. The storms and the ship wrecks are replaced by calm and quietude.”\textsuperscript{xii}
The reader may feel enormous loss and even a certain amount of oppression but he would not agree that even like a single line to be replaced with a happier one. Despite the alleged pessimism of *King Lear*, there is something very exacting in the death of both Lear and Cordelia. If we accept so many corpses strewn on the stage at the end of the play, it is because he wants to convey a very distinct message—a family is a sacred entity, and greed, revenge, anger and similar negative emotions bring far greater destruction than they do elsewhere in life. We are conscious of powerful current affecting all human life similar to the ill fortune of the hero. “Shakespeare never lets us know his concept of God, and he never tells us whether any relief is to be found in religion or not; yet his tragedies reveal that authoritative forces are rampant which makes mankind mere puppets in their hand, and it also reveals that these powerful forces are more often malevolent than benevolent.” (ibid)

In medieval times, a fall from high estate was the defining characteristic of tragedy: The same view of tragedy was expressed in Tudor times in the admired Mirror for Magistrates, in which many historical and legendary characters bewailed their disastrous falls. During the period of Elizabeth I, it was still usual to have eminent persons as tragic heroes—a king, a prince, a general—whose wreck
affected many other people. Even Tamburlaine, a shepherd, became ruler of half of the world before the end of his career; Faustus, a scholar, became renowned before his downfall; and only in a few plays, such as *The Yorkshire Tragedy* \(^{xiii}\), did Elizabethan dramatists opt for tragic hero a man of low degree. But with the historical and societal changes of the last three hundred years kingly heroes are out of trend. One could not visualize a tragedy about the Duke of Windsor, using Dryden’s title, ‘All for Love’. The heroes and heroines of modern tragedies are not renowned in Aristotle’s sense. They are mostly middle-class. Some of them are eminent only in their integrity or in their self-realization. Eddie Carbone in Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* \(^{xiv}\) has neither quality, but he allowed himself to be wholly known.

Many people feel nevertheless that Aristotle was right to require the tragic hero to be of power and eminence. It is arguable that novelists have been more successful than dramatists in creating tragic figures of comparable majesty without the advantages of birth or position. One could instance some of Dostoevsky’s heroes, or Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *The Mayor of Caster Bridge*.

Another of Aristotle’s beliefs was that plot, rather than character, was the prime essential of tragedy. Both, of course, are
important. When plot is all-important and characterization minimal, we have the recipe for a detective story or a thriller: and where character is the first essential and plot of minor importance, we may get the kind of play which is better than it acts. Yet some of the best tragedies of the past four hundred years depend more on character than on plot.

"Shakespeare’s and Racine’s tragedies all have complex and exciting plots, but it is the characters involved in the plots that make the tragedies great. Hamlet is unwillingly involved in two revenge plots, in which the avenger of one becomes the victim of another; but it is the character of the hero which transforms a thriller into great tragedy." (Racine, 84) The tragic events of Phedre are brought about by the accidents of the plot – the false tidings of her husband’s death, for example – but from the beginning Phedre is dying for her suppressed passion, and the greatness of the play depends more on her character than on her deeds.

In most Greek tragedies plot is less important than Aristotle believed. It is indeed, centrally important in King Oedipus, apparently his favorite tragedy. The plot is ingenious, Oedipus being caught in a trap set by the gods – caught by the actions of well-meaning people who were trying to prevent the fulfillment of a
terrible prophecy. Oedipus is doomed by the gods who are like the sadistic monsters described by the blinded Gloucester in *King Lear*.

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods:*

*They kill us for their sport.*

Such is the feeling aroused by the stranglehold of the plot in *King Oedipus* that the chorus in the sequel, Oedipus at Colonus, concludes that since life is inescapably tragic, it is best never to be born. To which one is tempted to retort that not many men kill their fathers and fewer still marry their mothers.

**The Function of Tragedy**

While Aristotle was well aware that tragedy gave pleasure, in the most discussed sentence in *Poetics*, he said that tragedy means of pity and fear brought about the purgation (catharsis) of such emotions (trans. 1965, p.39). xvi Milton quoted these words in his preface to Samson Agonistes and he added the gloss, to temper, and reduce them to just measure. This modifies Aristotle’s meaning, for he thought that pity and terror should be expelled.

Aristotle was replying to Plato’s complaint (trans. 1955, p. 383) that “poetry had an unhealthy effect because it made its readers too emotional”. Aristotle retorted that tragedy had a salutary effect because it purged us of pity and fear. Now most people would agree
that it is desirable to rid ourselves of fear, but as many have asked, ‘who wants to purge himself of pity?’ – Only scoundrels. Commentators have hopefully pretended that Aristotle was referring only to the excess of such emotions and that he was merely advocating the moderation which Greeks regarded as a desirable ideal. Perhaps he was: but it is difficult to square this interpretation with the idea of purgation.

The theatre is not a clinic or a health-farm. No one goes to watch a tragedy for therapeutic reasons, instead for enjoyment. There have been many attempts to adjust Aristotle’s words to common sense. But at this point it will be convenient to refer to two later attempts to discuss the functions of tragedy.

Hegel’s theory of tragedy (1975) is based on a dialectical principle that a tragic conflict will lead to reconciliation and harmony, despite what happens to the protagonists. His favorite play was Sophocles’ Antigone, in which the heroine buries her brother in defiance of Creon’s edict. Antigone is duly slain and as a direct result Creon’s son and wife both die. The harmony of which Hegel speaks is invisible to other readers. In The Oresteia, however, the chain of revenges is brought to an end and the furious become the kindly ones. There are a few Greek tragedies to which Hegel’s theory can be
usefully applied: and it is totally inapplicable to all the masterpieces of Shakespeare and Racine.

The other critic is A.C. Bradley\textsuperscript{viii}, whose chapter on the substance of Shakespearian tragedy provides a valuable summary of the main characteristics of tragedies; but he concludes with the much-quoted words:

\begin{quote}
"We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact or the no less inexplicable appearance, of a world travelling for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste." (ibid)
\end{quote}

The glorious good, Bradley later suggests, is a character such as Cordelia. What happens to such a being does not matter: all that matters is what she is. That is all very well: but if we examine the conclusions of all Shakespeare’s tragedies, we find that only in \textit{Romeo and Juliet} does good come out of evil with the reconciliation of the warring families. Fortinbras, Hamlet’s choice of successor, succeeds to the throne of Denmark: he is dreadfully flawed. What follows the end of all the tragedies cannot really be described as glorious good. Edgar and Malcolm become kings and Octavius
becomes sole master of the world, but what comfort can we get at the end of *Othello* or *Coriolanus*?

One is tempted to suggest that the effect, though not the function, of tragedy is to increase, not to diminish our pity and terror—compassion which is essential to the survival of humanity, and the terror that is akin to awe. We are fearful of man's vulnerability, but awestruck at his ability to endure. We feel, in Wordsworth's phrase, that we are greater than we know, more able to suffer with dignity the changes and chances of this mortal life.

The best way to understand Shakespeare's tragic vision is, of course, to see and read the tragedies very intelligently, but some help may be gained from a brief consideration of two speeches in Hamlet. In the final scene, when Fortinbras and others enter the stage looking for Claudius, they find to their amazement the corpses of Claudius, Gertrude, Laertes, and Hamlet. Horatio, Hamlet's friend, endeavours to bring the visitors up to date:

*What is it you would see?*

*If aught of woe or wonder, cease your search.*

Fortinbras and his associates are indeed struck with woe and wonder:

**Fortinbras:** *O proud Death!*
What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,

That thou so many princes at a shot.

So bloodily hast struck?

**First Ambassador**: The sight is dismal;

Horatio seeks to explain:

*the visitors will hear*

*Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,*

*Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters;*

*Of deaths put on by cunning and forc’d cause,*

*And, in this upshot, purposes mistook*

*Fall’n on the inventors’ heads ;*(ibid)

The spectators of the play itself have indeed seen unnatural acts, deaths put on by havoc, cunning, etc., and presumably these spectators have experienced the woe and wonder that the new arrivals will experience as Horatio sets forth the details.

Shakespeare does not merely slap the label of king or prince or general on a character and then assume that greatness has been established. His characters speak great language and perform great deeds. And, no less important, they have the capacity to suffer
greatly. Lear, in the first scene, gives away – almost seems to create
– fertile kingdoms:

   Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,

   With shadowy forests and with champains rich’d,

   With plenteous rivers, and wide-skirted meads,

   We make thee lady;(ibid)

Even in injustice, when he banishes his daughter, Cordelia, for
speaking the truth as she sees it, Lear has a kind of terrible grandeur:

   Let it be so, thy truth then be thy dower!

   For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,

   The mysteries of Hecate and the night,

   By all the operation of the orbs

   From whom we do exist and cease to be,

   Here I disclaim all my paternal care,

   Propinquity and property of blood,

   And as a stranger to my heart and me

   Hold thee from this forever.
Finally, even in his madness – “a sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch, / past speaking of in a king” – he has grandeur. To Gloucester’s “It is the king, is it not?” he replies:

Ay, every inch a king

When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.

I pardon that man’s life. What was thy cause?

Adultery?

Though shalt not die: die for adultery! No:

The wren goes to’t, and the small gilded fly

Does lecher in my sight.

Let copulation thrive...²²

We might contrast Lear’s noble voice with Edmund’s materialistic comment on the way of the world:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, the stars; as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treacherous by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of
whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star... Fut! I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. (ibid)

King Lear seems to be displacing Hamlet as the play that speaks to our time. Hamlet was especially popular with nineteenth-century audiences, who often found in the uncertain prince an image of their own doubts in a world in which belief in a benevolent divine order was collapsing under the influence of scientific materialism and bourgeois aggressiveness.

With a clear understanding of the evolution of the tragedy and the way Shakespeare handled it in his times, it is now possible to turn to the treatment meted out by him to the women characters in his tragedies. His tragic heroes, as it has been described in the current chapter, were magnificent and great in their own ways. They all suffered from a tragic flaw which makes them err and the audience somehow empathises with them. Is the same amount of care taken by the master dramatist when he is creating the women characters in his plays is what shall form the core of the discussion of the following chapter.

Hence it can be said that though Shakespeare wrote in tradition he created a tragic hero who was different from the early Greek
tragedies. Unlike the Greek tragic heroes Shakespearean tragic heroes suffer from a tragic flaw within themselves which makes them more human and vulnerable than invincible. It is interesting to see whether his women characters are as human as his tragic heroes or if they are stereotyped creations.
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